

License & Livelihood: Rickshaw Pullers in Nashik

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For most of the able-bodied, rickshaw pulling is an instant source of employment, a job for which little technical know-how and virtually no investment is required. "It is not like a factory. I can work whenever I feel like," is their common refrain, "Back home there is no work for us, says Babu, a rickshaw puller from Bihar. "We do not have land, nor are there any factories around. More than that, majority of us are uneducated so there is no option left for us other than to leave the village and move to cities looking for better avenues," he adds. With no godfathers and the selfish government (as he says sobbing with grief and anger) there is no other option left except to live at the mercy of others.

"Sahib, I have lost everything, my father who suffered from the dreaded tuberculosis and my mother who left eating partially due to the grief after my father's death and partially because of lack of food for her only son i.e. me was an unemployed educated person who after passing from the Nalanda university searched for any small job to feed his ill fated parents who had so much of expectations that once their son gets employed all their worries will vanish for ever." Says Deepak with sign of helplessness clearly visible on his blank face but still an air of strong resolution around him to get his dreams fulfilled that of doing social work, in whatever way he can, to see to it that no body else has to witness their beloved parent's pass away due to the paucity of money. This is not the story of one Deepak but of the innumerable cycle rickshaw pullers and street level vendors in different parts of India all having their unique stories about how this ruthless world of so called human beings ruled by their own masked bureaucratic devils had made things close to impossible for them to live in peace alongside them. With common sights of inhuman atrocities on these cycle rickshaw pullers and street level vendors being the order of the day a lot remains to be seen whether any of these big mouthed politicians can come or at least try to come for their rescue.

The most immigrant rickshaw pullers come from Bihar, Assam, Bengal, Orissa, Tripura, Tamil Nadu and even Bangladesh.

On an average, the earning of a rickshaw puller supports five or six others. Cycle rickshaws provide a much needed and valuable public service, especially for the low-income groups in our cities. Even today, a kilometer long ride in a cycle rickshaw costs no more than five rupees. An auto rickshaw charges Rs 15 to 20 for the same distance. In the old city area and in some of the congested colonies meant for the poor, where the lanes and by-lanes are too small for motorized vehicles, cycle rickshaws are the only available means of transport.

License procurement

Arguably one of the toughest asks for the these petty street level vendors and cycle rickshaw pullers it actually causes them to lose their sleep due to huge amount of under hand transactions demanded by the government authorities. Relatively speaking, with lesser investments and skill sets requirement these professions remain the only available option for these people on the streets to try and make their livelihood, though not without any external interference. Every year in the month of October-November, the municipal corporation, the license issuing authority, calls for licenses. Notifications are issued in the newspapers inviting application for licenses. "Any individual who is healthy, can own a rickshaw if he pays the nominal license fee of Rs 100," says Mr. Wagh, TMS (TAX METERING SYSTEMS) (Head Quarters) of Nasik Municipal Corporation. But for the puller, getting a license is not an easy task. As far

as the authorities are concerned dispensing of license is a simple procedure. But according to rickshaw pullers and owners "it is the most difficult task if you are not willing to give any bribe".

According to the Bye-laws that stands in most parts of India: "Any License to be granted to any person under these bye-laws shall be a license with photograph affixed thereon and expenses incurred thereon shall be borne by the licensee. These charges shall be on actual cost basis as determined by the Commissioner from time to time". The reality holds that very few rickshaw pullers have ever got their licenses without paying anything over and above that stipulated payment. This is the precise reason for most of the rickshaw pullers not having licenses and gradually these facts have led to their constantly diminishing numbers in the streets of Nasik. The number of cycle rickshaw pullers in Nasik has been steadily decreasing with the passage of time as now there are only about fifteen thousand left and more and more people are trying to leave this profession.

With no control over the number of rickshaws for a particular locality there is a constant struggle or competition among the rickshaw pullers. There is no unity among the rickshaw owners. They also fear the law as they are aware of the fact that it is illegal to own more than one rickshaw.

