

FATALIST LUXURIES

Of Inequality, Wasting and Anti-Work Ethic in India

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Abstract Grounded in long-term ethnographic research among producers of contemporary luxurious embroideries and fashions in Lucknow, a North Indian city famous for its golden age as a powerful cultural center of opulence and excess, the article shows how anthropological knowledge can enrich current critical discussions of luxury and inequality. Since the 90s, anthropology has seen a boom in consumption and material culture studies coterminous with the rise of identity politics and its celebration of diversity. Hence, also in theory, linking consumption to identity has stolen the limelight. In the process, questions of production, inequality and reproduction of social structures have been overshadowed. Critical reappraisal of luxury in theory can paradoxically show us a way out of this identity trap since luxury, unlike other consumer goods, demands that we think inequality. Luxury also forces us to think beyond luxury brands, goods and commodified experiences, pushing us towards more fundamental questions of a good life, morality and social order. The presented ethnographic case, which reveals how structural violence can go hand in hand with paradoxical luxuries facilitated by fatalist attitudes, points to how such anthropology of luxury might look like. In a village near Lucknow women embroider luxury pieces for fashion ramps and celebrities while being fed meritocratic dreams of individual progress and success by fashion designers and NGOs trying to convince them to work harder in the name of empowerment. But the women laugh at luxury goods, designers and middle class activists, and insist on their anti-work ethic and valorization of leisure, on wasting time over working; they prefer to 'luxuriate' rather than indulge in luxury goods. However, this perception of luxury is connected to hierarchical inequality and a sense of social fatalism that has been, paradoxically, re-invigorated through new experiences with competitive inequality, neoliberal pollution and the false promises of meritocracy.

Keywords luxury, inequality, social fatalism, structural violence, sacrifice

"Unless we know why people need luxuries and how they use them we are nowhere near taking the problems of inequality seriously" (Douglas 1988: 24)

Smashing the Televisions: A village of Adornos or Sacrifice?ⁱ

In the spring of 2008, I have for the first time visited a villageⁱⁱ located at the outskirts of Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh in North India. Except for a few households without electricity, all had a television and the local women told me

enthusiastically about the soap operas they devotedly followed every day and that have come to structure their everyday life and their chores. A former luxury good appeared to have become a necessity, or so I thought when one of the proud television addicts proclaimed that 'a life without television is impossible' ('TV ke binā zindagī namumakin hai'). Back then, television was hailed both in the media and in academia as a force of positive social change in India (Johnson 2000), some even celebrated the mass arrival of television as an unquestionable force of good instrumental in female empowerment and in lowering both the rates of domestic violence and of fertility (Jensen and Oster 2007). Hence, it came as a surprise to me that in 2011, during my second fieldwork, all of a sudden a considerable number of those previously indispensable televisions disappeared from the living rooms. This turned out to be the case especially for those households where women were engaged in the production of *chikan* embroidery, a famous local craft. Initially, I thought that maybe they had to sell the televisions because of debt and extortions of the local moneylenders, a source of occasional local inter-caste violence. Why else would they dispose of the beloved Bollywood movies, songs and soap operas? To my great surprise, I later found four televisions intentionally demolished in the backyard of one of the houses on a heap of garbage, a house belonging to the former female 'manager' of one of the *chikan* village workshops. The TVs were turned into unwanted waste, but they were paradoxically also kept, as if displayed, on the top of the garbage heap as a reminder of them being waste objects and renounced objects; they were relegated from the inside of the house to the outside and their privileged garbage position did not change for months even as other garbage was being added around them and under them. Clearly, all those televisions could not have been broken, and even if they were, they could still have sold them for parts or have them repaired. So why not sell them or repair them especially considering that money is a scarce resource? Upon inquiring, I was told that the women 'had enough' and they insisted that the televisions were cursed/cursed themⁱⁱⁱ, that they were the cause of all their current unhappiness and that nobody should be exposed to them, nobody should watch them or listen to them. As I was told, one day, following long discussions and convincing of their husbands, several Muslim and a few Hindu women of the village decided to collectively destroy their previously priced possessions in what could be considered an auspicious act of protecting the inside, a symbolic act of enclosure of the domestic habitat, and its separation from the malevolent outside (Chakrabarty 1992). It is not a coincidence that women performed this act since they are the culturally instilled protectors of the inside. The televisions came to stand for and concentrated within themselves the dangerous neoliberal pollution of the outside.

But the question is, why did they have to be sacrificed and could no longer be enjoyed? Why here?

The sacrifice of the local televisions appeared to be closely related to what was by the women perceived as external influences and as a mode of 'infiltration' into the local social economy, as overstepping of the invisible boundaries separating the protected village and the individual households from the 'outside'. Not only did the televisions stand for the pollution and danger of the outside (Chakrabarty 1992), but they have also progressively become objects akin to sacrificial substitutes that in the final act of demolition took the blame for a variety of 'new' social ills. The sacrifice of the televisions was meant to turn what progressively emerged as social chaos into familiar social order, to recreate the translucent social boundaries and to impose restrictions in face of an external world of excess, both of goods, images and potentialities; excess rather than scarcity created problems and had to be dealt with (Abbott 2014). If we consider sacrifice to mean "giving up something in order to receive something of greater worth" (Smith and Doniger 1989: 189), it becomes fair to suggest that what underlies sacrifice is a fundamental question of value. In this case, the question of value is connected both to the question of a desirable social order and to the question of a good life. Sacrificing the televisions and relegating them to the garbage space was an auspicious act of reclaiming and insisting on a particular notion of a good life, no matter how much lacking in goodness it might appear for instance to some modernists and middle-class activists (Chakrabarty 1992). So what did those televisions stand in for or should we rather ask who did they stand in for and who was 'murdered' in the name of restoration of social order and of a 'life worth living' (Pfaller 2011)? René Girard has argued that sacrifice serves the purpose of distancing violence from its true object (Girard 2013), but what happens when it is televisions that are sacrificed as substitutes rather than an indifferent sacrificial victim and that too in what appears to be a spontaneous ritualistic act rather than a culturally ordained ritual? May it be that we are dealing here with a sacrificial mechanism of protection from structural violence rather than any other form of violence?

