



**Newsletter Archives**  
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**Tied to the Past**  
**Traditional Professions of India**

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The Indian sub-continent is abundant with amazingly varying landscape - one can find awesome mountain peaks, hills, lush greenery, areas covered with fertile red mud, arid desert lands, seascapes and so much more, when one travels from region to region within the country. Tremendously diverse in tradition, culture and language, each region has its own identity.

Rural India constitutes nearly three-quarters of the entire Indian population. Each region in rural India offers a different perception of the beauty of Mother Nature. Rural India, at the present time, is a brilliant fusion of ancient systems and archaic beliefs, along with modern inventions. Some of the most breath-taking rural areas in India are Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Kerala and so on.

Each of these regions differs in terms of traditions, customs, rituals, dances, music, cuisine, festivals and professions. Rajasthan is most known for its colourful clothes, fairs and festivals. Kerala is famous for its many temple festivals, boat races and the fascinating Kathakali performances. Maharashtra presents its vibrant Lejhim and Lavani dance, whereas Bengal in Eastern India is most famous for its delectable milk sweets and Rabindra Sangeet.

In this two-part article, we take you on a rare journey into the depths of rural India. We bring you some of the commonest professions in the villages of India. India is filled with a plethora of arts, crafts and small-scale cottage industries, which is what binds together the fibre of the country, giving it its own unique, distinct identity.

In order to give you a more vivid picture of rural India, let us first try and give you an idea about the most common sights you can expect to see here.

## **Commonest sights in rural India**

Travel to a rural area in India can be a tremendously enriching experience. Walking along the lush greenery, watching the paddy fields being caressed by a gentle breeze, sitting under a tree and taking in the sights and smells of the locale is probably the best energizer there is!

Huge fields are dotted with little mud huts and rarely, a bigger independent house. In fact, foreign tourists wanting to get the real taste of village life in India sometimes stay in these huts for a night or two, before proceeding to the next destination. Sleeping in a 'charpai' or a portable rope cot is an experience in itself. One can spend the night gazing at a brilliant star-studded sky, which is a rarity in cities.



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**VILLAGE WOMAN FETCHING  
WATER FROM THE WELL**

Another very common sight in a village is women pulling out water from a well. Well

water is pure and constantly replenishes itself. Hence, this is a most popular source of water.



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**RAJASTHANI WOMEN FETCHING WATER**

One more sight you can often find, especially in rural areas of North India, is groups of women winding their way along the sinuous paths of the never-ending fields, delicately balancing several pots of water on their heads. One is bound to be stunned by their graceful gait and their sheer natural beauty, shorn of any artificial makeup that we are so used to seeing in urban India. Bodies toned from all the hard work in the fields, olive skin glowing and long, braided hair swaying behind them as they walk, these women look truly ethereal, like apsaras and nymphs from heaven!

## The Zamindars - the erstwhile ruling class of rural India

The Zamindar system was commonly prevalent in India, till the end of the British Raj. The Zamindar system gained popularity from the advent of the Mughal rule. 'Zamin' means 'earth' and the suffix, 'dar', implies 'the holder'. Hence, 'Zamindar' signified the person wielding authority over the particular plot or plots of land in that particular region. A zamindar is called a Wadera in Sindh; a Jagirdar in Maharashtra; and Chaudhary, Lambardar, Malik or Sardar in Punjab.

The Zamindar was an official employed by the Mughals to collect taxes from peasants. This practice went on even while under the British rule with colonial landholders. But after Independence, this system was abolished in India and Bangladesh. This system still continues to exist in Pakistan, though, especially in the provinces of Sindh and the Punjab.

### During the Mughal Era

During the Mughal Era, the zamindari system was employed to ensure proper collection of taxes during a period of time. With the Mughal conquest of Bengal, though, "zamindar" became a generic title, which included people with land holdings, semi-independent chieftains to the peasant-proprietors. All these zamindars were required to perform certain duties. Strangely, although zamindaris were allowed to be held hereditarily, they were not treated as the proprietors of their estates.

