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Boatmen of the Ganges

*Indian communities afloat in the global economy.*

Gray clouds moved in on a blue sky and rain lashed the crowded city. Boatmen hurried passengers into long wooden boats and shoved off for the other side of the river. Sheets of rain pelted the unprotected travelers but ten minutes later the boats reached their destination and a placid river reflected the image of giant white clouds in a blue sky.

The monsoon had come to North India and the floating bridge connecting Varanasi to the city of Ramnagar had been dismantled to make way for the Ganga, which in the coming months would swell several times above its normal level and flood the surrounding land.

At 8:00 am on the Ramnagar side pedestrians appear on the hill above the Ganga. They are vegetable traders balancing their wares on bicycles. They are clean shaven students from Banaras Hindu University. They are Hindu monks clothed in orange. They are office workers in pleated pants and button down shirts. They are Muslim women veiled in black accompanied by husbands and children who wear long white kurta pajamas.

A boat arrives from the Varanasi side. The passengers disembark and a member of the boating crew hounds them.

“Give me 2 rupees,” he says, his lips stained a shiny red from chewing betel nut.

“I don’t have it,” replies the passenger.

“Then give me 1 rupee.”

The passenger says he doesn’t have it and leaves the boat.

Another passenger tries to slip away without paying.

“Give me 2 rupees,” says the boatman.

“I’m a daily passenger, so why should I pay?”

“Who isn’t a daily passenger? Give me two rupees and go.” The boatman lifts his arms and yells to the crowd, “No one wants to give money. Do you people think that we don’t need to eat? Hey! Watch those people!”

Another boatman keeps his boat full of people waiting as he attempts to catch one or two more passengers before leaving. But one of his passengers repeatedly nags him, *Chalo bhai, savari ho gaya*—“Let’s move man, you have enough people.”

The boatman glares at the man. “You just sat down,” he says, “and now you are shouting to go.” He returns his attention to the river bank as the crew continues to cram the boat full of scooters, sacks of food, cages filled with small green birds and bicycles stacked one on top of the other. With the rim of the boat just above the water level they leave for Varanasi.

Suresh’s traditional occupation (caste) is *mallah*, or boatman. As a child Suresh’s parents sent him to school. During his first month he fought with another boy and the next day he announced that he wasn’t going back. His mother asked him why and he told her that school didn’t suit him. Around the age of ten he went to a carpenter and requested work. The next day the carpenter began teaching Suresh how to maintain the tools. Then Suresh learned sanding and over a number of years he learned the trade. During the rainy season, after workers remove the floating bridge connecting Varanasi and Ramnagar, Suresh leaves carpentry to return to rowing his boat. In the four monsoon months he can make 10,000 rupees, (roughly 260 dollars), two thousand short of his year-end earnings from carpentry.

Suresh, his mother, father, grandmother, aunt, two older brothers and their wives and younger brother and sister live in single home in a village on the bank of the Ganges next to a small complex of temples. The oldest brother, Shravan Kumar, weaves saris; the second brother, Mahesh, boats full time; Suresh, the third brother, is a carpenter; and Rinku, the fourth and youngest brother, about seven years of age, assists his brothers in

the season's boating. Suresh's father presides over the family. He decides when his sons will marry, who they will marry, what kind of work they will do and how their earnings shall be spent.

On Sunday Mohan Lal Pujari, Suresh's father, along with the women members of the family and several neighbors, sit intently before a small black and white television watching the faded images of a weekly program called *Krishna*, which details the life of one of the major Gods of Hindu India. They had the volume turned to maximum level and the old speakers produced a shrieking, piercing sound. When we arrived the rapt viewers failed to acknowledge us and we seated ourselves. The program showed Krishna in his youth. He loves a young woman named Radha but she ignores Krishna. Krishna expresses his sorrow to his friend Udow and Udow counsels Krishna to resist the flow of emotions. One should be steady, he says, undisturbed by the worldly current. "You are a part of God who is in all things. Radha is not separate from you." Krishna declares that love-waves are crashing over him and Udow says that true love flows outward without discrimination or attachment. The program ends and seconds later the power cuts. During the summer, when temperatures can exceed 115 degrees, it is a regrettable and recurring event.

