Occupational Preferences of College Students in North India*

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LITERATURE on occupational choices suggests that in modern industrial societies based upon capitalism, individuals have freedom to select their occupations. (Ginzberg 1951: 3). It is conceded, however, that the young adult’s occupational aspirations and his selection of a job are influenced by such factors as socialization by his family, his peer group and his school (Musgrave 1967: 33).

In the case of traditional societies, however, it is assumed that occupational choices are both limited and largely determined by such factors as caste, family status, religion, and other ascriptive norms (Ginzberg 1951: 3). India is described as a traditional society, presently undergoing the process of modernization. Since 1947, a democratic political system has existed in India. There has been a politicization of the masses, and a constant, though slow process of industrialization is taking place. What impact has this change in the external environment had on the interrelationship between a youth’s social origin and his selection of a particular occupation? The answer to this question will not only give us some idea of the interrelationship between the traditionally accepted ascriptive norms and occupational preference, but will also be indicative of changing patterns of social norms and values in a transitional society. It should be pointed out here that some recent studies on occupational distributions in India appear to demonstrate that despite urbanization, industrialization, and some change in traditional occupational patterns, caste and religion still remain the dominant determinant of one’s occupation. For example, in his study of occupational differentiation in South India, Noel P. Gist concludes that “the caste system as a determinant in occupational choice is still a dynamic

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force" (Gist 1954b: 131). He further adds that “High status castes are oriented towards high status occupations and vice-versa” (Gist 1954a: 130). With reference to North India, S. P. Jain’s study of a small town community also arrived at the conclusion that “occupational differentials” were still based upon “religion and hierarchy of castes” (Jain 1967: 309, Rutha 1970: 248). These conclusions, however, are based upon studies of the populations of either small towns or large cities. None of these studies focus solely on the occupational choices of those born and educated in a free India.

Occupational choice is viewed as a developmental process. Ginzberg, et al, stress that it is at the age of eighteen and above that a young adult is first in a position to make a “realistic” choice of his occupation (Ginzberg 1951: 95). It therefore becomes important to investigate the occupational preferences of college youth. It is the objective of this paper to investigate the inter-relationship between college students’ occupational preferences and their social origins.

**Universe of the Study**

The student population for this study was selected from Ludhiana and Jullundur, two large cities, and Malerkotla, a medium-sized town, all situated in the Punjab state of North India. Ludhiana and Jullundur, each with a population of 400,000 or above, have diversified economies built around medium and small-scale industries (Pathak 1970: 1091). Both cities are the headquarters of their district governments and both house numerous technical and educational institutions. According to the 1961 census, Jullundur district’s population was 54 percent Hindu, and 44 percent Sikh. In Ludhiana district on the other hand, the Hindus are a minority (33.7%) and the Sikh (63%) a majority (Census of India 1961: 31). Both of the cities, however, are predominantly Hindu, Jullundur having the larger Hindu population (60% as compared to 55% in Ludhiana) (Wallace 1967: 71).

Malerkotla has a population of approximately 50,000, including the largest concentration of Muslims in the state. It is a market town, heavily dependent on agriculture. The town was formerly the headquarters of a princely state.

**Sample and Methodology**

In Punjab, institutions providing college level are of three types: (1) Denominational colleges (here called private colleges) run by Hindu, Sikh or other sectarian organizations; (2) Government colleges run by the state government; and (3) Exclusively women’s colleges, managed and run either by the state government or by sectarian organizations.

To achieve a fair representation of these different segments of the student population, two private colleges (one Hindu and one Sikh), two state colleges (one urban and one rural), and two women’s colleges (one state and one Hindu) were selected for the study.