The zamindars had legal authority and so, they held regular courts, called zamindari adalat. The courts fetched them power, status and also income by way of fines and so on. Some of them even had some share in the dispensation of civil and criminal justice. The Chowdhurys could deal with the complaints of debts, thefts and petty quarrels within the community as well.

### During the British Era

The zamindars, during the British Raj, would collect taxes on his lands and then hand them over to the British authorities, keeping a percentage of the same for himself. In the Eighteenth Century, the English and Scots merchants residing in India noted a similarity between the existing zamindari and the landed gentry - the Squires or Lairds - that were once prevalent in the British Isles. Some of the later Zamindars were old Rajas or



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**ZAMINDAR OF MEDIEVAL  
BENGAL**

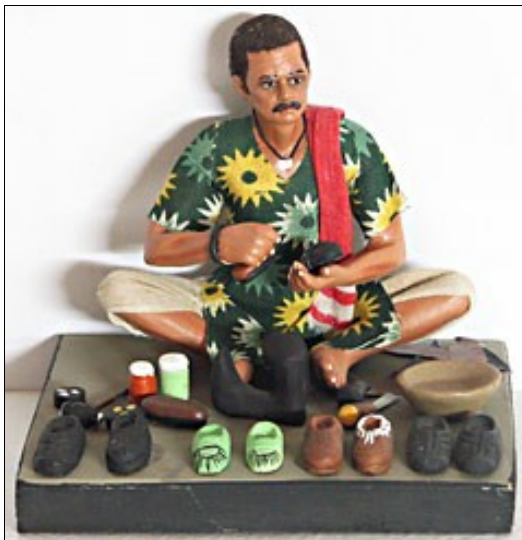
princes too, whose families had an illustrious lineage in the past. The zamindar of Burdwan was the largest tax payer and was hence called the "Maharaja". Other big zamindaris included Raj Darbhanga, Balrampur, Sahaspurbilari and Jhangirabad.

Post Independence, the zamindari system was legally abolished in India. This gave rise to each of the states making their own "Zamindari Abolition Acts". There have, however, been many cases of impoverished nobles marrying into rich families with no titles.

## Some traditional professions in the villages of India

What sets India apart from many world cultures is that art and craft in this country is actually considered a way of life, rather than a mere profession. Though it may also serve as a major form of livelihood, an artisan, both in rural and urban India, treats his skill as something divine, as something he needs to bow down to and be honest with. The relationship between the art and the artist is deeply spiritual and the latter's approach to his profession is more like a devotee sitting in prayer in front of his lord. Let us now take a look at some of the most common traditional professions in the villages of this wonderful country.

### Cobbler



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**COBBLER**

Traditionally, a cobbler (who's referred to as a "mochi" in Hindi) is one who mends broken footwear. Cobblers usually work with a last, which is a rough shape of a human foot. This helps him work further on the shoe shape and size. Additionally, the cobbler's tools include shoe stretchers, little shoe stands, hammers, nails, needle and thread, wax, glue and dubbin. Skilfully using his pincers, needle and thread, the cobbler works to mend the worst, seemingly irreparable slipper tear.

Cobblers usually sit cross-legged and work away all day, diligently bending over their work. They do not even seem to notice the grime and the dirt that gets onto their bodies and clothing, during the course of their work.

Many of them even manufacture new footwear items, including slippers, sandals, boots, moccasins and even shoes. They also repair a whole lot of other everyday items, such as bags,

clothing, broken zips, umbrellas and so on. They can mend items made of rubber, plastic, leather, jute and other plant material.

Many cobblers use many types of material to mend the soles of shoes. They may sometimes, for example, use cheap tire to create or mend the soles.

The cobbler charges a very paltry sum - in fact, next to nothing - to mend items. By and large, an Indian cobbler would ask only for Rupees Two to repair a very badly damaged sandal or slipper. He therefore invariably ends up struggling to meet both ends. Hence, the proverb, "The shoemaker's children are often shoeless." Of course, those who also manufacture footwear along with undertaking repair are much better off financially.