Following the destruction of the televisions, the same woman who previously insisted that life without television was impossible told me that 'television has stolen their life from them' ('TV ne chuṛāyā hai hamārī zindagī hamse'). Other women said that they were living for years the lives of the characters on the screen, discussing what they did and the lives they had, instead of living their own lives. Repeatedly, men and women alike said things like: 'life is outside, not in front of the television' ('zindagī bāhar hai, TV ke sāmne nahīm'), 'now I do not like watching

television, we do not want to watch all that' ('ab to mujhe TV kā śauq nahīm hai, nahīm dekhnā hai hamko yah sab'), 'life is outside, there is sun, field, cow, water, everything, what else do you want' ('zindagī bāhar hai, vah sūraj hai, khet hai, gāy hai, pānī hai, sab kuch hai, aur kyā cāhiye'), 'before we used to dream a lot, but now, what is the use/benefit' (pahle ham bahut sapne dekhte the, lekin ab kyā faydā?) and so on. The first repetition worth noting in all these utterances is the insistence on life and happiness being outside while the television has come to stand for the inside, like a trap, signifying fake life and misery or even death. Here we can observe a peculiar structural reversal of the common order of the inside and the outside, considering that typically it is the outside that stands for danger and pollution, whereas the inside is protected, clean and thus promises good life. At a first glance, the television appeared to have brought into the domestic space the radically different and dangerous outside that 'spilled' and polluted the domestic realm beyond a certain limit at which one can still take pleasure in the dangerous outside. After all, in the village, one of the most favorite pastimes, for both men and women, is precisely roaming around outside, in the fields and the open spaces, i.e. spaces that are potentially dangerous and polluted and have to be carefully separated from the protected insides of the households. Thus it appears that the question here is one of quality, character and amount of the polluting 'outside' that can either become a source of pleasure or become unbearable and destructive, staining everything that comes into contact with it.

In the preface to her book *The Culture Industry Revisited: Theodor W. Adorno on Mass Culture*, Deborah Cook argues that Adorno transformed the Plato's ancient "allegory of the cave into an explosive critique of the cultural industry" (Cook 1996: xiii). Her initial description of the fears connected to the cave created by culture industry mirrors the discourse of the villagers, who shared the same sentiments and fears that the life inside amongst fake images slowly destroys the actual life they are meant to be living outside, in the sun, a life worth being lived. "Adorno was plagued by the same nightmare" (Cook 1996: xiii) that could be summed up as follows:

We all have our backs turned to the entrance of the cave and sit facing a giant screen. Behind us are the merchants of hope and fear. They promise us power, prosperity, eternal youth, and sex appeal even as they prey on our dread and rejection and death. The spectacle that unfolds is gilded by these artful dream weavers, and fuelled by greed. (...) People in the cave chatter excitedly about what they have seen. The women wonder where they can find the clothing like the heroine's and

talk about dying their hair (...) most of my fellow cave-dwellers see life as the demagogues portray it, acting out their counterfeit fantasies while remaining paralyzed in their seats (Cook 1996: xi-xiii).

While we should take these sentiments seriously here, it is at the same time rather improbable that a whole village would mobilize its collective rationality and act in the name of cultural critique. Instead, we must locate the actual source of these fears and the function of reclaiming the value of life 'outside', while also removing the pollution from the 'inside' i.e. the reason for and the function of the sacrifice of the televisions. It is also implausible that the television that was blamed and sacrificed as the culprit was the real culprit and not a substitute standing for some other (social) evils of the 'inside', or even for structural violence.

Another shift in the language of the villagers might provide a clue here. During our first meetings they talked of dreams, of the importance of education, of wanting more from life, of wanting money and fancy things, of living high life and having fridges full of cold Coke; theirs was a *language* of social aspiration; a language of wannabe good consumer citizens that would please any capitalist and advertiser. But we should not let ourselves be deceived by language here. The world of dreams was kept at a safe distance; these daydreams were not really meant to become reality. When one of the local boys took a loan and bought a new motorcycle, clothes and sunglasses and paraded through the village pretending to be a Bollywood star, taking himself very seriously, the whole village laughed at his madness, calling him crazy (pāgal). And yet, imitating the mannerism of Bollywood stars, the movie dialogues and flirting using the famous film scripts (line māmā) is a favorite pastime of the local boys. Again, there is a limit, in this case a limit beyond which the ambition appeared just comical, precisely because of an unspoken social agreement that relegates it to the world of fantasy, but also of a dangerous outside, meant to be kept away even when it does not cease penetrating the translucent boundaries. For all the talk of dreams and aspirations, barely anyone embraced the meritocratic ideals of hard work or struggled to become a wealthy businessmen, actor, model and so on. At that point, there was a clear sense of a social distance between the television and the lived reality; where the former could be happily embraced and enjoyed and kept within its boundaries, while not intruding on the latter. Then, in the middle of 2011, the language progressively changed and fell into the familiar tone of 'resignation' known possibly to anyone who has worked in South Asia, a disillusioned and yet equally relieving language of what could be called social fatalism, i.e. "the belief that one's general social position in life is fixed and one cannot change it or could not have done anything to change it" (Elder

1966: 229). The villagers talked no more of dreams, instead they emphasized the importance of knowing one's (social) place; they talked of destiny (*qismat*), of all matters being in god's hands (*sab kuch uparavāle/allāha/bhagavān ke hāth mem hai*), sentiments shared equally by the Muslims and the Hindus. They embraced the language of need (*zarūrat*) and of use value that limited the amount of potential desires and the scope of one's dreams. Suddenly, the imagination was not to run wild anymore, instead they insisted that they had all they needed and they did not want more, they were not interested in fancy things, and luxury goods. Not even in dreaming about them. The language of need delimited the social space of acceptable desires and ambitions by insisting on what was, and on that being enough, rather than on what could be. In a paradoxical way, the underlying and implicitly shared understanding of the social situation became explicitly embraced. But why would that, which everyone was meant to understand implicitly all of a sudden had to be told explicitly and even demonstrated through the sacrifice of the televisions?