Disease and old age have left Mohan Lal Pujari looking like a famine victim, there being little difference in size between his biceps and thighs. When the power cut he remained sitting with his back propped up against the wall and turned only his head in our direction. We asked him about his name—the *pujari* at the end means "priest." He says that from childhood he has been a devoted patron of the Durga temple and since then people have tagged the *pujari* onto the end of his name. "My father worshipped regularly," he says, "and I followed his example. These days I can't do anything. My health is bad and I don't go out. My son Suresh goes to the temple now." Yesterday Mohan Lal made a rare excursion to the temple, a three minute walk for a healthy person; yet he had to stop several times in both directions. He showed us a syringe and vial of insulin serum and said that diabetes has reduced him to almost nothing. When his health

began to fail he told his oldest son Shraavan to go to the temple on behalf of the family. But he changed his mind because Shraavan has an uneven temperament that is not appropriate for the twice-daily task.

Mohan Lal laments many of the changes that have come to society. “In the past people had less income but one man alone could cloth and feed and shelter a household. Now every family member earns and still it’s not enough. At marriages the hosts used to serve you as guests of honor. Now they just set the food out and people eat. The men wore *dhotis* and *kurtas* (traditional male dress) but these young kids prefer pants and shirts. You could sit and tell people of all of your happiness and sorrow and they would listen. But today it’s different. When you go around no one asks how you are. People used to respect one another—whether you were poor or rich or old or crippled. Nowadays people respect money. Politicians come and make promises. They take the votes and disappear.”

“I educated my sons,” he says. “I told them to shun quarreling, envy, drinking and cheating. Respect in society is necessary and you get respect by talking politely and giving honor to those who come to you. But now people only respect themselves.” He says that now he only thinks about God. He has accomplished all that he was supposed to accomplish in his worldly life. He married, had children, supported a family, rebuilt his house from a mud house to a brick house, arranged the marriages of three daughters and two sons and at the time of his death, which he feels is not far away, he knows the family will be able to live decently. “My work is finished. I am old and useless. When death comes the separation is complete. Only God awaits me. Wealth and relations will not follow. So in the time I have left I don’t concern myself much with such matters.”

Suresh’s older brother, Shraavan Kumar, met us on his day off. He has a tight face, with pronounced cheek bones and large eyes—an appearance that reinforces his father’s description of Shraavan being charged with an extra and unpredictable amount of energy. Shraavan’s wife died two years ago from tuberculosis. They had two children but they died in infancy. As a child Shraavan briefly attended school but said didn’t like it. He says he had trouble learning what was asked of him and that he liked to roam around and see the sights of the village, the city and the river bank. Around the age of 10 he started working in the sari business. A few years ago he started his own small business of

weaving saris but he failed to make a profit and so he now works for a contractor. He may start another sari business but only if it is written in his fate. He goes to the temple for several reasons: because his father tells him to go, for peace of mind and for the chance that God may bless him with good fortune.

The city of Ramnagar is the home of one of India's regional kings and the king of Ramnagar owns the *ghat*—the area of river access where boatmen collect passengers. The king leased the boating rights of the ghat to a contractor who provides a steamer service that ferries passengers between Varanasi and Ramnagar. The boatmen protest that the contractor tries to stop them from operating and the contractor replies that the boatmen take away a sizable amount of his business. Nevertheless the boatmen continue to operate, prompting the contractor to take his case to the police. “Occasionally the police catch us,” say the boatmen. “They beat us with a stick and take our money. But they have no right to stop us.”

What ensues is an amusing game of hide-and-seek as the boatmen collect passengers and when they see the police coming toward the river they leave for the other side. The police stand on the bank cursing the boatmen and the boatmen curse the police back. Sometimes the police confiscate boats and dock them on the bank. An hour or two later, when the police are on a break, not looking or drinking tea, the boatmen come and take their boats and return to work.

The boatmen have pleaded their case with the contractor. They tell him that they are poor and that they must work. “But he doesn't listen,” say the boatmen. “He tells us to go to the king. But the king doesn't do anything for us. He says we can row but that we have to give them 50 per cent of our earnings. But if we do that then we won't eat.” The boatmen cannot hide their disdain for the king of Ramnagar. They feel he has betrayed them. According to them a king must care for the public and in return the public will help and respect the king. As it is, they say, only people outside of Ramnagar respect the king.

“We fight over business,” says Mr. Ram Naresh Nishad, the contractor who holds the lease for the commercial boating rights at Ramnagar Ghat. He sits in a chair a few

feet away from another table where his staff collects passenger fees. “Sometimes I complain and the police shut them down for two or three days.” Then he smiles and adds, “But it doesn’t really work.” Next to Mr. Nishad a police officer slouches in a chair with his legs stretched out before him. He nods his head in agreement. “The boatmen have stomachs,” he says, “so why should I catch them?”

