Indians at Work: Cultural Portraits

Louis Montrose
Mahout (elephant wrangler) and his mount
Amber, Rajasthan
INDIANS AT WORK: CULTURAL PORTRAITS

LOUIS MONTROSE
For many in the West, the phrase “Indians at work” is likely to evoke remote call centers; or, for those attuned to the global economy, perhaps the steel, pharmaceuticals, or IT industries. But beyond or beneath dynamic contemporary India and its cosmopolitan urban elite persists another India—primarily agrarian and poor and deeply traditional in its culture, including in its forms of labor. It is these latter Indians, at work in their towns and villages or in urban ghettos, who are the primary subjects of my project.

I had been interested in India—in its arts, music, food, and religious culture—for decades before my first visit there in 2007. At the same time, the prospect of visiting India intimidated me. Poverty and disease were and are all too real—along with environmental degradation, maddening bureaucracy, and alarming caste and religious divisions, among other ills. But that first visit also intoxicated my senses, captivated my imagination, and challenged my intellect. India seemed to me the most photogenic place on earth, brimming with the most open and photogenic people. Some strange new sight seemed about to appear around every corner. Although photography was a primary motivation for that first visit, I did not arrive with the intention of documenting Indians at work. That project spontaneously arose in the first few days after my arrival, as I was drawn to artisans practicing their crafts and others engaged in traditional forms of labor in the villages and small towns of Rajasthan. Over the course of nine journeys through various parts of India during the past decade, I have continued to seek out opportunities to photograph Indians at work earning a living in traditional occupations—as laborers and artisans, clerks and shopkeepers, merchants and traders, artists and entertainers.

The Hindu caste divisions that have organized Indian society since antiquity (and still hold deep if attenuated power, especially in rural and village India), are a system of social stratification based upon occupation. The four basic categories (varnas), in descending hierarchical order, are priests and teachers; rulers and warriors; farmers, traders, and merchants; and laborers. Outside and below this hierarchy are the achhoots, dalits or “untouchables,” whose traditional occupations were (and often still are) considered polluting. There are said to be more than 25,000 sub-castes, each tied to a particular occupation and traditionally hereditary. In this system, one’s occupation was and, for many, still is not only a means of livelihood but an essential identity and set of responsibilities, grounding one’s place in the world. To an extent far greater than is the case in the
contemporary West, in village India who you are remains inextricably tied to what you do.

*Indians at Work* documents local and traditional modes of labor persisting under pressure during a period of profound economic, social, and technological change. But it is also an attempt to shape the visual record of my personal experience into an artistically compelling form, in images that capture something of the bewilderingly rich, complex, and contradictory Indian ethos as embodied in the daily lives and activities of people whom I have encountered. While making images of people actively engaged in a particular kind of work, I am also gesturing toward the complex web of cultural values, understandings, and experiences which makes that work meaningful within the world those people inhabit. These are *cultural* portraits in the sense that, merely by going about to make a living by doing their jobs, the people I photograph are at the same time constantly in the process of creating and recreating their culture.

My own approach to work as a subject for photography has benefited from an engagement with the diametrically opposed styles and methods of two great photographers: Irving Penn, in his project *Small Trades* from the early 1950s; and Sebastião Salgado, in his project *Workers* from the later 1980s. Penn adapted the formality and rigorously controlled conditions of fashion portraiture to photographing his proletarian subjects in Paris, London, and New York: His workers were formally posed, full length, and standing against a neutral backdrop, dressed in the uniforms, and carrying the tools of their trades — not actively engaged in their work but rather modeling their jobs in the artist’s studio. Salgado, who had started to photograph while still an economist working for the World Bank, captures with visceral immediacy the human impact of globalization on manual laborers around the world. For all their photojournalistic impact, however, Salgado’s images also often achieve a formal artistry as compelling as any achieved in the studio by Penn. Though in my work I imitate neither of these artists, both have been catalysts to my thinking and to my practice. Many of my own environmental portraits are *candid* in the sense that the subject is either unaware of or indifferent to the camera. When people clearly are aware of the camera, I ensure that they are comfortable with being photographed before I shoot. I never formally pose my subjects, and choose not to shoot if they stiffly pose themselves in anticipation of being photographed. And for my purposes, background objects or details of demeanor, dress and decoration are not distractions from a primary focus on physiognomy, but are instead essential means of grounding the subject in his or her world. This is why I sometimes flagrantly violate the artistic prescription to simplify one’s composition and eliminate superfluous detail: The rich cultural texture thereby created may sometimes be the artistic point.

