

No-Tech Work

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Even today, in 2009, when India is being regarded as a key player in the world of high-tech industry, and all its big cities are busy beyond belief, it is amazing to see how much work in Indian villages as well as cities is still done manually, without the aid of any sophisticated machinery whatsoever. The following photos will illustrate my point. Mostly, this type of work is done by people belonging to the lowest socio-economic strata for earning their livelihood. The great majority of them is illiterate, and often is not even interested in changing that fact – perhaps they do not foresee much likelihood of improvement in their standards of life by being literate. They know what to do, and how to do it by observing their parents, without having to read or write. They use simple tools, but no high-tech gadgets to accomplish their objectives.



Men and women are busy at the fields in mid-February, sowing rice seedlings. The lots are divided by narrow, low earthen barriers to demarcate the properties owned by different people, making the use of big farm-machines such as tractors impractical. Usually two crops of rice are grown annually – one is harvested in late summer and the other, planted during the rainy season, harvested in late winter.

Putting newly harvested potatoes in baskets, to be bagged. – Photo: Amal Sengupta



Bagged potatoes being transported to markets by a bullock-drawn cart
– Photo: Amal Sengupta



Men and women of all ages are trying to catch small fish with their small nets in a shallow river; look closely to see the nets hanging from their right hands. The children sometimes use small pieces of thin fabric instead of nets.

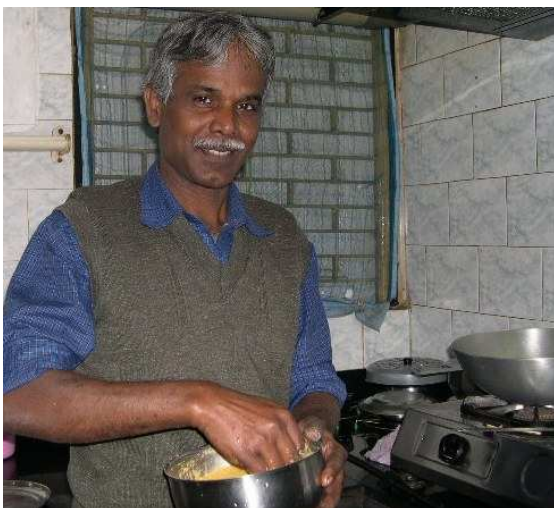


Bringing the cattle home from a pasture at sunset, along a paved road –
Photo: Sharmi Sengupta

A laborer, one of a group of workers, carries earth in a basket on his head, to build a walk-way (with some "channels" for the flow of water to continue) for ease of crossing a small rivulet. I caught him with my camera when he was returning to my side of the river to carry another load.



At a village fair, a very young artisan is weaving baskets, lampshades and other articles with thinly sliced bamboo. On his right you can see a rectangular, very basic bamboo "seat-upon" – Brownie/Scout style.



A kitchen-help is aerating some batter with his hand (rather than use a blender). This man has been with the employer's family for about 30 years, and lives with this family, away from his own. He has a wife and two sons who live in their village home and work in their farm – some miles away. He visits and stays with them once a year for about a month or two. He is, in reality, an indispensable part of his employer's family, and is treated like a family-member – well, almost. He was given the opportunity to learn to read and write, but he declined.



A lady who provides kitchen-help is peeling, dicing and slicing vegetables using an Indian-style kitchen-knife, mounted on a rectangular piece of wood with nails and screws. She comes to this home every evening for a couple of hours to prepare meals. Shy smiles are free!

What I found interesting is that her children go to school and the mother hopes that with education, they would have "better" jobs when they grow up. This trend, fortunately, is quite common among most domestic helpers.

Don't get the idea that people in India do not use any gadgets or electrical appliances – they do. Now-a-days, in almost every middle-class home there are televisions, c.d.-players, refrigerators and manual sewing machines. I saw blenders (called "mixies" in Kolkata), washing machines and even microwave ovens in some homes. But not every family owns a computer (cyber-cafes are everywhere), and even simple appliances such as electric can-openers, toasters and toaster-ovens are rare, as are regular cooking ranges or ovens. Dish-washing is still done by hand and neither have I seen any vacuum cleaners. Use of carpets is not common in homes, and neither is it practical; instead, the floors are tiled with marble or just polished cement and are swept and mopped with a damp cloth twice a day. Fortunately for middle-class families, help for house-cleaning, cooking and dish-washing is still available at an affordable, moderate cost. Actually, another interesting recent development is that at present, many upper middle-class families own a private car, although very few in the family know how to drive or even if they do, choose not to. They employ a highly skilled "driver" (chauffer) to take them to their destinations through heavy traffic, as well as to take care of their cars – and can afford to do so.

Cell or mobile telephones accompany almost every member of a middle-class family practically around the clock, for talking, for taking photos and for alarms in the morning. Even others who may not be so well-to-do, such as a fish-seller peddling his merchandise on the street often use cell phones. I saw a fish-seller take a two-minute break from cleaning and filleting fish to answer and use his cell phone! On streets, on buses, in stores and almost everywhere you will find at least a few people of all ages talking on their "mobiles", sometimes just to chat with a friend who has a contract with the same phone service company, making these "internal family" calls free-of-charge, with an initial deposit. So, technology has reached common people too, in some forms at least.



Photo taken with a mobile telephone-camera by Nilanjana Mukherjee

Note: All photos used in this article were taken by the author, unless otherwise stated.