

Book Review

India in the Machine Age

N B Sheth

Factory Workers in India by Arthur Niehoff, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, U S A, Pp 115.

THE academic as well as practical importance of the study of the social implications of urbanization and industrialization in 'underdeveloped' countries such as India is now well recognized. The work done so far in this field, is, however, very inadequate. The information available on the subject hardly warrants any significant generalization. Dr Arthur Niehoff's book is an attempt to provide fresh information in the field of urban and industrial sociology in India- It will, therefore, be read with much interest by those concerned with the problems of urbanization and industrialization in India and other 'underdeveloped' countries.

The book is based on an investigation the author carried out among some factory workers in Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. The workers selected for the study were all migrants from rural areas and had changed over from non-industrial to industrial jobs in joining Kanpur factories. In this sense, the title of the book is a misnomer. It apparently carries an implication that the factory workers in Kanpur can be treated as 'representative' of factory workers in India. This is certainly not true. Although we have no precise data, we can say with confidence that 'factory workers in India' do not have the same social background. In particular, all factory workers are not migrants from rural to urban areas and from agricultural to industrial jobs, as are the workers studied by Niehoff. In Western India, for instance, there are many workers having a long tradition of urban living and non-agricultural patterns of livelihood-

Direction of Change

The starting point of Niehoff's study is the contention that the process of urbanization and industrialization in an underdeveloped society, changes its institutions in the direction of those of the

industrial urban 'society' of the West. The latter is marked by individualism, rationalism and an achievement-oriented social stratification permitting mobility to individuals. Which implies that these characteristics are the necessary correlates of, an "urban, industrial society" and hence absent in an 'underdeveloped' society in its traditional form. This assumption is yet to be proved.

The aim of the author is, first, to describe the changes brought about by migration to urban areas and shift to factory jobs in the traditional social structure of Kanpur workers. The account of the "traditional social structure" is a suitably abridged version of the picture drawn by earlier writers such as O Malley, Lowie and Hutton. Second, he wants to compare the changes just mentioned with the changes that occurred in the West as a result of industrialization.

Indian and Western models

There are thus two models in the author's conceptual framework — the model of traditional non-industrial Indian Society and that of industrial Western Society. His problem then is to see in what respects the changes induced by urbanization and industrialization have moved the social life of Kanpur workers from the first to the second model. He asks, in effect, questions such as : How far has caste been replaced by class ? How far has the joint family given way to the 'individual' family of the West? There are some changes which Niehoff describes as 'peculiar to the Indian situation, i e changes in those aspects of social life which have no parallels in Western society (e g changes in the various restrictions connected with caste). But for the most part the study is set against the two models mentioned above.

An important issue arises at this stage. How far is the description

of Indian society given by O'Malley and others valid for the pre-migration social life of Kanpur workers? We know quite well that though caste, joint family and village community exist throughout India, there have been at all times important regional and local variations in them which need to be considered for a study such as Niehoff has attempted. The model of the traditional society he has drawn may have its own utility, but it cannot serve as a substitute for the description of the social background of a specific group of people such as Kanpur factory workers. Since, then, there is no valid information about the pre-migration social life of the workers in question, it is presumptuous to argue, as Niehoff has done, that the social life of workers described in the book is a by-product of their migration and acceptance of factory-jobs.

The author reports his findings in 17 chapters spread over 90 pages of the book. It is somewhat reassuring that he raises specific questions in the beginning of even chapter and answers them. Other wise, it would be extremely difficult to understand titles such as 'Economics of the Worker', 'The Household' and 'Family Size'. The first only gives the details of income and expenditure of an average factory worker in Kanpur and a comparison with the budget of his American counterpart. The 'Household' tells us mainly about the changing pattern of the joint family in Kanpur and the emergence of the nuclear family. The title 'Family size' is selected for the chapter which indicates the trend towards fewer children in the city and the attitude of workers to birth-control, 'The city and the village' deals with the relative advantages and disadvantages of the city and the village, and mainly contains stereotyped idealization of workers. It is, in the reviewer's opinion, a total loss.