The equipment used for this project included three iterations of the Canon 5d digital SLR and professional Canon lenses; all shots were handheld in available light. The RAW files were initially processed as color TIFFs before being converted and edited in black-and-white. This may seem like a perverse choice, since no country, no culture, expresses itself in more profuse and more vibrant color than
does India. Highly saturated color is the hallmark of much celebrated photographic work on India, such as that of Raghubir Singh (*River of Colour*, 1998) or Steve McCurry (*India*, 2015). Although most of my own work on India remains in color, for this particular project I nevertheless chose to finalize the images in black-and-white. This presentation is meant in part to honor the black-and-white tradition of documentary and street photography but there was also a more particular aesthetic consideration at work in my choice: Seeing in black-and-white makes it possible for us visually to experience aspects of India’s culture and people that saturated color obscures; and, without color to dominate the viewing experience, other artistic values emerge more strongly to engage our attention and elicit our pleasure — values of light and shadow, form and pattern, tone, and texture.

It is common to make a theoretical distinction between photojournalism on the one hand and fine art photography on the other; or between the photograph as an accurate record or reflection of an external reality on the one hand, and photography as an interpretative or transformative intervention into that reality on the other. Another way to think of this opposition is in terms of the primacy of *content*, on the one hand, and of *form* on the other. In any case, all of these binaries are abstractions: In practice, they are always blended, even if the proportions of the blend may shift radically from one photograph or one photographer to another. Any particular photograph may combine them in different ways and to different degrees — and indeed, the relationship between these elements within the same photograph may change depending on the perception of the person viewing it. If the overarching subject of my photography is people in the process of living their cultures, my constant artistic challenge is to achieve a satisfying meeting point between the journalistic, documentary dimension of photography and the formal or aesthetic one — between the acts of description and interpretation, recording and creating. The specifics of the challenge may well differ from project to project, from image to image, and the achievement may more often than not prove elusive but nevertheless that always remains the goal.

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Louis Montrose
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Embroiderer
Village in the Rann of Kutch, Gujarat
Shepherd leading his flock to greener pastures
Southern Rajasthan
Dung gatherers #1
Pushkar, Rajasthan
Harvesting wheat, Northern Gujarat

Dung gatherers #2, Pushkar, Rajasthan
Hay cart driver
Country Road, Tamil Nadu
Firewood gatherers
Orchha, Madhya Pradesh
Camel traders, Pushkar, Rajasthan

Animal feed carrier, Pushkar, Rajasthan
Sun drying *pappadum* crackers
Dharavi Slum, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Camel dung fuel vendor and customer
Pushkar, Rajasthan
Coppersmith
Old Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana)
A *Mata ni Pachedi* — an image of the goddess Durga painted on cloth, originally used as a portable altar by the nomadic Vaghri tribe — here being painted in the home studio of one of the last remaining families to create them. Ahmedabad, Gujarat.
Book and stationary shop keeper and his customer
Old Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh (now Telegana)
Pedicab drivers
Old Delhi
Mending fishing nets
Near Kochi, Kerala
Fishmonger
Coastal Village, Tamil Nadu
Butcher, Srinagar, Kashmir

Butcher, Old Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh (now Telegana)
Preparing salted hides for leathermaking
Dharavi Slum, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Pineapple merchants
Crawford Market, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Tailors in their stall
Village near Bhuj, Gujarat
Kitchenware merchant
Kolkata, West Bengal
Vegetable vendor
Badami, Karnataka
Sweepers
Amber, Rajasthan
Dhobi wallah (laundryman)
Near Kochi, Kerala
Drying block printed textiles after initial washing
Village near Jaipur, Rajasthan
Weaver in the only remaining workshop to produce *Patola* double ikat woven silk textiles
Patan, Gujarat
Baking bread in a *tandoor*
Old Delhi
Vendor of milk sweets
Haridwar, Uttarakhand
Sleeping barefoot shoe salesman
Agra, Uttar Pradesh
Jaggary (palm sugar) vendor
Mysore, Karnataka
Street shave, Old Delhi

Barber and client, Badami, Karnataka
Barber shaving the head of a mourner
On the ghats along the Ganges where the dead are cremated, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh
Shoemaker in his stall
Samode, Rajasthan
Street vendor frying snacks
Village near Dhenkanal, Odisha (Orissa)
Potter
Village in the Rann of Kutch, Gujarat
Hand block printing textiles
Dharavi Slum, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Folk musician
Gadi Sagar, near Jaisalmer, Rajasthan
Child busker tightrope walking in the street
Mumbai, Maharashtra
Vendor of flowers for offerings at a Dargah (Sufi shrine)
Near Unjha, Gujarat
Vendor of flowers for Hindu offerings
Mysore, Karnataka
Mattress maker
Luni, Rajasthan
Tuk-tuk (auto rickshaw) driver napping between fares
Mysore, Karnataka
Bell maker