Most rickshaw pullers do not own the vehicle they ply. They rent it on a daily basis at Rs 25 per day from small or big contractors who own large fleets ranging from 25 to more than 500 rickshaws. A new cycle rickshaw does not cost more than 4000; a second hand rickshaw can be purchased for Rs 1,200 to 2,500. Thus, a rickshaw driver pays nearly Rs 750 as rent per month so if he pays rent for say five to six months then he actually pays the price of a new rickshaw. Still purchasing a new rickshaw is a distant dream for most of them. One reason is that a number of rickshaw pullers are seasonal migrants who periodically return to their villages during the peak agricultural season. However, most of them prefer to continue with their jobs for a large part of the year and would be able to pay off the investment for a second hand rickshaw in 3-4 months. If they don't get their own rickshaws, it is largely because of the nightmare that follows if they decide to deal with the official bureaucracy directly.

To begin with they would have to pay hefty bribes to get a license. The fee itself may be a mere Rs 27 per year but the going rate for "buying" a license in the black market is Rs 500-600 per rickshaw. You simply cannot get it without paying the bribes. However, getting a license does not ensure that they can thereafter carry on their trade without extortion and harassment. In fact, the way the whole trade is regulated by the corporation makes it less of a hassle to ply an "illegal" rickshaw rented from a big operator (who can handle the police) rather than to own one legally. This is how it works.

In Maharashtra the big fleet owners get dozens or even hundreds of *unauthorized* licenses made by suitably greasing palms. In addition, they pay regular local *haftas* to the police. Each *thekedar* has in addition several unlicensed rickshaws for which he pays any thing between Rs. 100-200 per month as protection money to Municipal Corporation officers. These amount to huge money say 5-6 million. This is apart from what the *babus* get in black money (Rs 100 to 150) for yearly renewal of licenses and other extortions. Apart from these payments, monthly *haftas* are paid to the police by the fleet owners. Yet this does not spare them occasional confiscation of rickshaws by the traffic police on the ground that they are plying in prohibited zones.

In addition, the municipal officers can fine a license-holding rickshaw for any number of violations, such as not having a bell or a light on the front handle, reflectors at the back, or proper mud guards.

When caught, the licensed rickshaws have to pay a fine of Rs 100 per vehicle and storage charges however many the number of days the rickshaw is held, plus at least Rs 50 as bribe for the release.

They are harassed for parking their vehicles at night and harassed for occupying space on the roads though they pay road tax as much as anyone else. No wonder only big contractors can cope with the system and ordinary rickshaw drivers prefer to rent at exorbitant rates rather than put themselves at the direct mercy of the *authorities*. The rickshaw rent thus includes protection money. An important consequence of this draining system is that no one has either the motivation or the capital to improve the quality of the rickshaws or even to keep them in good repair. Most of them are of primitive vintage and

in a dilapidated condition, requiring much more effort and strength to drive them than they would be if the drivers owned their own machines and had an incentive to keep them in good repair and upgrade them as they earned more money. Most important of all, their illegal status makes rickshaw pullers forever frightened and easy to be tyrannized. There is no respite for them other than to grease palms of the authorities who are to actually meant to fight for their protection and avoid their exploitation.

Rickshaws are often viewed as cause for congestion and as vehicle which violate traffic regulations and cause chaos on the road. However, rickshaws and other non-motorized vehicles in Maharashtra have been completely ignored in the traffic planning and road designs.

The money paid to the rickshaw landlord could make a tremendous difference to the rickshaw puller's families - especially to the children. Because their income is so substandard, they are forced to live in slums where disease runs rife. Children are not able to be educated and basic medicines are beyond their means. In India there is no social security or sickness benefits. Sadly, to make up the difference between starvation and subsistence, the children are often sent off to work. The work that is available to children is unimaginably horrible to Westerners. Tiny boys and girls do hard labor at often dangerous slave jobs, such as digging drains, working in sweat factories, carrying heavy loads, etc. As the Bible says, they are an oppressed people.

Tax collection

The Nashik municipal corporation is divided into wards. The ward committee consists of councilors representing the electoral wards within the territorial area of the ward committee. There are 6 ward committees namely Nashik (E), Nashik (W), Nashik Road, Panchavati, CIDCO and Satpur. The main function of the committees is to approve the cost of works for the wards, incorporate the expenses in the budget etc. Now there is tax collectorate in each of these wards and they have their own tax collecting clerks who goes into the streets of the city and collect whatever fees is applicable from the respective vendors and submit these money to their respective offices in their own wards. From there the total money pooled is then sent to the headquarters at Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan, the head office at the center of the city. These practices call for a lot of malpractices as the bureaucratic machinery operating in between has enough authority to charge the vendors at their will and these poor chaps have to fall prey to them to continue with their hard earned means of livelihood. Their general complaint is why is the police keeping mum even after knowing what all happens—these poor fellows are unable to understand synchronism that is existing between the police and the bureaucrats that is the single major cause for all the malpractices prevalent in this society and even if they do, they keep quiet to see their business carry on as they can often witness the atrocities and illegal demands of these heavyweights to which they have to bend down ultimately, unable to find a friend for themselves who could actually fight them out for them in these “jungle-raj”.