Social fatalism as a belief means accepting the inevitability of one's destiny, social position, and limited individual agency, but also of needs and luxuries considered socially appropriate and acceptable to any given social position. Paradoxically, this belief allowed for being relatively happy, or at least content, here and now, rather than sacrificing the here and now for, statistically speaking, most probably unattainable dream-future. In this sense, the sacrifice of televisions would be a sacrifice of sacrifice itself in order to not to have to sacrifice oneself. This form of social fatalism was also accompanied by an explicit acceptance of what we could in analytical terms distinguish as 'hierarchical inequality' (Béteille 2002). Before we proceed further in this discussion, let us elucidate some of the formative events that took place during the years in question, as well as the particular specifics of the cultural context relating to the local valorization of luxury and leisure that as we shall see, also pertain to different forms of social inequality.

Intense Encounters with the World of Luxury Fashion and the Rich

Up until 2009, most of the unmarried women and about half of the married women in the village, both Muslims and Hindus, have been embroidering *chikan*^{iv} saris and *kurtas* (tops) largely for traders and exporters based in Lucknow. A brief note on the production of *chikan* embroidery must be made at this point; production of *chikan* is a multi-layer process that typically involves the trader, who purchases the cloth and threads, employs finishers and manages the complex networks of production, these include the block-makers, cutters, tailors, printers, middle-men, embroiderers, washermen, and dyers (for more details about the structure of the

industry, see Kuldova 2016). The industry thus relies on numerous weak ties (Granovetter 1973) that cut across locations, religions, genders, castes, and classes as the production is dispersed and every stage of the final embroidered product is done somewhere else by specialized craftspeople (fabric, block-making, printing, embroidering, washing, dyeing, finishing, exporting, trading, design). Hence, it is largely impossible to force the production under one roof, even if some have tried^v, or, in the case of the village women, to possess enough capital to buy in the cloth and organize all the stages of the complex labor process across social and geographical distances; consequently, it is rather unrealistic for the village women to become traders, even if they had the ambition. The fact remains that *chikan* embroidery has been and is a source of extra income and not a core activity even if some, in the name of empowerment, have been attempting to change that. And so back then in 2008, pieces to be embroidered were distributed to the village women by a middle-man hired by a trader, who remained largely unknown and invisible to the women. Already then, the women were a reluctant workforce, unreliable in deliveries, hard to convince to work more than they cared to, not taking the work seriously, no matter how hard the middle-men were trying to convince them to work more, obviously in their own desperation to secure cuts for meddling. Instead of 'work', the women called *chikan* 'time-pass' or 'hobby' that brought rather negligible amount of cash into the family budget. No matter how much feminist writers on the industry like to portray these women as terribly exploited (of course without the women knowing it), as not knowing their own good and in need of empowerment (read 'independence' through regulated wage work) (Wilkinson-Weber 1999, Chakravarty 2003), we should not let ourselves be blinded by this patronizing rhetoric here. Making the women work more than they themselves care has been the crucial problem for capitalists aiming to turn unorganized and informal craft-production into an expanding industry. Hence an alliance with the feminist visions of middle class good life and empowerment through wage work is beneficial first and foremost to the capital owners. The reluctance of the women to work harder and longer was in the process compensated only by expanding number of the part-time workforce, yet with a natural limit. At some point in 2009, one of the upper middle class Lucknow based traders and exporters^{vi}, also a small-time politician, got inspired by his new daughter-in-law, an educated middle class girl, who felt 'great pity for the exploited and oppressed village women' who worked for him and argued for the need to give them a better life, a noble goal indeed. The trader has also seen the example of SEWA Lucknow, the local branch of the India wide Self-Employed Women's Organization, that has been since mid-80s rather effectively convincing both the urban and rural women to embroider harder by promising economic

independence, dignity, recognition and 'fair wage', a monthly, rather than piece based, salary that amounted barely to a few hundred *rupees* more. One thing must be made clear here from the outset, there is no actual career in craft, no matter how exquisite quality one could produce, there is nowhere to climb to earn more; all of the aforementioned are largely cosmetic changes that benefit the capitalist, or in this case the NGO that acts like an 'ethical' business selling the added value of 'fair trade' to 'conscious consumers'. Coming from the position of an artisan it is literally impossible to ever become a designer (Kuldova forthcoming, Kuldova 2016). Hence, inspired by these strategies of making the workforce more reliable and obedient, the trader too decided to set up an NGO that would train the women, make them work harder, thus turning out better quality pieces faster. The NGO was to serve the capitalist to address the ever so problematic question, especially in this context, of how to make people work, i.e. how to align their desire with the master-desire of the capitalist and make them (preferably joyfully) embrace their servitude (Lordon 2014). The violent coercion used in the past has been replaced by noble agendas such as female empowerment meant to seduce women into organized labor in the name of their own good or the good of their offspring. They were told that their dependence on husbands (what they often consider to be precisely their privilege of *not* having to work) is necessarily bad as opposed to the apparently liberating dependence on wage and the capitalist (that is presuming that power, recognition and value come solely in the form of cash – proportionate to its amount). The NGO established by the trader and run by his daughter-in-law came into the village and began preaching to the women about how they can make something of themselves, increase their living standard, even become business women, promising them that one day they will get out of the village and that even they will be able to afford luxury goods. After six months of attempting to establish 'working units' in the village and setting up a hierarchical chain of command among the women, where some were suddenly overseeing and controlling the work of others and of creating incentives that would ideally make the women compete with each other, the trader has abandoned the idea and reverted to the use of middle-men. The women were according to him 'unmanageable', not knowing their own good and impossible to convince to work harder; they talked back, laughed at him and did not want to cooperate (Kuldova 2013). The more the NGO was pushing the rhetoric of self-realization and of pursuing one's dreams, the more resistance they faced, they were laughed at in the same way the boy who took a loan to look like a superhero was. The trader left, but a new character was to soon appear in the village, a more powerful, intrusive and seductive player.