Cobblers are generally found everywhere - in the villages, towns and cities of Mumbai. They set up tiny roadside shops and work untiringly all day long. This is a male-dominated profession, which is usually traditionally handed down from generation to generation in rural India.

## Carpenter

The word, "carpenter" comes from the Old French word "carpentier", which is again derived from the Latin "carpentries" or "maker of a carriage". A carpenter is a skilled worker who works with wood and other related material to construct, install and maintain establishments, furniture and other objects. The carpenter's work involves heavy manual labor and outdoor work. Carpentry is a skill that is gained through tough experience and study. This, too, is a male-dominated profession.

A carpenter can create, maintain and repair items like household furniture, woodwork, window casings, mantels, doors, building models, shop fitting, platform framing, timber framing, beam framing and so on. Many carpenters in the urban areas even work with advanced techniques such as shuttering and falsework, as in concrete construction.



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**CARPENTER**

## Vishwakarma, the Divine Carpenter



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**VISHWAKARMA**

The concept of carpentry even features extensively in Indian mythology. Vishwakarma, the Divine Draftsman, is considered the presiding deity of all craftsmen and architects. This Son of Lord Brahma drafts the whole universe and is the official builder of all the gods' palaces and other abodes. Vishwakarma is also said to have designed all the Pushpakavimanas or flying chariots of the gods, and even their weapons.

The Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics of Indian mythology, describes Vishwakarma as "The lord of the arts, executor of a thousand handicrafts, the carpenter of the gods, the most eminent of artisans, the fashioner of all ornaments ... and a great and immortal god." Vishwakarma is depicted as having four hands, wearing a crown and decked in gold jewellery, holding a water-pot, a book, a noose and craftsman's tools in his hands.

## Vishwakarma Puja

September 16 or 17 of every year is celebrated as Vishwakarma Puja. This is a time when workers and craftsmen resolve to increase productivity and gain divine inspiration for creating newer and newer items. This ritual usually takes place within the factory premises or a shop floor. Workers decorate their place of work on this day and fly colourful kites to mark the occasion. Incidentally, this occasion also marks the start of the festive season that culminates in Diwali.

## Vishwakarma's creations

Hindu mythology often talks about Vishwakarma's many architectural marvels. Through the four yugas or epochs, he built several divine places and palaces for the gods. In the Satya yuga, he built the Swarga Loka, or Heaven, where Lord Indra rules as the King of the Devas. Vishwakarma then built the Golden Lanka (the abode of the asura, Ravana) in the Treta yuga, the city of Dwarka in the Dwapara yuga and Hastinapur and Indraprastha in the Kali yuga.

## Lanka becoming Ravana's abode

There is an interesting tale about the construction of the Golden Lanka. When Lord Shiva married Parvati, he asked Vishwakarma to build a beautiful palace for them to reside. In just a split second, Vishwakarma materialized a palace made of gold. Now, Ravana, though an asura or demon, was a devotee of Shiva. He had many times pleased Shiva through acts of total surrender and devotion. Hence, Shiva invited Ravana to perform the Grihapravesh or the house-warming ritual. After the sacred ceremony was over, Shiva asked Ravana to ask anything in return as Dakshina or a fee. Ravana, overwhelmed with the beauty and grandeur of the palace, asked Shiva for the golden palace itself! Shiva immediately gave in to Ravana's wish and that is how Lanka came to be Ravana's abode.

## Dwarka

Dwarka is the capital city, where Lord Krishna lived and undertook his activities. The Mahabharata records that Krishna had lived in Dwarka, making it his Karma Bhoomi or center of operation. This is why Dwarka is still considered a holy pilgrimage for the Hindus.



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**KRISHNA AS KING OF DWARKA**

## Hastinapura



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**SRI KRISHNA, IN HIS ROLE AS AN  
ENVOY OF PANDAVAS TO THE  
KAURAVA COURT OF HASTINAPUR**

The town of Hastinapura was the capital of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the warring families, during the era of the Mahabharata. After the Pandavas won the battle of Kurukshetra after an enormous struggle, Lord Krishna installed Dharmaraj Yudhisthira as the ruler of Hastinapura.