The cycle rickshaw pullers are required to pay these taxes though there is no written documentation of the law that requires them to pay these taxes so these can be called as the height of corruption by the bureaucratic machinery.

The cycle rickshaws are required to pay five rupees per day so that the total collection from the fifteen thousand odd rickshaws is likely to be around the figure of seventy five thousand per day. That can be a huge sum for the month that is about twenty two lakhs of unaccounted money. This tax is collected every day without fail so everyday the rickshaw pullers have to find out new explanations if they are to be exempted from paying these taxes though most favour to pay these as it leaves them in peace to go for their daily work in peace.

The unprotected-unwanted workforce

Rickshaw pullers are quite often blamed as drug addicts or drug peddler. Often they are blamed of robbery. "We consider rickshaw pulling as a decent job. We can pull the rickshaw only if we have good

health. If we are drug addicts from where will we get enough energy and health to ride the rickshaws?" questions Naresh (name changed) Living in abject poverty, most of them smoke beedies, chew tobacco, drink locally brewed alcohol and some are also prone to the use of drugs. "kuch to karna hai.. dukh door karne," says a rickshaw puller in filmy style. Most of them suffer from tuberculosis, asthma and body ache. "Most people attach a social taboo with rickshaw pullers," says Rajendra Ravi, Convenor of Jan Parivahan Panchayat. The decision makers feel that rickshaw driving is not a dignified profession. They ignore rickshaw pullers while evolving grandiose transport policy for the nation. At the same time these same people will be the first to catch one, if they had to walk a little," he adds. The licensing system, corruption and inadequate road space cannot be resolved till rickshaws are brought to the mainstream of transport policy planning in the country. There should be official moves to develop better designed rickshaws.

It is difficult to organize rickshaw pullers. Most of them are migrants. They do not operate in a place for long. Most of them return to their villages after a few month's work. Illegal status of the rickshaw pullers makes the legal organization almost impossible. Low returns and the poverty of the rickshaw pullers make this sector non-self-sustaining. Moreover, a sector, which does not even figure in the transport policy document of the government, cannot be seen as strategic.

Reforms in this sector

1. There has been a spate of articles in the media about the operation of the licensing regime for hawkers and rickshaw pullers in Delhi (e.g. article titled: "Poor Excuses" by Tavleen Singh in *India Today*, 9 July 2001, "Regulate street hawkers" in *Times of India* 16 July 2001). [Both these articles are based on Manushi study and facts that emerged through the *Lok Sunwayi* of street vendors and rickshaw operators]. A study by a high profile NGO, Manushi, titled: "How the License Quota Raj Impacts the Urban Poor" was also released. N. Vittal, Central Vigilance Commissioner, has written to the Delhi Chief Minister, Shiela Dikshit, drawing her attention to the problems.

2. The broad points made in these articles, the Manushi study, and Vittal's letter are as follows:

- (i) The policy of restrictive issue of licenses for hawkers and rickshaw pullers is a perversion of the SC judgement in *Saudam Singh vs. NDMC and others, 1987*, which ruled that hawking, etc. represented a fundamental right to livelihood, and was subject only to reasonable regulations to avoid potential social costs of these activities (e.g. street/pavement obstruction).
- (ii) The restrictive licensing system enables rents to be collected by the officials who process, issue, and enforce licenses. These rents are estimated in the Manushi study to be approx. Rs 500 million a month. (While the study followed a rather informal methodology/approach, the figure is not beyond credibility, coming to Rs 1000 per month per hawker. The number of unlicensed hawkers is estimated at 500,000, while those licensed are just 20,000).
- (iii) Hawkers and rickshaw pullers are also subject to atrocities by these functionaries, e.g. destruction or misappropriation of the hawkers' wares or impounding/destruction of rickshaws, by these functionaries.
- (iv) That it is time that the licensing system is reformed so that the hawkers and rickshaw pullers, belonging to the poorest sections of urban society, are enabled to pursue their modest livelihoods without extortion. *This would convey the message that policy reforms benefit the poor, and not only the middle class or well-to-do.*

