
November 5, 2008

NEW DELHI JOURNAL

Urban Cowboys Struggle With India's Sacred Strays

By **JEREMY KAHN**

NEW DELHI — Brajveer Singh does not own a wide-brimmed hat, leather boots or a pair of jeans. He has never ridden a mechanical bull.

But he can lay claim to being a real-life urban cowboy. Mr. Singh is among the dozens of men who spend their days roping cattle on the streets of this city as part of a long and frustrating battle to rid [India](#)'s capital of stray cows.

There is perhaps no more stereotypical image of India than that of a stray cow sauntering down the middle of a busy city street, seemingly oblivious to the traffic swerving around it.

Hindus consider cows sacred animals, and their slaughter is banned throughout most of India. Cows are frequently allowed to wander where they please, even in cities, where Indians tend to view them much the way Americans and Europeans regard pigeons — an unpleasant but intractable part of the urban landscape.

But in New Delhi, many residents long ago lost patience with the thousands of stray cattle. In 2002, after citizens petitioned the courts to do something about them, judges ordered the cattle cleared from the roads.

Six years later, however, the cows are still here. In September, the government missed the latest in a series of court-ordered deadlines for their removal, but officials say the city is committed to solving the problem before the Commonwealth Games, which will be in New Delhi in 2010.

Meeting that goal is up to Mr. Singh and the city's 164 other "cow catchers."

One recent morning, Mr. Singh and the seven other men in his team gathered near their truck in Old Delhi, the capital's ancient heart. Seven of them squeezed into the cab, while one stood scraping day-old manure out of the truck's long, high-sided bed.

They set off looking for cows.

This is dangerous work. Only on the rare occasions when a trained veterinarian accompanies them are the cattle catchers allowed to use tranquilizer darts or a [stun gun](#). Instead, they rely on rope lassos and brute strength to capture the beasts, which often charge into traffic or kick and buck violently in an attempt to escape.

On this particular day, Mr. Singh literally seized a young bull by the horns, wrestling him into position for roping.

"The key is, once you have the horn in your hand, try hard not to let go," he said with a grin.

He and the other cow catchers all have tales of being injured on the job, suffering everything from rope burns to broken bones. One even lost an eye when he was gored by a bull.

But far more dangerous than the cattle, according to the cowboys, are the people they encounter. The cow catchers have been involved in fistfights with drivers enraged that the cowboys have blocked traffic while trying to remove cows from a busy road. Religious Hindus, who sometimes feed the stray cattle found near temples, have on rare occasions been known to pelt cow catchers with stones.

"It's an occupational hazard," said the city's most senior cow catcher, Virpal Singh, who is no relation to Brajveer Singh.

An even greater concern, however, are the thousands of illegal dairies that operate in the city. The government classifies any cow wandering the streets as stray, but many of these animals are actually owned by unlicensed dairies. The dairy operators — and the slum dwellers who buy their cheap milk — often react violently when cattle catchers arrive.

This day, a young man carrying milk jugs on his scooter only glowered at the cattle catchers as they used a hydraulic lift to place a cow they had captured from the median of a congested road into the rear of their truck. But Brajveer Singh pointed to a scar on his scalp — a reminder of the seven stitches he required last year after a dairy operator hit him over the head

with a stick.

In return for enduring these risks, a cow catcher earns about 10,000 rupees, or \$250, a month. That is less than what the city employee assigned to drive the cow catchers' truck makes, but most cow catchers said they were just happy to have a government post, which provides job security and benefits.

Once the cow catchers capture their daily quota of 9 or 10 animals, they drive the cattle to a city-run compound where workers use a long pipelike gun to shoot a microchip down each cow's esophagus. They then deliver the cattle to one of five government-approved cow sanctuaries on the outskirts of the city.

These shelters, called gosadans, are run by Hindu charities but receive hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional financing from the city. In theory, the microchips keep the shelters honest, preventing them from selling the cows back to illegal dairies or turning them loose.

But the cow catchers say it is not uncommon to capture the same animal twice. Virpal Singh said dairies sometimes use political connections to force the city to release seized cows. And Vijender Kumar Gupta, chairman of the standing committee of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the government body responsible for overseeing the roundup of stray cattle, said that the influence of this "milk mafia" is the single biggest factor standing in the way of Delhi's meeting the court order.

Over the past two years, the city government says, it has taken more than 20,000 cows off the street. But this still leaves an estimated 5,000 to 12,000 strays.

"I don't think Delhi will ever really be free of cows," Virpal Singh said.

Most of Delhi's cattle wranglers are recruited from rural areas outside the city, and they commute into the city from their villages each day by train. While it is a small fraternity, the cow catchers say they rarely socialize outside of work. There are no cowboy bars in Delhi.

"After a full day of trying to catch cows, we are usually too tired to do anything except go home and go to bed," Brajveer Singh said.

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