## Indraprastha

The Mahabharata records that the blind King Dhritrashtra offered a piece of land called Khaandavprastha to the Pandavas, for their residence. Yudhishtira obeyed his uncle's order and went to live in Khaandavprastha with the Pandava brothers. Later, Krishna invited Vishwakarma to build a capital for the Pandavas on this very land, which he renamed Indraprastha.

Indraprastha was a place full of architectural marvels and beauties. Floors of the palace threw out a reflection like that of water, and the pools and ponds inside the palace gave the illusion of a flat surface with no water in them.

Once the palace was built, the Pandavas invited Duryodhan and his brothers, to visit Indraprastha. Not knowing the wonders of the palace, Duryodhan was flummoxed by the floors and the pools, and fell into one of the ponds. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, who witnessed this scene, had a good laugh. She boldly stated that "the son of a blind man is bound to be blind" - Duryodhan's father was the blind King Dhritrashtra. This remark of Draupadi annoyed Duryodhan so much that it went on to become a major cause for the great war of Kurukshetra described in the Mahabharata.

## Mayaasura, the architect of the asuras

According to Hindu mythology, Maya or Mayaasura was an asura or demon King, presiding over the Asuras, Daityas and Rakshasas. He was revered as the main architect of the netherworld. Maya designed the three flying cities, collectively known as the Tripura. Though the cities prospered immensely and gained power and dominance over the whole world, they were ultimately torched out of the skies by Lord Shiva, due to the bad behaviour of the resident asuras. Maya, though, escapes the destruction, as he is a devotee of Lord Shiva.

Mayaasura, the father of the beautiful Mandodari, wife of Ravana, built a capital that he called the Maya Rashtra, now, Meerut.

## Mayasabha

Krishna and Arjuna save Maya's life during the destruction of the Khandava forest. In return, Maya offers his services to them. Krishna commands Maya to construct a beautiful palace hall for Arjuna's elder brother, King Yudhishtira, at Indraprastha. Maya does so and this large and absolutely fabulous hall becomes the Mayasabha. The Mayasabha too, just like Indraprastha, had reflective floors, deceptively flat surfaces that were actually pools of water and so on.

## Potter

The term, pottery, is used to describe ceramic ware created by potters. The most popular types of pottery include earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain work. Potteries are places where such wares are made. Pottery is one of the oldest human skills - one could even call it art forms, as it takes a lot of training and hard work to create items of pottery.

## How pottery is done

Pottery is made by shaping clay into objects of a desired shape and then heating them at high temperatures in



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**POTTER**

a kiln, so as to induce reactions that lead to permanent changes, including hardening them, increasing their strength and setting their shape. Each region differs in the type and properties of clay used by potters residing there. This often helps to produce wares that are unique in character to that particular locality. Clays is many times also mixed with other minerals to attain certain other works of art.

## Tools used by the potter

The potter's most basic tool is his hand. There are also additional modern tools that potters use nowadays. The potter's wheel and turntable is yet another important tool. Besides, there are shaping tools such as paddles, anvils and ribs; rolling tools like roulettes, slab rollers and rolling pins; cutting/piercing tools such as knives, fluting tools and wires; and finishing tools too, such as burnishing stones, rasps and chamois.

**Handwork or hand-building** is the earliest forming method used in pottery. Wares can be constructed by hand from coils of clay, flat slabs of clay, solid balls of clay, or even a mix of these. Different parts of hand-built vessels are fused with the aid of slurry or slip, a runny mixture of clay and water. Needless to say, hand-building is a much slower process than wheel-throwing, but it also gives the potter great control over the size and shape of wares.



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**POTTER**

In the process of **throwing**, the wheel keeps rotating rapidly while the solid ball of soft clay is pressed, squeezed, and pulled gently upwards and outwards to form a hollow shape. The clay is first centered - this is the most important step. Then the whole process of hollowing and shaping starts off. The speed and accuracy of wheel-throwing is more suitable for making precisely matched sets of wares such as table wares and so on. Which method the potter uses largely depends on the kind of wares he wants to create. Thrown pieces can be modified by having handles, lids, feet, spouts, and other aspects added using the techniques of handworking.