New rickshaws: the magical effect

Life changes greatly when the puller owns his own Rickshaw. There are two shifts - day and night. Because he owns the Rickshaw, he can operate it himself during the day shift then hire it out at night and earn a rental on it. Also he can take a day off every now and then and still receive an income through

rental. A shiny, new Rickshaw dramatically improves income, as it is much more sought after by customers and renters alike. India does not have taxi-style ranks for Rickshaws. Rather than waiting in an orderly queue until it is their turn, people simply choose which Rickshaw they want to ride in from a group of Rickshaws. Naturally, people are attracted to Rickshaws that look new.

As an added bonus, big companies such as Coca Cola and the State Bank of India pay to advertise on new Rickshaws clean, comfortable and reliable. This is happening in quite a few places in Maharashtra nearing the districts bordering Madhya Pradesh.

Even family life is enhanced when the puller owns his Rickshaw. It supplies valuable transportation for the owner's own family requirements, especially for going to church. The added income frees the children from dangerous and cruel hard labor and allows them the opportunity to go to school. Families rejoice over being able to spend time together. The extra income also enables the grand parents in the family to be properly cared for.

Almost all of India's Rickshaw pullers are uneducated. The typical scenario is that because the father is a Rickshaw puller, the son will also become one. It is due to a lack of education that these children can not choose a different profession. Therefore the education of Rickshaw pullers' children is a primary objective as it changes their destinies. Schools have been set up in some of the Rickshaw pullers' villages

The Hungry People is one of the world's largest providers of Cycle Rickshaws to poor Indian families. The Hungry People funds other nearby schools. Supplementary, highly nutritional feeding programs have been implemented at lunchtimes for children.

"When a Rickshaw puller receives a sponsored Rickshaw, he is provided with access to our Rickshaw Maintenance Centers, where the Rickshaw can be taken for puncture repairs, tire changing, bearing lubrication and general running repairs. Beyond maintenance of Rickshaws, we conduct general training classes for Rickshaw pullers. They learn basic business procedures. If possible bank accounts are opened for those who are given a Rickshaw and they are taught to save, a skill their previous day-to-day existence never required. They are also taught the principles of giving and helping those less fortunate than they are "

"Sponsoring a Rickshaw is truly a gift that keeps on giving, day after day, year after year"

Government speaks: the trade has no future

"The numbers of rickshaw pullers is so insignificant, it does not call for a new scheme for their rehabilitation into alternative jobs," says A.K. Das, joint secretary of the State Transport Authority of West Bengal state.

"The persons in this trade are mostly aged, and their numbers are greatly reduced. After a certain time, a gradual process of elimination will take place. This issue will die its natural death."

Though under the Ministry of Labor, Government of India has provided many welfare schemes for the rickshaw pullers and the Secretary, Ministry of Labor, Government of India on January, 1998 provided for a few measures that are:

- 1) Issuance of Registration and Identity Card..
- 2) Construction of rest house and rickshaw shed with drinking water and lavatory.
- 3) Provision of dispensary, medical facilities etc.
- 4) Giving social security scheme and
- 5) Sanction of loans on easy installments and purchase/repair of rickshaw.

However, the State Governments failed to act on these measures. Therefore, there is no assessment report on the said status. Again, the Secretary, Ministry of Labor, But a small firm in a small town on the Pune-Nashik highway, has put its money on the humble cycle-rickshaw, has found buyers for it in the West and has even devised electric versions. And maybe, with the CNG calamity, it's time for us in India to take note of it as well. Three rickshaws - called the Improved

Pedal Rickshaw (IMPRA) - designed and developed at NARI have been bought by a British entrepreneur who plans to use them to show tourists the sights of London. A fourth has been picked up by an individual buyer from Germany; both buyers heard of the rickshaws through the NARI website. This should be an eye opener for most of us as the rickshaws could be the mode of pollution free travel.

