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For India's Newly Rich Farmers, Limos Won't Do



Kuni Takahashi for The New York Times

Kapil Yadav arrived by helicopter at his bride's village before their wedding in the eastern outskirts of Delhi, India, last month. Farmers and landowners in the area have prospered after a recent spate of land development.

By JIM YARDLEY

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NOIDA, India — Bhisham Singh Yadav, father of the groom, is stressed. His rented Lexus got stuck behind a bullock cart. He has hired a truck to blast Hindi pop, but it is too big to maneuver through his village. At least his grandest gesture, evidence of his upward mobility, is circling overhead. The helicopter has arrived.



Kuni Takahashi for The New York Times

At a wedding on Delhi's outskirts, the groom, Kapil Yadav, and the helicopter his father hired.

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Girls protected their faces from the

Mr. Yadav, a wheat farmer, has never flown, nor has anyone else in the family. And this will only be a short trip: delivering his son less than two miles to the village of the bride. But like many families in this expanding suburb of New Delhi, the Yadavs have come into money, and they want everyone to know it.

"People will remember that his son went on a helicopter for his marriage," a cousin, Vikas Yadav, shouted over the din. "People should know they are spending money. For us, things like this are the stuff of dreams."

The Yadavs are members of a new economic caste in [India](#): nouveau riche farmers. Land acquisition for expanding cities and industry is one of the most bitterly contentious issues in India, rife with corruption and violent protests. Yet in some areas it has created pockets of overnight

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dust near Delhi as a helicopter carried the groom to his bride's village less than two miles away.

wealth, especially in the outlying regions of the capital, New Delhi.

By Western standards, few of these farmers are truly rich. But in India, where the annual per capita income is about \$1,000 and where roughly 800 million people live on less than \$2 a day, some farmers have gotten windfalls of several million rupees by selling land. Over the years, farmers and others have sold more than 50,000 acres of farmland as Noida has evolved into a suburb of 300,000 people with shopping malls and office parks.

That has created what might seem to be a pleasant predicament: What to do with the cash? Some farmers have bought more land, banked money, invested in their children's educations or made improvements to their homes. In Punjab, a few farmers told the Indian news media they wanted to use their land riches to move to Canada. But still others are broke after indulging in spending sprees for cars, holiday trips and other luxuries.

"They go for Land Rovers," said N. Sridharan, a professor at [the School of Planning and Architecture](#) in New Delhi. "They buy more televisions, and quite a lot of money also goes into drinking. They try to blow it out."

Much of this conspicuous consumption is bad financial planning by farmers who have little education or experience with the seductive heat of cold cash. But some sociologists say such ostentatious spending, especially on weddings, is rooted in the desire of lower castes to show off their social mobility, partly by emulating the practices of the upper castes.

In India, as in many places, a wedding has always been equal parts religious ceremony, theatrical production and wealth demonstration project. For the country's elite, the latest matrimonial trend is destination weddings in Bali or palaces in Rajasthan. For the new rich, hiring a helicopter is motivated by the same impulses for excitement and one-upmanship.

"Everyone wants to be better than the others," said Subhash Goyal, whose travel company handles three or four helicopter weddings every year in the Delhi region. "This is how the new rich behave. They want to show off and say, 'I have more money than you.'"

On the morning of his son's wedding, Mr. Yadav sat in the shabby brick courtyard of his village home, finalizing the last details of a ceremony that seemed to straddle different centuries. He had earned about \$109,000 selling three acres of his ancestral land. He banked some of the money, renovated his house, bought a small Hyundai and purchased three more acres farther out to continue farming.

He estimates that his share of the wedding — the bride's father pays a bigger share — will cost him \$13,000, including \$8,327 for the chopper. "It is for my happiness, for the happiness of my son," said Mr. Yadav, 36. "In my marriage, I went in a car. But that was a different era."

As the family began the traditional procession through the village, his son, Kapil, 19, was dressed in embroidered finery atop a white horse. Mr. Yadav's rented white Lexus finally got around the bullock cart; he was taking it to the bride's village while his son rode in the chopper. As another touch, Mr. Yadav also had hired a truck — the Reenu Rock Star 2010 Hi-Fi DJ — to lead the procession. It was playing Hindi pop so loudly that the brick homes of the village seemed to shake.

Then a problem arose: The truck was stuck at a tight corner, and the procession was pinned between the truck and a herd of water buffaloes. As people slipped around the marooned Reenu Rock Star, another problem materialized: The helicopter was already circling above.

Usually, the procession is a slow parade to wave to neighbors. But the Yadavs had rented the helicopter by the hour, so everyone started running, sidestepping the piles of water buffalo dung and the channel of open sewage. The corpulent mother of the groom, her



flesh spilling out of her sari, giggled as she barreled toward the arriving aircraft.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "We are so happy!"

The helicopter landed in a clearing. In the distance, the concrete skeletons of new apartment towers were clouded in a haze. Hundreds of villagers surrounded the small blue helicopter, which was guarded by a detail of local police officers. Then the groom and two relatives jumped in, and the blue bird rose over the village, as Mr. Yadav hopped in the Lexus and roared toward the bride's village.

The ride took five minutes, and Mr. Yadav barely beat the arriving chopper. When the son stepped onto solid ground, he was wearing a garland made of 100 rupee notes. The helicopter was to return in the morning, after the wedding ceremony, to deliver the newlyweds back to the groom's village and the rest of their lives.

But as the white-haired pilot prepared to depart, the father of the bride, Davinder Singh Yadav, pulled him close. "Please take it over the village a few times before you leave," he shouted. "The village is so big. Everybody needs to see it."

A moment later, as the copter circled above the small farming houses, the father said: "The whole village will remember. The whole world will remember."

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.

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