**Slipcasting** is used in mass-producing ceramics. It is also used to make wares that cannot be formed by other methods of shaping. A slip is made by mixing clay with water, is then poured into a highly absorbent plaster mold. Water seeping from the slip is absorbed into the mould, letting the clay taking the shape of the mould. The extra slip can be poured out of the mould, which is then split open to remove the finished object. Slipcasting is largely employed in the production of sanitary wares, intricately detailed figurine work and so on.

Adding other material to the clay while being formed, gives the object different kinds of finishes to the item. The commonest among these additives are sand and grog, colorants and in some cases, even gold dust. Many times, the product is glazed with a glassy coating, as it both ornaments and protects it from damage.

## Pottery in India

The tradition of pottery making in India is very ancient. Being a primarily agricultural country, pots for storage of water and grains were always in demand. It is believed that the actual beginning of Indian pottery was during the Indus Valley Civilization. This art has continued to evolve through the ages. There is proof of pottery making, both handmade and wheel-made, from all over India. In fact, the craft was well advanced even during the time of the Harappan civilization. Rectangular ovens for firing the product were in use right back then. Seals and grain and water containers were made that were put to use effectively too.

The potter occupies pride of place in the Indian art milieu. Indian pottery is rich, colourful and diverse, just like the country herself!



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**FOLK ART PAINTED  
TERRACOTTA  
FLOWER VASE**

## Basket weaver



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**CANE BASKET WEAVER**

Basket weaving, also termed as basketmaking and basketry, refers to the process of weaving together unspun vegetable fibers into a basket or similar shape. Basket weaving is made from a variety of pliable, fibrous materials, such as animal hair, pine straw, hide, grass, thread, rope and wood. Basically, the material selected to weave the basket has to be such that it readily forms and stays in some shape. Basket weavers are also called basketmakers.

In India, the adivasis or the aboriginal tribes are known for their brilliantly coloured basket-weaving techniques. They first dye the twine or similar material and then weave them together in an impressively elaborate fashion. They either barter these baskets for other goods, but may also use them for religious purposes.

## Types of basket weaving

There are several types of basketry. "Coiled" basketry uses grasses and rushes. The "Plaiting" type employs the use of ribbon-like materials, like yucca and palm, which are tough and can hold better. Roots and bark are used for the "Twining" type of basketry. The most popular type, though, is "Wicker", which uses cane, reed, willow, oak and ash.

Baskets have a base, side walls and the rim. They may also come with lids and handles. They come in many shapes, sizes and colours and serve miscellaneous purposes. It all depends on the weaver and his imagination. Basketmaking is a very ancient skill and dates back to many thousands of years back. With time, this art too has evolved and re-invented itself. This is not only an item of utility, but is also used now for decorative purposes.



## Basket weaving in India

In India, Punjab is known for its spirally built baskets. Sarkanda, a wild grass growing in swamps, forms the basic material. This is stitched together with date-palm leaves. Dyed date-palm leaves are worked in intricate patterns, similar to the geometric patterns of the phulkar.



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**FRUIT BASKET**

Kashmir is known for its intricately designed willow baskets. Fresh twigs of the willow tree are woven into delicate designs to make a variety of baskets which are used in homes and also sold commercially. The Kangri, an earthen pot in which burning coals are kept on a bed of ashes, is probably the finest example of basketry in Kashmir. Small pliable twigs of willows are dyed and coloured foil is pasted to the outer side of the clay bowl. A lovely lace pattern is worked out of the twigs, which allows the shining foil to be seen through. Tassels worked with coloured grass are then hung from the edges to make the finished object, a beautiful piece of craftsmanship.

Uttar Pradesh has a tradition of making baskets out of a monsoon grass called moonj. In North Bihar, coiled baskets are made with the local rough monsoon grass, which is covered with a golden coloured sikki grass and dyed in different colours.