This was a small attempt on my part to look into the matters concerning one of the most under privileged classes of the society i.e. the rickshaw pullers who are constantly struggling with their livelihood and only have unfulfilled dreams to cry for. Hoping for a revolution in their status would be too much an exaggeration though I believe they do have the basic rights to live in peace with whatever means they have and I also call for that little help from the people who are blessed with plenty at their disposal and can afford to share their means in whatever way they can to bring back the smiles in the faces of these *rickshawallas*. Though some NGOs and small social service organizations are putting in efforts in these directions, still a lot remains to be seen.

Research methodology

Research objective: To find out the problems faced by the rickshaw pullers in Nasik and Nagpur as to what is leading these people to move out of these profession(if possible)

Research design

Tool used

Administered questionnaire as the main objective of the study is to find out the problems faced by the rickshaw pullers in the two cities.

Sample design

The sample is a list of 100 cycle rickshaw pullers from Nashik and Nagpur.

Pilot testing

The pilot testing is done by administering the questionnaire to the cycle rickshaw owners in Nasik and understanding their opinion on the profession.

Data collection

The questionnaires were administered and documented to arrive at the conclusions and recommendations.

Analysis and interpretation

The results were analyzed and interpreted and the requirements identified.

Questionnaire on the problems faced by the rickshaw pullers:

(The questionnaire was translated in Hindi for convenience.)