In 2010, a Delhi based fashion designer unsatisfied with subcontracting *chikan* embroidery to local traders and fearing his designs being stolen and copied *en masse*, especially since he focused on reviving *chikan* for the luxury market, decided to patronize a whole village; surely, this would also look good on his portfolio presented to his elite clientele. Having previously worked with the aforementioned trader, he bought out his informal claim on the village production and tried to replicate the stunt the trader did earlier with the NGO, believing he knew better than the trader. And so he came to the village with bombastic claims presenting himself as a benevolent patron who will turn the village into a prosperous place under his 'rule'. He set out to 'change their mindset', as he said. The 'mindset' was according to him the biggest obstacle to overcome, something he knew well from other village crafts he worked with. Repeatedly he pointed out that as long as one works with craftspeople in urban areas, they are easy to manage, control and command; the reason largely being that they are solely dependent on wage for their survival and thus for the reproduction of their bare life. The craftswomen in the village on the other hand tend to have access to agricultural produce and cows to sustain them, thus being self-sufficient in terms of bare survival, and secondly, have enough men in their families who bring in extra money from diverse small jobs, money for things like alcohol, tobacco, schooling, medicines, dowry and clothes. Beyond that, desires tend to be limited. Turning these women into effective workforce thus means predominantly expanding the realm of material desires and accompanying hopes and dreams – the very same job that the television is meant to do with all its commercials and fantasmatic scenarios of high living. The designer claimed that it was the mindset of the villagers that prevented their economic growth. This argument is clearly reminiscent of Max Weber's reasoning around the economic 'backwardness' of India, with its caste system, different forms of self-making, and its division of ethical, economic and religious labor that fuelled its inability to even successfully follow the model developed in the West (Weber 1962), even if in academic circles largely refuted (Morris 1967). The designer, inspired by his political friends and their campaigns that effectively mobilize the sentiments of the villagers, decided to run a campaign that would convince both men and women in the village that they can become somebody if only they work hard enough – and for him. Skilled at branding, the designer certainly knew how to mobilize the affects of the villagers through images of success that he claimed were closer than they ever believed, convincing them to stop laughing at the foolish young boy who dreams. Suddenly, they were embroidering dresses for Bollywood stars, for divas on the fashion ramp, for the rich and influential in Delhi and Mumbai. They were embroidering luxury goods, no longer cheap pieces for the mass market; in return they were

promised that their own self-worth shall increase together with the worth of the goods on the luxury market. The charismatic designer succeeded in mobilizing the affects of the villagers and making them joyfully embrace their servitude. He talked of progress, of development, of breaking taboos, of the fruits of hard labor. Even women who previously did not engage in embroidering joined in and several houses of the better off villagers were selected to house the workshops. The designer spent money to furnish the rooms where the women were to embroider and gather every day for at least nine hours. Older women trained younger ones and the newcomers; 'managers' were appointed, typically recruited from the well-off higher caste house owners, which paradoxically reproduced the local structures of hierarchical inequality, and in the meantime the designer kept preaching equality of opportunity. Every workshop had a television, intended as a source of motivation and inspiration, a stimulant of new material desires and consumer culture, a medium of naturalization of capitalist culture encouraging the identification with the master-desire of the capitalist (Garnham 1990, Garnham 1983). The women were promised monthly wage that would amount to at least triple of what they used to earn through middle-men and piece wages. Those able to produce high quality were promised more, to spark the competitive spirit. At that point they understood for how much their embroidered saris sell and who wears them. All of a sudden the rich were no longer just in the television, they were in their backyard. The designer, the 'baṛā ādmī' (big man), has brought the dreams of aspiration, success, of the world of riches and luxury goods within the reach of their reality; dreams of wealth were no longer a joking matter.

For a few months the workshops ran relatively well, but it turned out that organizing the labor, including the printing and washing in the city, was not as easy and profitable as the designer initially imagined even though he produced a successful *chikan* collection. In the end, he decided to switch back to silks and *zardozi*^{vii} and limit *chikan* only to that which could be subcontracted. He left the village and never returned, the villagers claim that he has not paid their wages for the last three months. Without any written contracts, the whole theatre ran on promises and dreams. Being cheated and betrayed by a 'big man', the women and their husbands alike became yet again painfully aware of their powerlessness when attempting to demand justice and their fair share of profit; as they said, 'he turned us all into fools, all were lies, all was nonsense' (usne to ham sabko bevaqūf banāyā, sab jhūth thā, sab bakvās thā'). If the televisions as sacrificial substitute stood in for someone, it was the designer, and if for something, it was the dreams and fantasies of consumerist good life that he brought with him. In this sense the sacrifice was not only a murder, but a *deicide*. The designer, first resisted, became

few weeks later celebrated as a bringer of wealth, an enthusiastic new era of prosperity was ahead, he was deified and his propaganda embraced, but then he disappeared, withdrawing his support and wealth, and leaving only debt.

It is said that westernization and the rise of the middle classes has brought with it the decline of hierarchical inequality, but as we have seen, it has also brought its own form of inequality, what André Béteille labeled competitive inequality (Béteille 2002). While hierarchical and competitive inequality can be separated analytically, in reality they coexist and it is often hard to determine how they shape each other. Meritocratic competition is to replace birth and patronage, providing an illusion of equality, but competition is rarely fully open, as the villagers already knew, but were painfully reminded of. As Béteille notes, "a competitive system creates its own distinctive form of inequality which can sometimes be more extreme than in a hierarchical system" (Béteille 2002: 22). The 'new' social ills of competitive inequality and fake promises hit the village hard and sparked the explicit rhetoric of social fatalism and of 'knowing one's place', i.e. a return to the paradoxical comforts of hierarchical inequality and acceptance of one's destiny. The televisions were sacrificed in face of the injustice, and with it were all the impossible dreams, ambitions and the world of the designer; they were smashed and turned into waste and displayed as a reminder of the futility of work, aspiration and excessive dreams. Rather paradoxically, a sense of predestined hierarchical inequality and of acceptance of subordination has re-emerged as a form of resistance to a new form of competitive inequality and exploitation perceived as far more dramatic and unjust. The new class antagonism translates here into a reproduction or even revival of casteist structures and legitimation of one's place through a sense of fatalism. The crucial point about hierarchical inequality and its acceptance is that it implies a system where "persons at different ends of the social spectrum are not expected to compete with each other for social recognition and reward" (Béteille 2002: 8); as such it can be relieving in the sense of providing a means of coping with and delimiting future risks and a balance between external control and (limited) personal control. Amidst the struggle to recreate order from the social chaos created by the designer's intervention and confrontation with the world of luxury, the question of what is a good life and what is luxury re-emerged, only in a more pressing way, and has become a matter of discussion especially among the women. Let us now consider how the discussion so far can anticipate an anthropological contribution to the study of luxury.