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**GANESHA FACE ON SILVER COLORED WINNOWER**

Tamil Nadu is famous for the Chettinad baskets, which are made with date-palm leaves. The bamboo baskets of Bengal are used for a number of ceremonial purposes. Kulas, which are winnowing baskets, are not only used for winnowing; but a special variety is made and painted with auspicious symbols and is used in the marriage ceremony.

In the Terai area of Bihar, these baskets are decorated with stylised human and animal figures. Special baskets decorated with tassels made out of shells are given to the brides on their wedding day. A bride uses these baskets to carry lunch to her husband while he works in the fields. The shell tassels tinkle in the breeze, announcing her arrival, so that the elders of the family move to another area.

In Mysore, the tradition for basket-making here is therefore based on the use of cane. The north-eastern region of India, which comprises of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura has the finest example of cane and bamboo work. Whole bamboos are also used for making containers as the solid knots or nodes of the bamboo make it natural tubular containers. These are used to carry and store liquids, like water and rice beer, store precious pieces of textiles and also to make the ceremonial drinking cups.

## Charkha Weaver

The Charkha or a spinning wheel is basically a device used for spinning thread or yarn from natural or synthetic fibers. This device existed right from the eleventh century in Baghdad, China and Europe. The spinning wheel replaced the hand spinning method. Here, the fiber is held in the left hand and the wheel slowly turned with the right. Holding the fiber at a slight angle to the spindle produced the necessary twist. The spun yarn was then wound onto the spindle by moving it so as to form a right angle with the spindle.

There are many types of spinning wheels, such as the great wheel, the walking wheel, wool wheel, flax wheel, saxony and upright wheels, all used for different types of yarn and materials.

## The Charkha

The Charkha is the proud product of India. The floor or tabletop charkha is one of the most ancient forms of the spinning wheel. The charkha works much like the great wheel, with a drive wheel being turned by hand, while the yarn is spun off the tip of the spindle.

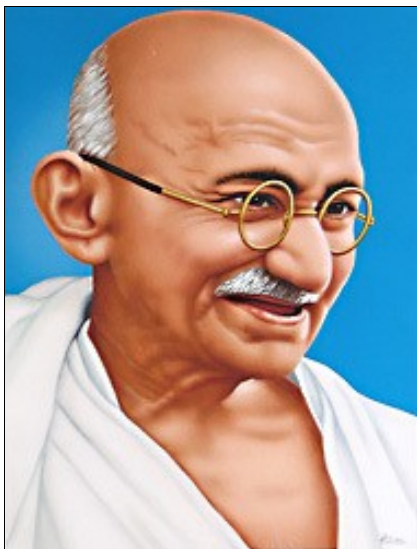
The Charkha may be etymologically related to Chakra and it was both a tool and a symbol of the great Indian Independence movement. The charkha, a small, portable, hand-cranked wheel, is ideal for spinning cotton and other fine fibers, though it can be used to spin other fibers as well. The size of a Charkha varies, from that of a paperback to the size of a briefcase, to a floor charkha.



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**CHARKHA WEAVER**

## Mahatma Gandhi and the Charkha



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**MAHATMA GANDHI**

Mahatma Gandhiji, the Father of the Nation, brought the charkha into larger use with his teachings. He wanted the charkha to assist the Indian people achieve self-sufficiency and independence. Hence, he used the charkha as a symbol of the Indian independence movement and included it on earlier versions of the Flag of India.

The British colonial rule was wiping out India's textile production. Gandhi became a role model for Indians at this time. Gandhiji's idea was based on a principle that is good for the soil, the producer and the consumer. He encouraged self-entrepreneurship and appealed to all to ban all that was foreign and adopt an exclusively Indian way of life, starting from wearing authentically Indian clothes.

## Another meaning for the term, Charkha

Charkha is also the name of a voluntary non-governmental organization, which was set up in 1994, intending to bring issues related to rural India to the fore. Now, Charkha acts as a link between the villages of India, activists, NGOs and the media, both national and regional.