Village in the Rann of Kutch, Gujarat
Drum maker
Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh
Plasterers
Jaipur, Rajasthan
Quarrying stone
Near Chettinad, Tamil Nadu
Bansuri (bamboo flute) player
Jodhpur, Rajasthan
Teachers and pupils
Madrasa attached to a Mosque in Srirangapatna, Karnataka
Boat building on the Ganges
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh
Ship building on the Arabian Sea
Mandvi, Gujarat
Coir (coconut fiber) mat making
Near Kochi, Kerala
Silk weaver
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh
Lake fishing
Amber, Rajasthan
Artist creating a traditional *Patachitra* painting on cloth coated with paste of chalk and ground seeds
Home studio in the heritage crafts village of Raghurajpur, near Puri, Odisha (Orissa)
Maker of talismanic masks
Madurai, Tamil Nadu
Maker of Murtis (images of Hindu gods)
Ahmedabad, Gujarat
Kathakali performer applying his makeup
Kochi, Kerala
The Kathakali female demon in performance
Kochi, Kerala
Kathakali performer applying his makeup
Kochi, Kerala
The Kathakali hero in performance
Kochi, Kerala
Rajasthani folk dancer
Manwar, Rajasthan
Classical dance troupe
Mamallapurum (Mahabalipurum), Tamil Nadu
Louis was born in London and grew up in New York City. Throughout his childhood and youth, he was strongly drawn to visual culture — savoring pictures and photographs in magazines and books, creating his own drawings and designs, frequenting art and photography exhibitions at museums and galleries, and taking studio art courses as well as art history courses in high school and college. Concentrating on English and European history and literature, he earned a BA at CCNY and an MA at The University of Toronto. After teaching briefly in New York City, he moved to southern California to begin a doctoral program; almost half a century later, he is still there. Upon completion of his Ph.D., he began a thirty-five year teaching, research and writing career in the humanities at The University of California, San Diego. Although focused on verbal and performance culture, he incorporated the study of visual culture into his work as a Renaissance scholar and cultural theorist. His widely influential academic writings include two books published by The University of Chicago Press and numerous essays, some of them frequently reprinted and some translated into other languages.

Despite a lifelong engagement with the visual arts, he did not take up photography until early in the digital era. Largely self-taught as a photographer, he feels that his abiding interest in the visual arts and architecture helped to shape his sensitivity to issues of composition, form, and tonality in photography. Once kindled, his engagement in making photographs became intense and enduring. Within five years, he had decided to retire from his academic career in order to have more time to pursue his twin desires to travel and to photograph. As a child, his favorite book had been his atlas; he loved to pore over the maps of far away places. He later developed a deep interest in the subject matter of geography, history, and anthropology. But only in recent years has he had the time and resources to travel extensively, and all his travels are planned and conducted to maximize the possibilities for photography. He has worked extensively in south and east Asia, Africa, and Mexico. He strongly believes that to experience the diversity of cultures and landscapes stimulates the mind and the spirit, and provides a multiplicity of contexts in which we can better grasp our own place in the world.

Louis works in a number of photographic genres, including street and cityscape, art and architecture, and environmental portrait. But whatever the genre, most of his work is focused on the documentation and interpretation of culture. His photographs have been exhibited in shows in London, Paris, Madrid, Copenhagen, and Buenos Aires as well as in California, Colorado, Ohio, and New York. Four of his portfolios have been published in *LensWork* (issues 94, 111, 116, 128). His photographs have also been featured in *Black & White, COLOR*, and other fine art photography publications, as well as in *Condé Nast Traveler, Lonely Planet Traveler, Digital Camera*, and *Art and Design* (Beijing). He was named 2010 Professional Photographer of the Year by the World Photography Gala Awards, and 2011 International Travel Photographer of the Year by TPOTY in London. When not traveling, he and his wife, Caroline Ding, live in the town of Solana Beach, north of San Diego. To view more of his work, please visit his website: www.louismontrosephotography.com.
Hindu priest performing evening fire ceremony (Aarti) honoring God Shiva
Small temple atop the rock monolith at Narlai, Rajasthan