Conceptions of Luxury: Hierarchical Inequality v. Competitive Inequality

Since the 90s, we have seen a boom in consumption and material culture studies paralleled only by the rise of identity politics with its celebration of diversity. Hence also in theory, linking consumption to identity has stolen the limelight (Campbell 2004, Du Gay 1996, Miller 1987, Miller 2006, Roberts 1998). Luxury has thus become perceived as just another kind of consumption good, reflective of identity and status, a matter of self-crafting and self-fashioning and performance in a neoliberal world of 'free choice' and individuality. And so while everyone was happily consuming to show off their 'authentic' self, identity, inner child, personal beliefs or sub-cultural belonging, questions of inequality, reproduction of social structures and production have been overshadowed (Michaels 2006). Thinking through luxury and its production can show us a way out of this identity trap. "While the gap between the rich and the poor has grown larger, we've been urged to respect people's identities—as if the problem of poverty would go away if we just appreciated the poor" (Michaels 2006). Even the mere fact that the high depends on the low and cannot be thought without it already points us in a different direction, namely towards stratified social structures. Moving away from the realm of consumer goods for the imaginary and typically rather well-off 'masses' towards contemplating luxury, a symbol of wealth and power over others, we are forced to address inequality, or so we would imagine. However, in practice, even though the necessity of engaging with inequality should appear straightforward, we have seen that for instance fashion studies, indulging systematically in the study of luxury fashion, are typically obsessed individual creative designers, their biographies and brand narratives. This hyper-focus on individuality and celebrity repetitively pushes questions of production, social structures and inequalities into invisibility (Kuldova 2015, Kuldova 2016), while making us think in terms of elite identity, tastes, consumption habits, desires and so on, instead of power relations. The debate about consumption, as it is led today, needs to be disentangled from the question of identity and refocused at the question of inequality – at least as a corrective measure. Here thinking through luxury can be instructive. As Christopher Berry has shown, luxury is a political question, in the sense that it reveals the ways in which we imagine social order and society at large. Moreover, discussions about luxury also often reveal our notions of the ideal society, and of what we consider good or bad, necessary and superfluous, excessive and legitimate, or even just (Berry 1994).

In what follows, we will continue our discussion of the televisions that were thrown out and consider the different conceptions of luxury and good life endorsed by the designer on one hand and the villagers on the other, conceptions

that became over the months progressively more and more explicit and culminated with the decision to get rid of excessive and 'inappropriate' dreams. While the designers, themselves creators of luxury goods, display their status through those same luxury goods, the villagers valorize leisure instead. They value not having to work, they value roaming around and chatting more than being constantly stressed and tensed, but having fancy things. Because typically stressed and tensed, the designer was in the beginning laughed at – for being silly to let that happen. Rather than from symbols of spending power, the villagers' source of pride stemmed largely from the means of production that they owned, such as fields and cows that they proudly showed to visitors, while insisting that they are happy with little. This portrayal could easily lend itself to an accusation of romanticization of the village and rural life, a life that is hard enough. However, that would be the case provided we think of poverty in terms of culture and identity; it is precisely along those lines that the happy and virtuous frugality of the poor has been celebrated. We certainly do not want to run the danger of turning a class position into something akin to village culture, or heritage, to be proud of, cherished and admired by others (as in slum tourism), thus ignoring the role of inequality and the powerful role of experiences of injustice in the process. When we perceive the different conceptions of luxury and related notions of good life and social order through the lens of inequality and structural violence rather than identity, we can account for the valorization of anti-work ethic without turning it into a matter of cultural identity. (This would also account for the fact that fatalist attitudes are equally prevalent among Hindus and Muslims, fatalism being rather a matter of class position and fixity of social structures than a matter of religious belief.) In this sense, the distinction between competitive inequality and hierarchical inequality, in our case connected to fatalist logic, becomes a prerequisite for thinking through luxury, its consumption, display and alternative meanings.

Luxury, Inequality and Beliefs in Un/Just World

In its heyday, during the rule of the Nawabs of Awadh (1775-1856), Lucknow has been known as the richest, most magnificent, luxurious and cosmopolitan Indian city of its times (Trivedi 2010, Ramusack 1995, Llewellyn-Jones 1985). During the times of the Nawabs rule the city became synonymous with cultural refinement and Indo-Persian style and was called The Venice of Orient, Shiraz-i-Hind or The Constantinople of India and has built its reputation as a fashion center of languorous grace. What is truth and what myth is hard to distinguish today, but there is no doubt that the myths of life under the Nawabs, marked among other things by communal harmony and a widely shared culture of leisure, frame the