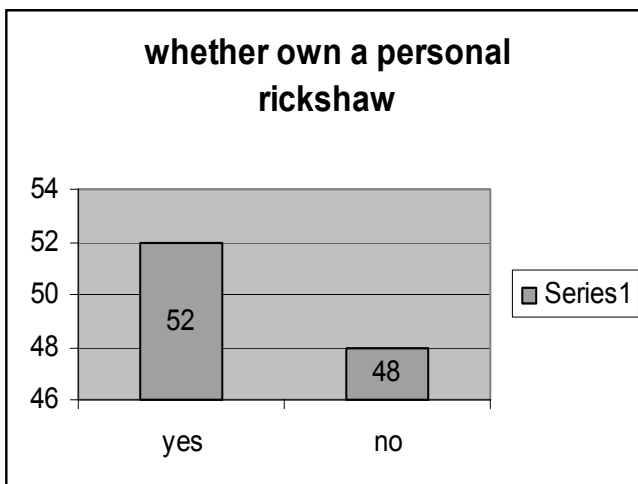
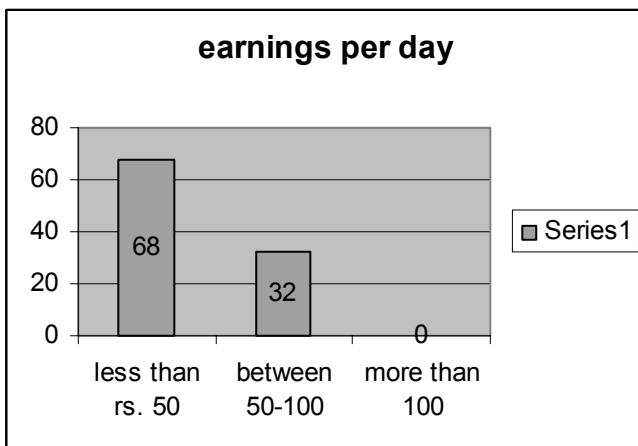
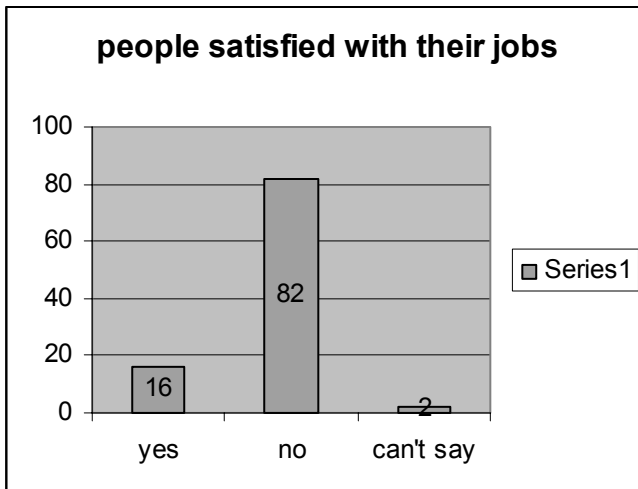
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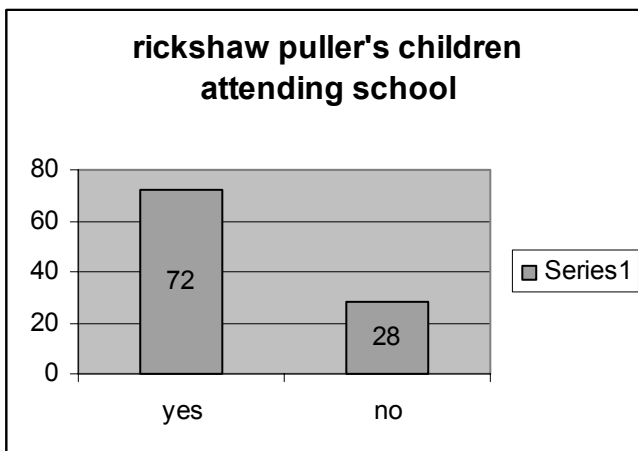
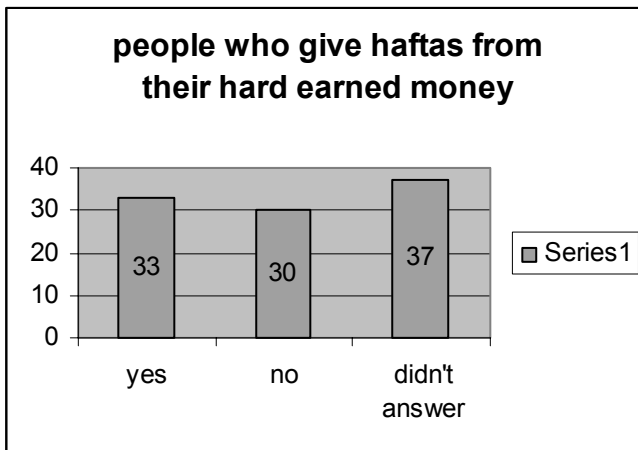
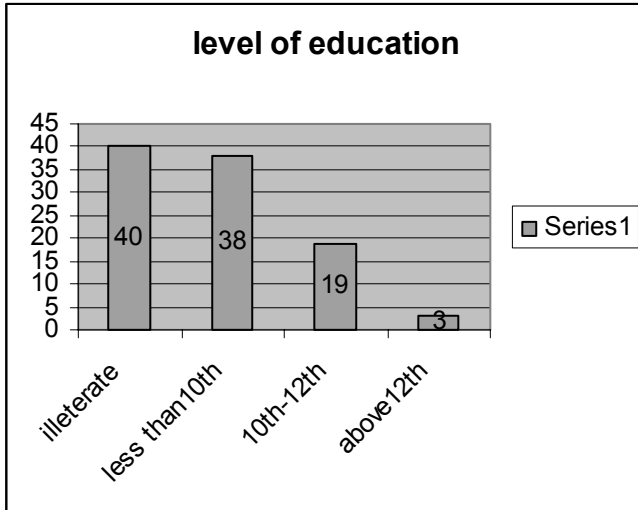
All data collected to be kept strictly confidential.

