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In India, Poverty Inspires Technology Workers to Altruism

By ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

BANGALORE, [India](#) — Manohar Lakshmipathi does not own a computer. In fact, in India workmen like Mr. Manohar, a house painter, are usually forbidden to touch clients' computers.

So you can imagine Mr. Manohar's wonder as he sat in a swiveling chair in front of a computer, dictating his date of birth, phone number and work history to a secretary. Afterward, a man took his photo. Then, with a click of a mouse, Mr. Manohar's page popped onto the World Wide Web, the newest profile on an Indian Web site called [Babajob.com](#).

Babajob seeks to bring the social-networking revolution popularized by [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) to people who do not even have computers — the world's poor. And the start-up is just one example of an unanticipated byproduct of the outsourcing boom: many of the hundreds of multinationals and hundreds of thousands of technology workers who are working here are turning their talents to fighting the grinding poverty that surrounds them.

"In Redmond, you don't see 7-year-olds begging on the street," said Sean Blagsvedt, Babajob's founder, referring to [Microsoft](#)'s headquarters in Washington State, where he once worked. "In India, you can't escape the feeling that you're really lucky. So you ask, What are you going to do about all the stuff around you? How are you going to use all these skills?"

Perhaps for less altruistic reasons, but often with positive results for the poor, corporations have made India a laboratory for extending modern technological conveniences to those long deprived. [Nokia](#), for instance, develops many of its ultralow-cost cellphones here. Citibank first experimented here with a special A.T.M. that recognizes thumbprints — to help slum dwellers who struggle with PINs. And Microsoft has made India one of the major centers of its global research group studying technologies for the poor, like software that reads to illiterate computer users. Babajob is a quintessential example of how the back-office operations in India have spawned poverty-inspired innovation.

The best-known networking sites in the industry connect computer-savvy elites to one another. Babajob, by contrast, connects India's elites to the poor at their doorsteps, people who need jobs but lack the connections to find them. Job seekers advertise skills, employers advertise jobs and matches are made through social networks.

For example, if Rajeev and Sanjay are friends, and Sanjay needs a chauffeur, he can view Rajeev's page, travel to the page of Rajeev's chauffeur and see which of the chauffeur's friends are looking for similar work.

Mr. Blagsvedt, now 31, joined Microsoft in Redmond in 1999. Three years ago he was sent to India to help build the local office of Microsoft Research, the company's in-house policy research arm. The new team

worked on many of the same complex problems as their peers in Redmond, but the employees here led very different lives outside the office than their counterparts in Redmond. They had servants and laborers. They read constant newspaper tales of undernourishment and illiteracy.

The company's Indian employees were not seeing poverty for the first time, but they were now equipped with first-rate computing skills, and many felt newly empowered to help their society.

At the same time, Microsoft was plagued by widespread software piracy, which limited its revenue in India. Among other things, the company looked at low-income consumers as a vast and unexploited commercial opportunity, so it encouraged its engineers' philanthropic urges.

Poverty became a major focus in Mr. Blagsvedt's research office. Anthropologists and sociologists were hired to explain things like the effect of the caste system on rural computer usage. In the course of that work, Mr. Blagsvedt stumbled upon an insight by a [Duke University](#) economist, Anirudh Krishna.

Mr. Krishna found that many poor Indians in dead-end jobs remain in poverty not because there are no better jobs, but because they lack the connections to find them. Any Bangalorean could confirm the observation: the city teems with laborers desperate for work, and yet wealthy software tycoons complain endlessly about a shortage of maids and cooks.

Mr. Blagsvedt's epiphany? "We need village LinkedIn!" he recalled saying, alluding to the professional networking site.

He quit Microsoft and, with his stepfather, Ira Weise, and a former Microsoft colleague built a social-networking site to connect Bangalore's yuppies with its laborers. (The site, which Mr. Blagsvedt started this summer and runs out of his home, focuses on Bangalore now, but he plans to spread it to other Indian cities and maybe globally.)

Building a site meant to reach laborers earning \$2 to \$3 a day presented special challenges. The workers would be unfamiliar with computers. The wealthy potential employers would be reluctant to let random applicants tend their gardens or their newborns. To deal with the connectivity problem, Babajob pays anyone, from charities to Internet cafe owners, who finds job seekers and registers them online. (Babajob earns its keep from employers' advertisements, diverting a portion of that to those who register job seekers.) And instead of creating an anonymous job bazaar, Babajob replicates online the process by which Indians hire in real life: through chains of personal connections.

In India, a businessman looking for a chauffeur might ask his friend, who might ask his chauffeur. Such connections provide a kind of quality control. The friend's chauffeur, for instance, will not recommend a hoodlum, for fear of losing his own job.

To re-create this dynamic online, Babajob pays people to be "connectors" between employer and employee. In the example above, the businessman's friend and his chauffeur would each earn the equivalent of \$2.50 if they connected the businessman with someone he liked.

The model is gaining attention, and praise. A Bangalore venture capitalist, when told of Babajob, immediately asked to be put in touch with Mr. Blagsvedt. And Steve Pogorzelski, president of the

international division of Monster.com, the American jobs site, said, “Wow” when told of the company. “It is an important innovation because it opens up the marketplace to people of socioeconomic levels who may not have the widest array of jobs available to them.”

Mr. Krishna, the Duke economist, called it a “very significant innovation,” but he cautioned that the very poor might not belong to the social networks that would bring them to Babajob, even on the periphery.

In its first few months, the company has drummed up job seekers on its own, sending workers into the streets with fliers promising employment.

To find potential employers, in addition to counting on word of mouth among those desperate for maids and laborers, Babajob is also relying on Babalife, the company’s parallel social networking site for the yuppie elite. People listed on Babalife will automatically be on Babajob, too.

So far, more than 2,000 job seekers have registered. The listings are a portrait of India’s floating underclass, millions and millions seeking a few dollars a day to work as chauffeurs, nannies, gardeners, guards and receptionists.

A woman named Selvi Venkatesh was a typical job seeker. “I am really in need of a job as our residential building collapsed last month in Ejipura,” she said, referring to a building collapse that killed two people, including an infant, in late July, according to The Times of India.

In Mr. Blagsvedt’s apartment one morning, Mr. Manohar, the painter, professed hope.

He earns \$100 a month. Jobs come irregularly, so he often spends up to three months of the year idle. Between jobs, he borrows from loan sharks to feed his wife and children. The usurers levy 10 percent monthly interest, enough to make a \$100 loan a \$314 debt in one year.

Mr. Manohar does not want his children to know his worries, or his life. He wants them to work in a nice office, so he spends nearly half his income on private schools for them. That is why he was at Babajob in a swiveling chair, staring at a computer and dreaming of more work.

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