conceptions of 'good life' among the people of Lucknow and its surroundings. The fundamental phantasmatic mythologies of this city and the cherished selective traditions are more interesting here than any notion of truthful history, i.e. what interests us here is "that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as 'the tradition', 'the significant past'. But always the selectivity is the point; the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings are neglected and excluded" (Williams 1973: 9). The Nawabs are remembered for their patronage and indulgence in refined poetry, beautiful courtesans, delicate cuisine, seductive fashion, elaborate etiquette, marvelous architecture, *imambaras* and mosques, spectacular celebrations and festivals, and all the pastimes: *kathak*^{viii} performances, kite-flying, cock-fighting or just time to sleep and relaxing (Gude 2010, Mangalik 2003, Markel and Gude 2010, Oldenburg 2007, Oldenburg 2006, Sharar 2005, Trivedi 2010). This is the Lucknow that lives on in imagination and that is fuelled to new phantasmatic heights through Bollywood cinema as much as branding narratives not only of elite designers but even local traders, no matter if they are selling food, clothes, perfumes or tourism. Equally, this Lucknow lives on in the imagination of the 'common man'. The villagers fondly talk of themselves still having that *nawabi* attitude, a relaxed approach to life as much as the elevated and refined way of speaking. If there was any luxury that trickled down to the masses under the rule of the Nawabs, it was the generally relaxed approach to life, the valorization of leisure and bodily pleasures – to *luxuriate*, the ephemeral activity of wasting time, was more important than the luxury goods made to last for eternity (or at least a long time, like the monumental palaces). The times of the Nawabs were clearly marked by a shared sense of an accepted hierarchical inequality, where the Nawab was considered the ruler and supreme patron of arts and crafts. There was on one hand luxury that was available only to him, a manifestation of his status and power, and on the other an idea of luxury that the Nawabs shared with the whole of the populace, in which the subjected masses could partake. The idea of luxury with its central notion of refinement encompassed far more than just luxurious goods. Refinement related to crafting and elevating anything from everyday language to food. It pertained to reciting poetry, indulging in leisure and laziness and the pleasures of slow-time, dancing, slow cooking, kite flying (a refined past time at that time) and so on. Lucknow was considered a city of *nafāsat* (finesse) and *nazākat* (delicacy), a city synonymous with luxury where all universal basic human needs – sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure – were refined (Berry 1994), perfected and elevated to an art form. All its inhabitants, elite or low class, were imagined as partaking in this local culture of refinement. Embroiderers were said to create

poetry in their hands, the delicate embroidery was known as royal work (*śāhī kām*). Lucknow's cuisine, too, had to match the beauty of the poetic language. On one hand, the elite set the rule of sensuality, where "food became very powerful statement of class and social position. Cooking turned into art, the site for a grand mingling of the material sciences with sensibilities and heritages both indigenous and European, especially French" (Mangalik 2003: 43). But on the other hand, even in the village, the refinement of food and slow-cooking is prevalent, even with the limited means. Guests are served the same sweets as those the Nawabs appreciated, such as *gulāb jāmūn*. And so, at least in fantasy, "this refinement, delicacy of sensibility, elaboration, and versatility are all part and parcel of that distinctive quality people call *Lakhnawiyat*, or 'Lucknow-ness'" (Petievich 2010: 107). This sentiment resonates with the people in the village, irrespective of religion or caste, who all share a powerful sense of keeping alive the traditions of the mythical Lucknow. As they say, 'here we all live like the Nawabs, relaxed, without any tension' (*yahām ham sab navāboṁ kī taraf jī rahe haiṁ, ārām se, tension ke binā*). Even *chikan* is to be done and produced at leisure; it is nothing to be hurried; it is a time-pass. Time is meant to be wasted in the production of *chikan*; its production is not meant to be governed by the capitalist demands of effectivity. Even the Nawabs recognized this dimension of excessive wasting of time as the ultimate sign of luxurious living, cultivating also the opposite end to that of permanent luxurious monuments to their status, wealth and position in hierarchy – it is said that a *chikan angarkha* to be worn by the Nawab took two years to embroider and was so thin that after one wearing it dissolved. The ephemeral exquisiteness of the piece that just dissolved was the sign of ultimate power – the energy and time that went into its making was gracefully wasted in a matter of an afternoon. While the piece dissolved, the myth of this sovereign waste of energy and time has been burnt into the memory of the local people.

Within the logic of hierarchical inequality then, certain material luxuries and splendor are reserved to the elites, typically born into their wealth. Opulent luxury in this sense has served more as a symbol of sovereignty, flaunted by the kings, *nawabs* and royalty to materialize the divine or cosmic hierarchy. As such, it was never meant for 'those below'. Within the system of hierarchical inequality, luxury is accumulated in what is considered as 'adequate' in proportion to the social position within the hierarchy. Hence, following this logic, even if the women have for instance beautiful golden jewelry, it is not only their 'bridal wealth', but more importantly a material expression of their hereditary position within the hierarchy and not a personal vanity or a symbol of merit. Hierarchical inequality in India is explicitly unjust and visibly so; accepting this as given with a sense of social

fatalism is hence a way of coping with an unjust system and with the implicit shared belief in a world that is, at least here and now^{ix}, unjust.

A confrontation with the world of the designers is first and foremost a confrontation with a world of competitive inequality; this is a world driven by the idea of merit and hence also by the belief in a just world (Rubin and Peplau 1975). Within this worldview, shared nowadays by the westernized elites and the middle classes, meritocratic achievement increasingly serves as a (rhetoric and performative) legitimization of hereditary wealth, which effectively creates the illusion of a just, deserved reward for hard work and achievement as opposed to 'undeserved' hereditary privilege (Kuldova 2016, Khan 2010). On a closer inspection, however, the distinction here is slight but significant. Within the logic of hierarchical inequality, a belief in an unjust world (here and now) is openly shared, hence people know quite well that the world is unjust and act accordingly (even if they might hope for justice in afterlife or next life). Within the logic of competitive inequality, a belief in a just world (here and now) is openly endorsed, but at the same time it turns out that this belief takes the form of an illusion without owners, an illusion that no one seems to really believe in upon closer inspection (Pfaller 2014), i.e. people know quite well that the world is unjust, but still they act and, most importantly here, judge others, as if it was just. Hence, this belief, or rather shared illusion without owners, has profound consequences for how people at the bottom of the social structure are treated. It is only within the logic of competitive inequality with the accompanied belief in a just world that the people at the bottom are treated as if they deserve their poverty; the poor are held accountable and directly responsible for their own misery. In this sense, the belief in just world adds another layer of injustice. Within the logic of competitive inequality, showing off luxury goods becomes a way of claiming accomplishment that is presented as 'well-deserved'; it means telling those below that they are less by virtue of their own making, while systematically pretending that they had an equal starting point. Competitive inequality stemming from the meritocratic ideal thus systematically denies structural violence. Precisely this hypocrisy of pretending that the designer's wealth is deserved, when in fact the village women saw that it is all their underpaid work that made him rich, while at the same time being told that they themselves can be rich and famous one day, turned out to be more unbearable than treating the problem of social inequality and injustice in terms of social fatalism. Social fatalism has thus re-emerged here as a solution to a profoundly unequal world and to an imposition of illusory meritocratic beliefs. Accepting the harsh reality and the social constraints and limitations that tend to reproduce rather than change, or even get worse over time, hence appears as a

