Return Mobility and the Process of Stratification in Rural India

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In this paper, we will examine the occupational attainment process for rural India, using the life cycle model suggested by Blau and Duncan (1967:Ch. 5). The evidence generated by this research tradition of status attainment provides a good justification for employing their basic model for comparative analysis. However, the comparative evidence generated in this tradition should be carefully examined in order to construct valid theories of stratification, and in order to avoid the pitfalls of the earlier studies of social mobility. In order to provide a comparison we will apply a similar analysis to a rural sample of India and the U.S. We expect these comparisons to show differences in the status attainment processes of the two societies. Part of these differences between rural United States — an Industrial Society and rural India — an industrializing society — can be explained by the phenomenon of "return mobility" in rural India and its absence in the rural U.S. It is, therefore, argued that contemporary industrializing nations, such as India, may not necessarily follow the patterns of stratification that have been experienced in other industrial nations, such as the United States. On the other hand, industrializing societies may be developing their own indigenous processes of attainment. If this should be the case, one must be careful in cross-national comparisons of status attainment processes.

The Data, Model and Methods

The data for our rural Indian sample consists of 906 heads of households from 11 Punjab and Haryana villages. These 11 villages were selected purposely for this survey — they represent a deliberately broad range of cultural and dialectal-linguistic variations within the north-west region of India. The 11 villages also differ in terms of their jati (caste) composition — some are single jati villages while others are multi-jati villages. These villages also represent different levels of economic development and productive resources. These variations are reflected in the villages’ different sizes and degrees of isolation from communication centres (roads, railway stations and cities). The data were collected by the Census of India as part of their Socioeconomic Survey of 587 villages in 1962-63, only about half of which has as yet been published.
The data from the 11 villages included in this study, however, were obtained from the census authorities, and the coding was done from the "Household Schedules." Elsewhere we have pointed out that these villages provide us with a rough representation of the rural Indian labor force in 1962-63 (Sharda, 1977:71-78). Further checks have also confirmed the representative character of the sample with regards to age and sex distributions, as well as to overall literacy rates for 1961 (Sharda, 1981:27, exp. fn. 2). However, despite the similarities between sample variables and the Indian Census data of 1961, no claims are made as to the representativeness of our sample to the whole of India, although we believe that the estimates obtained from this sample would not be too far wrong if a better controlled and more representative sample had been taken.

The data for our rural United States sample were obtained from a survey of 1962 conducted for the purpose of studying occupational changes in a generation (OCG-I). The method of sampling and techniques of data collection have been explained elsewhere (Blau and Duncan, 1967: 10-19). The term "rural" is defined in this study in accordance with the Census classification of the respective countries. As with many stratification studies, our two samples have been restricted to males between the ages of 20 and 64 who were active in the "civilian labor force" in 1962.

Since we follow Blau and Duncan's methodology closely, as suggested also by Treiman (1970), we have scaled the stratification variables of Blau and Duncan's basic model in exactly the same way. Current occupation of the respondents, their father's occupations, and first jobs of respondents were scaled for both samples, using the metrics of Treiman's Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale (1977). Similarly, education of the respondents was scaled for both samples on the basis of approximate number of school years completed. Since we did not have data on father's education in our rural Indian sample we did not include this variable in our comparative model of occupational attainment.

Blau and Duncan's (1967) paradigm of mobility research has redirected the efforts of scholars to the estimation of models of occupational attainment process. In the absence of real cohorts it is useful to heuristically conceive of different age cohorts of a cross sectional sample to represent different ages of a real cohort undergoing labor force experiences (Blau and Duncan, 1967: 177-188). However, Blau and Duncan remind us that this is only a heuristic device — one that suggests hypotheses — and thus should not be considered as a substitute of real cohort studies. In examining the same data, Featherman (1971) did find small "cohort effects." However, when correlations were corrected for attenuation, these effects disappeared (Kelley, 1973; see Featherman's responses to criticisms of Kelley, 1973). Haller and Portes, (1973) also report that the status attainment process of a real cohort (one they were studying) is no different from the status attainment process of the synthetic cohort Blau and Duncan have studied. Since no real cohort data exists for rural India we have to fall back on this heuristic method in examining our problem.