## Blacksmith

A blacksmith creates objects from iron or steel by forging the metal. He uses his tools to hammer, bend, and cut the metal into desired forms. Blacksmiths create things such as tools, agricultural implements, cooking utensils, railings, grills, wrought iron gates, horseshoes, weapons, light fixtures, furniture, sculpture, decorative and even religious items.

The black color occurs due to the fire scale, a layer of oxides that forms on the surface of the metal during heating. The term 'smith' originates from the root, 'smite', which means 'to hit'. Therefore, a blacksmith is a person who smites black metal.

Heating metal makes them soft enough to be shaped with hand tools, such as a hammer, anvil and chisel. Propane, natural gas, coal, charcoal or coke are used for the forging process.

Blacksmiths today also use oxyacetylene or similar blowtorch for more localized heating. As the iron is heated to increasing temperatures, it first glows red, then orange, yellow, and finally white; then it melts. The ideal heat for most forging is the bright yellow-orange color, rightly referred to as "forging heat." Blacksmiths usually work in dim light conditions, so that they are able to see the glowing color of the metal.

There are four techniques of smithing, namely, forging, welding, heat treating, and finishing. Forging involves five basic operations, namely, drawing, shrinking, bending, upsetting and punching. An assistant usually helps in the forging process by repeatedly swinging a heavy sledge hammer on the metal.



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**VILLAGE BLACKSMITH FAMILY**



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**BLACKSMITH**

**Drawing** involves lengthening of the metal by reducing one or more dimensions.

**Shrinking** is the opposite process as drawing. As the edge of a flat piece is curved, the edge becomes wavy. This portion is heated and the waves are gently pounded flat to conform to the desired shape.

**Heating** steel to a "forging heat" allows bending as if was hard plasticine. The bending is then done with a hammer over the horn or edge of the anvil or by inserting a bending fork into the Hardy Hole and placing the work piece between the tines of the fork and bending the material to the desired angle.

**Upsetting** makes the metal thicker in one dimension through shortening in the other.

**Punching** is done to create an ornamental pattern, or to make a hole. It can also be used for cutting, or slitting and drifting: these are done with a chisel.

**Welding** involves joining a metal to the same or similar

metal.

Sometimes, a combination of the above techniques is used to get the desired shape. After this, the blacksmith applies finishing to the product, to remove sharp edges and smooth the surface. Wire brushes, sandpaper and grinding stones may be used for this purpose. Additionally, some blacksmiths also use oil, wax, paint and varnish to spruce up the product further.

## Smithing in world mythology

Hephaestus was the blacksmith of the gods in both Greek and Roman mythology. A supremely skilled artisan who used a volcano as his forge, he created most of the weapons of the gods, and was himself the god of fire and metalworking.

In Celtic mythology, the role of the Smith is held by eponymous characters, Goibhniu or Gofannon.

Every Indian village and little town have their very own village blacksmith. But with the advent of the Industrial Era, the demand for blacksmiths started dwindling and so, many of them started working as automobile mechanics, horseshoe and hardware makers and so on.

## Priest

The priest occupies prime position in Hindu culture. The priest, who is called Pundit (in the North), Shastrikal or Vadyar (in the South), hails from the Brahmin community, the topmost caste in the society. In order to become a priest, the person has to go through many years of rigorous training. The person is trained right from childhood in the Vedas, mantras, Shastras and so on, till he achieves mastery over them. If his Guru is pleased with his progress, he is declared fit to become a priest and is absorbed into the fold.

Priesthood usually used to be a family profession, with the priest's son becoming a priest and so on. But this is not necessarily the case today. In the present time, there are lesser and lesser children being sent to the Veda Paathashala (school) in order to learn through the ancient Gurukula (resident student) system.