viable coping mechanism. By throwing out the televisions, the villagers not only sacrificed the meritocratic illusion and killed the designer in substitute, but most importantly also refused to be blamed for their poverty. What is at stake here is not a mere perpetuation of established structures, or continuity, but instead a re-embracing of familiar structures under changed conditions and external pressures to embrace a different notion of 'good life'. The solution is a form of return to paradoxically 'comfortable' structures of injustice that allow for happiness, good life and a different sense of luxury that relies more upon luxuriating rather than display of luxury goods. We are reminded of Emile Durkheim and his claim that suicide is more prevalent among the well-off than the poor, since poverty is in itself a restraint that lowers one's socio-economic expectations. As Durkheim said, and I think he has a rather practical point here,

If poverty protects against suicide, it is because it is in itself a brake. Whatever one does, desires are to some extent bound to take account of means; what one has serves as a benchmark by which to decide what one would like to have. As a result, the less one has, the less one is inclined endlessly to extend the limit of one's needs. Powerlessness, by forcing us to moderation, accustoms us to it; apart from which, if mediocrity is all around us, nothing excites envy. Wealth, on the contrary, by the powers that it confers, gives us the illusion that we depend only on ourselves (...) the less one feels limited, the more intolerable any limitation becomes (Durkheim 2006).

In the village too, increase in monetary income often becomes a problem that leads to fights, conflicts, and family break-ups, rather than becoming a source of joy. Money is therefore often labeled as cursed, as a source of misery rather than pleasure. In practice, the divide is extrapolated also through the conflicting notions of good life and of luxury. This becomes most visible in the interactions between the designer and the villagers. To the villagers, the designer always appears stressed, tensed, always running after money; the same money that they hold in ambiguous contempt – it is necessary, but too much of it can destroy the peace of your life, in the same way as too little of it can throw you into complete misery (again, within this logic, for happiness to take place the amount of the money should be appropriate to one's position within the hierarchy, anything below or beyond presents itself over time as destructive and as hindering the ability to luxuriate). The stories of destroyed relations, fights, tensions and so on, blamed on greed for money, or on money at large, are prevalent in the village. You earn more, but your family and relations suffer in the process; a common and shared

sentiment. Especially the women often imagine the city as a space of neoliberal pollution, a space of misery and filth. Their men often travel to the city to do different petty jobs and there is nothing the women envy them about that. It is also the contrast of the city (and urban poverty) with the village (relative access to resources for life sustenance) that constitutes the village as a space of leisure, and wasting of time.

Another point is worth noting here. In the case of the production of luxury fashion, it is remarkably hard for the producers to fall for their own supposed mystique. What the designers present to their elite clients as extremely rare, unique and scarce appears in the village commonplace – anyone can do the embroidery (even if not of the highest quality). The village women are thus clearly aware of the degree to which the designers manufacture illusions of scarcity of the luxury good they produce and that the imaginary value lies more in the name of the designer, the power of his brand and the aesthetic economy of the fashion and celebrity systems; what the designers sell as luxury is hardly a luxury in the village – no less because the magic of the creative designer does not really hold much seductive power over the locals largely ignorant of high end brands and the elitist consumer culture of the cities. The source of the high exchange value of designer clothes thus still remains obscured for the workers, but one thing is clear, for them the designer is incapable of turning what they produce into desirable luxury. This goes also for other consumer products that he adorned himself with, from fancy watches, iPhone, and other gadgets. While these were admired and gazed at, they did not provoke any immediate sense of wanting to have them too, no matter how much the designer tried to change those attitudes and even if he temporarily succeeded. Following his exit, the insistence on that they did not want these things and that they were not for them grew even stronger. Rather, instead of hectic and desperate accumulation of consumer goods as symbols of one's status (their idea of the designer running after money and things), they claimed to prefer to enjoy life. Like Paul Lafargue, they provoke us by their statements about the value of laziness (Lafargue 1883), they want to live *ārām se*, as they say, without bother, without hassle, without control, without cutting up of their day by strict work routines. In this claim lies a resistance against their life being less worth because they do not possess certain things. The persistent sentiment that today resonates through the village is the insistence: 'I am fine where I am' (*maim jahām hūm, vahām maim thik hūm*). Being able to say this might paradoxically be the true luxury, even if here an effect of structural violence that has translated into an attitude of social fatalism. This sentiment is also connected to a commitment to immaterial luxuries, those that do not leave splendid monuments behind. The luxuries, the refinements of

everyday life and universal needs, that trickled down from the *nawabs* to the poor, are of the invisible character; invisible luxuries for invisible poor, invisible in proportion to their social position within the hierarchy. Rather paradoxically, the same designer envied the ability of the villagers to enjoy the here and now, juxtaposing it against his stress and anxiety to constantly manage his appearance and his dependence on lavish displays of his status for maintaining his position. And yet, it is highly probable that 'being happy with the little one has' and 'not wanting more' is possibly an effect of structural violence that has been accepted as people developed techniques to accommodate injustice. With the growing inequality worldwide, we can observe similar effects even in the western countries, where more and more people renounce luxury goods in favor of immaterial luxuriating to which they afford higher moral standing (and thus can feel good about their own subjection).

