



THE FACE OF PHILANTHROPY

Picturing Progress

IN some of India's poorest villages, videos examining subjects that are often taboo—child brides, HIV, hunger, land rights, or the status of the country's *dalit*, or “untouchable” caste—are drawing big crowds.

The evening screenings are popular not only because many villagers are illiterate, and film is an accessible form of entertainment, but also because the videos help create an atmosphere in which controversial subjects can be comfortably discussed.

Jessica Mayberry, an American who had worked in the television industry, founded Video Volunteers in 2004 after a stint in India. She realized that as video cameras were becoming increasingly affordable, they could be portable, potent tools for conveying important social messages.

Video Volunteers matches small community groups with a volunteer filmmaker who trains them over two months to shoot footage, write compelling storylines, edit the footage on a computer, and produce 30- to 60-minute “videomagazines.”

Video Volunteers has two staff members in New York and three in India. In its most

recent application cycle, the group chose 10 groups, predominantly in rural parts of India, that are set up with the equipment they need to produce videos on a regular basis. One stipulation is that the majority of the group's members be women.

Gavin White, Video Volunteers' chief executive, says that a built-in distribution system is the most critical element of each project. Each group must identify a minimum of 25 villages with at least 1,000 residents each within a 50-kilometer radius.

As part of the partnership, the groups take their “road show”—complete with widescreen projector—to different villages night after night, where the films inevitably spark discussion and debate.

“It's often the first time they've felt able to speak publicly about these issues or been allowed to say these things,” says Mr. White. “And who doesn't like to watch a movie?”

Here, a volunteer at the group Anandi, which works with rural and tribal women in the western Indian province of Gujarat, practices her video-making skills.

—MARTY MICHAELS

Photograph by Lindsay Utz