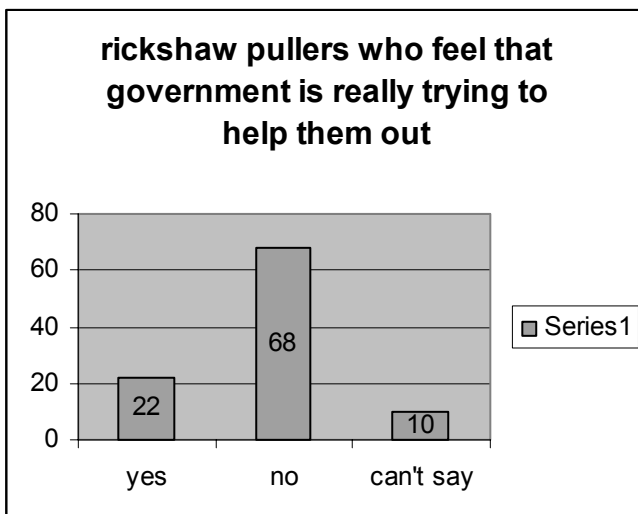
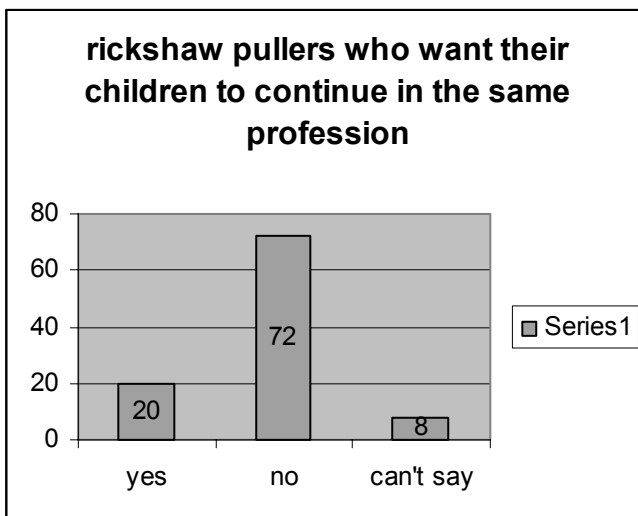
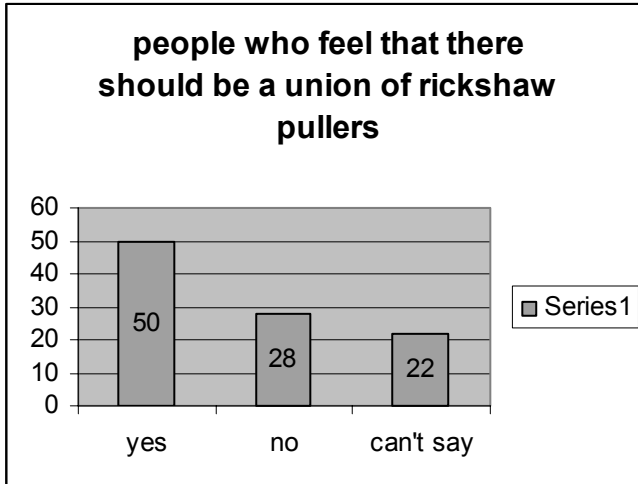
- 1) Are you satisfied with your job?
- 2) What is the daily average pay?
- 3) Do you own a personal rickshaw?
- 4) What is your level of education?
- 5) Are there any illegal taxes or *haftas* collected from you?
- 6) Do you think there should be a union for the cycle rickshaw pullers?
- 7) Do your children go to school?

- 8) Do you want your children to continue in the same profession as you?
- 9) Do you think the government authorities are concerned about you or are really trying to help you all?
- 10) Any recommendations /requests that you would try to make for the authorities or people in power?

Findings and results







Recommendations

Though there is a lot of atrocities and problems faced by the cycle rickshaw pullers still there is ray of hope as we find that the level of awareness is continuously on the rise.

We find that the education is finding priority to starting off with the profession right from childhood as the awareness is continuously increasing as to the need of education for right to live in a somewhat respectful manner as they are themselves suffering from the lack of education at the hands of society where they are being exploited in every possible manner. The actual help of the government and other authorities who say they are trying to help these poor people is still a far reality as it looks from the current scenario.

There are actually a very few rickshaw pullers who are satisfied with their profession as a whole and most of them would not like their children to continue in the same profession. Rather they are willing to discontinue with their own means of livelihood to venture for something more respectable and something that could at least take care of their daily needs.

We see that another area of concern is their extremely low level of pay that is making their lives more miserable so they could be provided some sort of an additional income source in the form of temporary employment where relatively low level of skill sets is required so that at least they are able to meet the daily needs in a more peaceful manner.

Also the government and the other organizations who claim to look after their plight needs to gain their confidence as to have their support for the matters concerning these petty people who themselves are finding it difficult to trust people even those who are really go against the tide to mould the government opinion on issues that are concerning them. Thus we find the growing level of insecurity in such a profession which has been there for years taking people on wheels to their destinations but alas it remains to be seen if there is somebody who can take these people at least midway through to their destinations i.e. *a respectable living and make their lives a little more secure.*

References

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<http://cvc.nic.in/vscvc/cvcspeeches>

National cycle network: guidelines and documentation of rickshaw culture

Website of hungry people-the social organization.