With David Graeber we can consider structural violence as those "structures that could only be created and maintained by the threat of violence, even if in their ordinary, day-to-day workings, no actual physical violence need take place (...) we are usually dealing with conquered populations of one sort or another – hence, with people who are keenly aware that current arrangements are the fruit of violence" (Graeber 2015: 59-61). The underlying threat of violence, upon which these structures rest, became visible in the last conflict over unpaid wages with the designer. When the men related to the women demanded the payment, the designer first threatened to call the police. When they persisted, he did. Contracts being non-existent and working relation being based on trust, the villagers had no way of demanding their right. However local and small, this case is mirrored in much more bombastic and painful encounters with police and military force across India, be it in protests against Coca-Cola (Raman 2007) or Tata Motors (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015); it is the privileged who are protected by the state and its repressive apparatus. As Graeber points out, structural violence invariably produces "extreme lopsided structures of imaginative identification" (Graeber 2015: 69) – and so they all live like the Nawabs. Structural violence translates here into symbolic violence: it is not a question of identity or romantization of the poor, their conception of luxury stems from need rather than greed, or hereditary privilege. "Symbolic violence then consists properly speaking in the production of double imaginary, the imaginary of fulfillment, which makes the humble joys to which the dominated are assigned appear sufficient, and the imaginary of powerlessness, which convinces them to renounce any greater ones to which they might aspire" (Lordon 2014: 108-10). The villagers thus lock themselves in a restricted domain of enjoyment, and yet, the lesson of social fatalism is that when

the restriction is self-imposed and commonly understood as a social good, it is far more bearable than when it is perceived as directly imposed.

No matter these lopsided structures of imaginative identification and the social fatalism, the women also make the designer and his kind question the valorization of consumer goods as markers of status and identity with their presumed 'emancipatory potential'. They clearly show that the enforcement of a work ethic in the name of individual liberation is an empty promise that brings more misery into lives that happiness and turns people into slaves of capital. The absurdity of it all was summed up as follows by one of the embroiderers: "They make me work so they have what they promise me, which is what they have, but only because I work, if I stop working they won't have it but neither will I, but I won't care, yet they will – for me it won't be a loss, I already do not have it and won't have it, you cannot lose what you do not have. They promise I will earn enough to enjoy holidays, but if I do not work, I already have holiday". In 2013, some of the televisions were back, but carefully kept at a distance and no longer watched with the same initial passion.

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Contributor's Note

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ⁱ The chapter is grounded in ethnographic fieldworks in North India, specifically Lucknow and New Delhi, during 2008, 2010 and 2011, and shorter fieldwork trips in 2012 and 2013. During my research I have focused largely on the relations of production and consumption within the Indian fashion industry and have worked extensively with craftspeople, fashion designers and their clients. The chikan embroidery industry based in Lucknow formed the core of the research and of the networks of production that were explored.

ⁱⁱ The name of the village remains concealed in order to protect the privacy of its inhabitants. It is located within the 25 km radius of Lucknow, and is a mixed village of Hindus and Muslims, who are in the minority (around 30% of the village). However, both Hindu and Muslim women are engaged in *chikan* embroidery, even though traditionally a Muslim craft. Around 55% of women are literate, among the *chikan* embroiderers the numbers are higher as they tend to be younger, with only few older women involved, among the men the literacy is around 60%. Even though around 50% of the houses are *pucca* (solid, permanent) houses and the majority of houses have electrification, only several houses have proper sanitation. The local economy consists of small farming (cultivators and agricultural laborers), cultivation of vegetables, crops and fruits (esp. paddy, potatoes, sugarcane, mangoes), keeping buffaloes, cows, poultry, goats, combined with non-farm activities, such as the repair workshops, small snack shops, basket making, pottery and last but not least the *chikan* embroidery (women) and one *zardozi* embroidery workshop (men); there is a primary school, basic medical services and one lawyer but no bank branch.

ⁱⁱⁱ It was never really clear here if the objects themselves were considered cursed, thus bringing bad luck or if they were actually doing the cursing through the moving and talking images, or if someone else was to be blamed for cursing their televisions. All these explanations seemed to collapse into each other at different times, as the subject (*shap* - curse) and verb (*shap denaa* - to curse) was used in both active and passive tenses, as well as an adjective.

^{iv} Traditionally a white on white embroidery done on muslin practiced by Muslims, today largely produced in Lucknow and surroundings in multiple colors and fabrics. Increasingly, due to the expansion of the industry, Hindu women have learned the craft to earn a bit of extra cash. During the last four decades, the craft was revived by the Indian Crafts Council initiatives, NGOs, SEWA Lucknow and numerous fashion designers and traders.

^v Notably, the SEWA Lucknow, a local branch of the nation-wide organization for women's empowerment. The local SEWA has tried to teach the women all stages in the production, creating a factory-like setting where all processes are concentrated (with the exception of block-making). This has led to several conflicts with male local craftsmen as they saw their hereditary professions being hijacked and their services no longer required.

^{vi} The trader, designer and their NGOs featuring in this story are anonymized, both due to their own wish and the sensitivity of the material.

^{vii} A metal-wire embroidery, often done with crystals or Swarovski stones. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century *zardozi* was done with gold and silver threads and semi-precious and precious stones. *Zardozi* is typically done by Muslim men; most Delhi based designers run their own workshops, largely located in and around Shahpur Jat and Hauz Khas; in Lucknow and surrounding villages there are numerous *zardozi* workshops as well.

^{viii} A North-Indian classical dance, in Lucknow connected to the image and persona of the courtesan, who was also a poet and protector of high culture (Kuldova, Tereza. 2012. "Fashionable Erotic Masquerades: Of Brides, Gods and Vamps in India." *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 3:1&2, 69-86. The dance was revitalized in post-Independence India and turned into a relatively respectable pastime for middle classes.

^{ix} Within the Hindu worldview, one is typically considered as born into a position that one 'deserves' based on one's previous life, hence justice arrives first in the next life. However, one could argue that this might also be one of the ways of coping with injustice and structural violence here and now and with the fact that one's suffering is not always proportionate to one's merit, behavior, goodness, charity and so on. But still, the belief in an unjust world and the accompanying social fatalism appears to be in everyday practice shared equally by Muslims and Hindus. Hence, it has possibly less to do with scriptural matters of religion than with experiences of persistent social inequality and structural violence. Even if each tradition offers scope for free will and for changing one's destiny, this does not disqualify our analytical distinction that functions as a Weberian ideal type.