Lucknow Rickshawallas: The Social Organization of an Occupational Category

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THIS paper is frankly experimental in that it constitutes an effort to deal not with a community or culture as a whole in the usual social anthropological sense of the word but with an occupational category in an urban center of North India using the combined techniques of the sociologist and the anthropologist. The study deals with social organization, but with social organization in the broader meaning of the term which embraces not only kinship but social stratification, role patterning, demographic structure and certain aspects of economic relationships as well. Ultimately, therefore, we discuss the kinship system and domestic organization of a chance sample of bicycle ricksha drivers in Lucknow, India, but only after a fairly lengthy examination of the place this occupational category occupies in the social structure of a "transitional society". Since our approach is so unorthodox in many ways, this prior preoccupation with the whole setting of our subjects seemed a necessary precondition for talking meaningfully about the characteristics of domestic organization that were found among them. Many difficulties lie in the path of using anthropological methods in urban settings for the study of occupations and these are well appreciated by the author. Subsequent publications on this subject will endeavor to profit from the difficulties and deficiencies evident in this initial, rather imperfect attempt. But it is felt that one must begin somewhere and the present essay represents this first, tenuous step. Building upon the body of concepts elucidated in this paper, for example, a subsequent paper will explore in much detail the domestic organization of scores of families at the top and bottom of the urban occupational

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1 My work in India has been made possible by three generous sources. In 1954–55, as a Fulbright Student, I first went to India. In 1959–60, I returned as a Postdoctoral Fellow of the National Science Foundation. From 1960 to 1962, I remained to do further research under two concurrent postdoctoral fellowships provided by the National Institute of Mental Health.

2 A "chance" as opposed to a "random" sample was all that could be obtained under the circumstances. There were no statistics available concerning the social composition of this occupation on the basis of which a systematic sample could be constructed.
hierarchy and compared with the rural kinship system found in the city's hinterland.

**General and Theoretical Considerations**

The term "rickshawalla" is Hindustani and denotes one who operates a three-wheeled conveyance that is propelled and steered in the same fashion as a conventional bicycle. Two passengers are normally accommodated on the seat behind the driver although, by overloading, more are sometimes carried. Throughout India the bicycle ricksha meets a need for cheap, individualized transportation much in the same fashion as the taxicab does in the United States. The rickshawalla's is a low-status occupation because the work is exhausting, the pay is low, and little training or education is needed. In middle-sized Indian cities in particular, such as Lucknow, there are hundreds of these vehicles on the streets and it is clear on the basis of even superficial observation that a large percentage of their drivers are recent arrivals from rural areas who are qualified to do little other than menial tasks such as this.

Lucknow had a population of around 625,000 in 1959. It is the capital of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous province (70 million people), and is predominantly a center of politics, administration, trade and education. Heavy industry in the province is located in Kanpur, forty miles to the south. Although the number varies from year to year, it is estimated that between two and four thousand rickshas ply their trade in the city and its environs. Normally, ownership of bicycle rickshas is separate from their operation. Owners are sometimes middle class individuals, such as teachers, clerks and shopkeepers, who purchase and maintain from one to four rickshas as a side-investment to bring in a modest added income. This category probably accounts for the majority of bicycle rickshas in operation. However, there are also some large-scale entrepreneurs who may own dozens or scores of bicycle rickshas and whose primary income is derived from this source. In all cases, owners rent their vehicles to prospective rickshawallas for from twelve annas to two-and-a-half ruppees (15c to 50c) a day. Rarely does one encounter a driver who owns his own ricksha mainly because the cost of ownership (Rs 450 or $100 for a new one) is prohibitive for those who typically find their way into the occupation.

This investigation of the social life of rickshawallas was part of an overall examination of the phenomenon of social mobility in India, with particular reference to the question of what takes place when people steeped in the values of a caste system confront the economic, social, and cultural order that is

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1 According to the 1951 Census of India, the population of Lucknow was 496,961; by 1961, the Census indicated a population of 655,673. This is a growth-rate of approximately 1.6% per year which means that by 1959 around 128,000 had been added to the population.
2 Mukerjee and Singh (1961:35) say that there were 412 bicycle rickshas in Lucknow in 1943-44 which number had increased to more than 2,500 in 1954-55.
3 The rate of exchange is Rs 4.75 to the dollar.