Caste and Class

There are five chapters on caste. The first of these is 'Caste and Class'. Among Kanpur workers caste and class coexist. They intersect each other in the sense that a high caste man may belong to a low class and *vice versa*. The

author has grouped the various castes into high, middle and low according to their association with the different strata of the traditional *Varna* system. One would expect a sociologist working on India to know the relevance of the *Varna* system for an understanding of

caste in modern India. The latter part, of this chapter is devoted to the existence of classes among factory workers. For some important social relationships, class has replaced caste. On a review of the number of classes postulated for India by earlier writers, Niehoff

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decides himself in favour of a three-class system. Industrialists, clerks and workers are regarded as belonging to the high, middle and low classes respectively. This is an extremely simplified picture of social stratification in urban India and has little use for the sociologist. For even a cursory observation of the social attributes of the different occupational and income groups is sufficient to demonstrate the existence of several classes merging into one another.

The differences between the classes are stated to be mainly cultural — differences in clothes, in the brands of tobacco and in the railway classes used by them. The only thing said about the relations between the classes is that the higher classes behave towards lower ones in an authoritarian way. However, the evidence brought in to substantiate this argument is thoroughly unconvincing*. The following passage is worth quoting at length.

"The treatment of individual! of low class by upper and middle class persons *can be* very authoritarian. In most instances that I observed the low-class individuals accepted such treatment without protest. On one occasion when I was accompanied by a Hindu College student I wished to take some movies of a camel that was being led along a road. The camel driver was of lower class status, as attested to by the fact that he was doing this manual work. The college student was *probably* of upper middle-class status and was wearing Western clothes, which always establishes a man of middle-of-high-class status. (What about factory workers? See photographs on pp 32 and 48). The student, in his desire to help me, told the camel driver to *s*op*, ordered him to have the camel kneel down, to mount the animal, and to go back down the road a distance and then come towards us slowly, a procedure repeated twice. I was surprised, but nevertheless pleased, to have such excellent control over the subject for photographic purpose. When *we were finished*, I wanted to give the man something for his trouble and *expenditure of time*, but my companion insisted that this wouldn't be necessary, nor was it even necessary to thank the camel driver. He was dismissed with a summary "JAO", the Hindi imperative for "to go", (p 25) (Italics and parentheses mine).

It seems the social stratification in Kanpur has vanished into insignificance before the camel-driver *curio* and photography.

Caste and Occupation

In the other chapters on Caste the author has discussed the changes in the traditional features of caste, such as restriction on choice of occupation, restriction on inter-dining and social intercourse, cultural exclusiveness and endogamy. Although the higher-castes had a tendency to prefer high and clean jobs in factories, there were many exceptions since those who migrated later had little or no chance of job-selection. The relation between caste and occupation thus became weaker in the urban industrial situation. However, the choice of occupation was much wider for lower castes than for higher ones. We are informed in the chapters on migration that the first migrants from villages to Kanpur were members of low castes who were driven out for reasons of poverty and social exploitation. These low caste people were absorbed in high and clean jobs as well as in low and unclean jobs. The higher castes migrated later and not always for economic reasons. When they arrived in town, most clean jobs were already manned by lower castes. The former had, therefore, to be satisfied with low unclean jobs. This means that the lower castes were in a position of advantage in the economic scale. This is a very important observation and, if it had been pursued, might have provided a good understanding of inter-caste relations in Kanpur.

In the two chapters on marriage, we are told that the marriage pattern and ideas regarding marriage are almost entirely traditional. The unmarried are looked down upon; marriage is primarily essential for a son. Marriages are mostly arranged; the age at marriage is still low; there are no inter-caste marriages. However, a large number of married men leave their wives back in their villages and live alone in Kanpur.

One full chapter is devoted to the problem of the unmarried after saying that there are few unmarried. The unmarried men remain so due to high dowry. ("High castes paid the largest dowries and there was more bachelorhood among the high caste Hindus . " Does the

author inform us that there is 4 bride-price among high-caste Hindus in UP?). Some remained unmarried because they left their villages suddenly. Some problems connected with bachelorhood — prostitution, etc — are discussed.

The chapter *on 'leisure time'* catalogues the games and pastimes of the city workers. It is said the workers combine the traditional with the modern by seeing religious films. The prohibition policy of the Government is also considered as falling within the purview of the study and we are told that prohibition was a success *generally*.

Finally, there is a chapter on 'Social Control' wherein we are told that Kanpur is more 'disorganized' than non-industrial cities like Lucknow. There were more cases of sex crimes, thefts, horse-play etc in Kanpur than elsewhere. That is, social control over the individual is weakened by industrialization. In this chapter the author also refers to some 'bad habits' prevailing: among Kanpur workers, such as body elimination in open spaces, and sneers at them. One wonders whether this also is an example of disorganization.