Mr. Nishad says that he has established his business by law and if the boatmen want to work they will have to pay him a percentage of their earnings. The boatmen counter that since there is no longer a kingdom how can the king be the owner of the land? The boatmen have filed several suits against the king and the contractor but Mr. Nishad brushes them aside. “My papers are complete,” he says. “My business is legal. They don’t have proper permission to work here. I have it and so I will win.” Some of the suits have been pending since 1985 and court procedures in civil cases can take as long as 12 years to reach resolution. Once a week Mr. Nishad goes to court to file papers and pay his lawyer and even if the verdicts are rendered in his favor he knows the boatmen will continue to do business. “The suits have been filed and I must defend myself,” he says. “Besides, they outnumber me, so there is little I can do against them.”

While we were talking a member of the contractor’s staff implored the traveling public to pay for their fares. “Take a ticket. Take a ticket, brother. Please take a ticket.” Mr. Nishad sits in his chair chewing betel nut and assisting his staff. “Stop the ones without tickets,” he says. “Hey. Go and get that man. He didn’t pay.” “Hey you, with the bag, take a ticket.” The traveler, caught shamelessly cheating, accuses the Mr. Nishad of being a greedy man. “You want to go without money,” replies Mr. Nishad, “yet you abuse me too.” He turned back to us and smiled. “These are my problems. Everybody wants to go without paying. The students come and demand free rides. They say, ‘We don’t get money from home so how can we pay you?’ Others pretend to be students. I ask them for their identification cards and they say, ‘You are not the vice-chancellor, so why should we show you?’ Sometimes I think I should leave this business.”

Suresh is one of India's 400 million illiterates. In the eyes of the elite and upper middle classes he symbolizes all that is to be avoided: superstitious, idle, lazy, unproductive, illiterate and backward. People like Suresh are one of the primary reasons for India's poverty and for its inability to become a military, technological and economic super power that earns the praise and respect from the world's advanced nations that the elite and middle class so dearly craves. But Suresh says he's not at all poor. "I have everything—a home, family, food, clothing and work. This is not poverty."

Governments the world over have enacted economic policies designed for liberalization of markets, large scale corporate business and middle class consumption. The policy requires "fiscal prudence" by slashing corporate taxes and social services for those—by far the majority of people in India—who can't pay for them. This same economic strategy also raises prices for basic goods while the income of the poor remain stagnant. Rural people, indigenous people and poor people world wide are under a massive assault by the rich and their benefactors, the middle classes, and as a result people like Suresh and his family skate on very thin ice. A disabling sickness, the death of an earning family member, a natural disaster or a falling economy can bring great stress and encourage the formation of poverty: destabilization of traditional social structures, marginalization of females and girl-children, anxiety, spousal abuse, suicide and crime; which, along with a staggering gap between the rich and the poor, and massive environmental degradation due to middle class consumption and third world overpopulation, are the hall marks of the global economic system.

Suresh wakes at 4:00 in the morning, bathes in the Ganga and then worships at the temple. He eats and then goes out to earn his living. In the evening he cleans the surface of his boat dirtied by a few hundred muddy footprints. Afterwards he bathes and worships at the Durga temple again. He washes the image, offers a flower garland, incense and a mantra he learned from his father. He often goes out in the evening to the bazaar to meet friends, taking milk or yogurt and enjoying the atmosphere of people, lights, sounds and smells. He has two meals a day, the noon meal being lentils, vegetables, rice and *roti* (unleavened bread); the evening meal being a lighter version of *roti* and vegetables. According to Suresh there are four important things in his life: God, family, work and his temperament, which should be easy going and peaceful.

This is his education, his ethos. It shapes his entire existence. When asked what the Ganga is he said, “It is my Mother. The whole world swims in the Ganga.” (*duniya ganga me tair raha hai*) When asked what his hobbies were he mentioned the main points of his life: family, God, work, the Ganga, strolling in the bazaar. For these reasons India is rich because for him the richness of everyday experience constitutes wealth just as much as a steady income does. His seven year old brother Rinku seems to be headed in the same direction. When asked what he wanted to be in life he didn’t say an “airforce pilot” or “banker” or “engineer” or “marketing executive.” The question puzzled him and then he answered, “A man.”