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**HINDU PRIEST**

## The priest's duties

- A temple priest has the following duties:
- Taking care of the temple
- Keeping the sanctum sanctorum clean
- Performing the everyday aarti, neivedya (offerings to the deity) and different poojas
- Keeping track of the many festivals and the poojavidhis (method for offering prayer)
- Distributing Prasad to all devotees after the aarti
- Reciting mantras (prayers) and conducting yagnas (sacrificial rituals)
- Conducting special poojas as requested by the devotee
- The temple priest may also have additional duties, as stipulated by the temple authorities.

## The family priest



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**DHOTI AND STOLE FOR PRIESTS**

The family priest, as the term suggests, is closely associated with that particular family. He advises the family on the kind of poojas they should perform and presides over the minor and major poojas conducted by the family. This could include poojas and rituals performed during festivals, the birth of a child, naamkaran (naming ceremony of the child), sacred thread ceremony, wedding rituals, funeral rites and so on.

Some family priests even reckon the person's horoscope at birth and advises him/her about the steps he should take in various stages of his/her life.

Hence, family priests are not only considered as a medium to the Divine, but also a friend, philosopher and advisor of the family.

## Animal Shows

### Snake Charmer

Snake charming is the practice of supposedly "hypnotising" a snake by playing on the "Been", a musical instrument. A snake charmer may also perform other seemingly dangerous stunts, as well as other typical street performance acts, such as juggling, sleight of hand and so on. Snake charming is most common in India and can also be seen in some other Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Malaysia; and cross-continental countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

Many snake charmers live a nomadic life, visiting towns and villages on market days and during festivals. The most popular species of snakes include those that are native to the snake charmer's home region, such as varieties of cobras, vipers and so on.



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**SNAKE CHARMER**

### Method of snake charming

First, the snake charmer must get a snake. Traditionally, he goes into the forest to capture one. Today, the charmers buy them from snake dealers. Snake charmers usually hold their serpents in baskets or pots hanging from a bamboo pole slung over the shoulder. These baskets are covered with cloth between performances.

Snake charmers are typically dressed - long hair, white turban, wearing earrings and necklaces of shells or beads. Once the performer finds a location to set up, he sets his pots and baskets about him and sits cross-legged on the ground in front of a closed pot or basket. Removing the lid, he plays the Been or Pungi. The snake ultimately emerges from the container, seems to sway awhile to the tune and may even extend its hood. The snake, in most cases, is supposedly trained to sway to the Pungi.

## The history of snake charming

Serpents are sacred in Hinduism, since they are related to the Nagas. Snake charmers were hence considered holy men who were influenced directly by God. The earliest snake charmers were traditional healers by trade. They would treat snakebite and remove snakes that had entered people's homes.

The early 20th century was something of a golden age for snake charmers. Governments promoted the practice to attract tourism, and snake charmers were often sent overseas to perform at various cultural festivals. They also provided a valuable source of snake venom for creating antivenins.

## Snake charming in India today

Sadly, snake charming as a profession, is in danger of dying out today. This could be due to a variety of reasons, most important among them being the recent enforcement of a 1972 law in India banning ownership of serpents.

Animal rights awareness, the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and deforestation and urbanization could be the other reasons why snake charmers are seen less and less often nowadays. In order to earn a livelihood, these people are now taking to begging or working on daily wage jobs. Snake charmers had organized a protest some years ago, regarding the loss of their only means of livelihood, and the government is at present considering this appeal.

## The Bear and Monkey Show



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**MADARI - ROADSIDE ENTERTAINER WITH BEAR**

Another popular street show which is highly appreciated by spectators of all groups is the bear and monkey show. The performer roams around the area, along with his trained bears and/or monkeys. These animals are trained to perform certain skills like jumping through hoops, clapping the hands, shaking hands with spectators and so on. The trainer further utters a few syllables such as "duppudu taiya taiya" and the monkey is trained to raise its front paws and dance to the rhythm. The trainer also trains the animals to go around and collect money from all the spectators, which he uses up to sustain himself and the animals he takes around.

This show is hardly seen on the roads today, owing to the very same Wildlife Protection Act.

We have been able to accommodate only a few of the professions followed in India. We will come back with the second part of this article soon, where we will talk about a few more professions in India.

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This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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