Comparison with Western Society

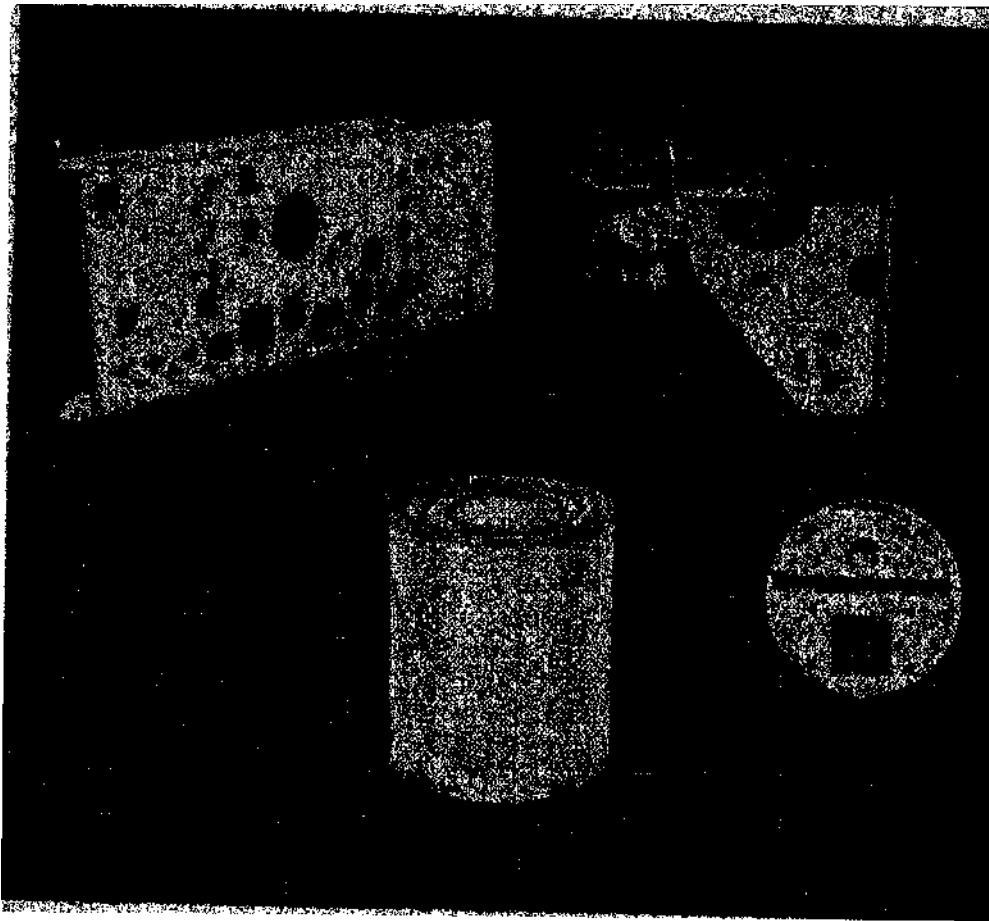
In "Conclusions" the author summarises what he has said in the previous chapters. He also carries out in specific terms the work of comparing changes in Kanpur with the model of the industrial western society. The emergence of class is a definite parallel to the West. Changes in caste are not comparable to the West, whereas the family has moved towards the Western-type of family. Individual mobility has increased, which again is a parallel to the Western Society. In short, industrialization and urbanization have produced the same type of change in the social set-up of India as they produced in Western Society. The hypothesis needs the support of similar studies in other areas.

Unfortunately, Niehoff has made several vague and incorrect statements in the book under review. On page 55, for example, we are told, "The Hindu method of eating by popping balls of food into the

mouth with the fingers without touching the lips is also an indication of the mouth's portability." Anyone conversant with India knows that the method of eating described here is certainly not

"the Hindu method". And he says in the preface that he was often invited to the kitchens of Kanpur workers! Again, there is a statement reading "Many younger sons who lost out in inheritance came to

the city for employment" (p. 35). Does he suggest the existence of primogeniture in Indian society? We wish the author had been more serious about his study as well as about Indians.



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