





# Ready. Aim. Shoot!

**Learning Video for Social Change in Gujarat, India**

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It's 7:00 a.m. in India. The temperature is approaching 113 degrees. I'm the only Westerner in a tightly-packed jeep, swerving in and out of every one of the four lanes of this frantic highway — dodging buses, trucks, cars, rickshaws, cyclists, pedestrians, shepherds, cows, goats, and the occasional camel-drawn goods carriage. Apart from the heat, I would normally find this type of situation exhilarating. But, right now, I'm disturbed by the awkward quiet of my fellow passengers.

After about 20 minutes, I finally break the silence. "So, what did he say?"

Our four-person video crew had just left a small village located in the north Indian state of Gujarat, where we had interviewed a 70-year-old man named Darshibai. From what I had seen—a sparse home without functioning electricity, an empty kitchen, and an emaciated man with a look of hopelessness in his eyes—I was aware that we had just gotten some powerful visual material for our story on Food Security. But since the interview had been conducted entirely in Gujarati, I hadn't heard the full story.

Over the next hour, Sabana, the video's director, gave me a rough translation. Eleven years ago, when Darshibai's wife died, he went to the local government office to have her name removed from their joint food-rationing card. He was told to leave the card behind and come back the next day to retrieve a new one. When he returned, his card had disappeared. Most likely it was stolen by a corrupt low-level government official and sold on the black market.

Darshibai, who is no longer able to work and has to rely on meager handouts from neighbors, has been slowly starving to death ever since.

"It's just me and my God now," he told Sabana.

This is one of the many scenes that plays out in my head as I lay awake late at night in the cramped upper bunk of an Indian sleeper train speeding away from Gujarat. I want to sleep, but can't. I've just come from the most challenging and yet rewarding experience of my lifetime.

## Video as a Tool for Social Change

Three months ago, my sister Lindsay and I arrived in the town of Rajkot, Gujarat as representatives of Video Volunteers, an organization that matches filmmakers with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world for two to four month stays. During this time, training in video production occurs either for the NGO's staff or for members of their local community.

Lindsay and I were paired up with an NGO called ANANDI (Area Networking and Development Initiatives), a progressive women's organization that uses an empowerment approach to improve the lives of rural and tribal women in some of the region's most impoverished areas. Our mission was to turn four ANANDI staff members into filmmakers.

After first demystifying the medium, we were to impart the skills of video shooting and editing, from concept to completion. Along the way, we were required to balance the technical with the social change aspects of video, which would involve extensive research into the region's various social issues. At the conclusion of this comprehensive training, we would focus on helping our students to create a final product—in this case, a "video magazine" designed to educate and motivate a rural and, primarily, non-literate audience.

The magazine would be distributed through many channels: it would be used by ANANDI field workers at village training sessions; broadcast on local cable television networks; and distributed to smaller, partner NGOs as a networking and knowledge-sharing tool. Finally, Lindsay and I were tasked with creating a sustainable video production unit within the NGO, with the goal that they will continue to

produce videos years down the road.

## Lessons with the Non-Violent Weapon

Upon arrival in Rajkot, we were given an empty room in the ANANDI office. This was to become our new home for the next three months. The following day, we met the class, which was comprised of four students and an English translator. Kirti and Rishi had very limited English skills. Kailash and Sabana spoke no English at all, and had only been educated to the 7th and 10th grade levels.

"When I came in, there was this basic fear that I was not well-educated. I thought, 'This is only for educated people,'" Sabana, 22, recalls of the first day of class.

Likewise, Kailash, 19, had her own set of doubts, "Questions in my mind were, 'Rishi and Sabana are better educated than me.' So I felt insecure. At one point, I wanted to run away from here and go home."

Our first class began with cutting out photos and discussing the technical and conceptual meanings behind them. Within hours, we had a sense of our students' differing personalities, simply by observing.

Sabana comes from Godhra and was personally affected by the 2002 communal riots that left over 1,000 dead. Her photos had an escapist feel to them. She chose snow-capped mountains, soaring birds, and glowing sunrises.

Kailash hails from a tribal background, where entire families are often forced to migrate to find work if they do not have a successful harvest. Her photos of large rivers, green grass, and lush crops were clear signs of a young woman with strong ties to her region.

Kirti was slow and deliberate in the choices she made, revealing her role as a senior member of ANANDI.

Rishi, ANANDI's computer administrator, was silent and thoughtful as he hung his photos on the wall in a very methodical manner.

Our classes continued on a daily basis, and we often worked more than 12 hours each day, trying to stay on top of our ambitious schedule. A digital still camera served as an excellent way to accustom the students to looking at the world around them in terms of a series of images. We assigned various still photography exercises, one of which was to simply take a series of shots that would tell a story of the students' choice. We ended each day with a screening and critique of the class's work.

By week three, we had moved onto the video camera. After we emphasized the delicate nature of their "non-violent weapon," we allowed the students to record one another with it. We took turns interviewing each other and screened what we had shot. What followed was a discussion about how it felt to be on camera versus behind the camera.

Oftentimes, the language barrier forced us to resort to some rather improvisational training techniques. To illustrate auto-exposure, we compared the camera to the eye—both need sufficient light to register an image. We had our students look into our eyes and explain what happened to our pupils when the room went from dark to bright. This drew a direct comparison with the pupil of the eye and the iris of the camera.

## Fighting for Food Security, One Frame at a Time

At the halfway point of our term in Gujarat, it was time to begin our final product—the video magazine. The class named it "Umang," the Gujarati work for "joy," and chose "Food Security" as the topic. The goal would be to raise awareness amongst our rural audience that freedom from hunger is a right, not a privilege, and thus result in greater numbers of people demanding access to government programs.

Each student would shoot and edit their own segment, with the help of the others as a crew. After scouting locations and scheduling interviews, we set out to a number of nearby villages to begin shooting. This is where we encountered people like Darshibai, who were living (and dying) proof of a failing and corrupt public food distribution system for the poor. We also met women who must resort to feeding their children tobacco or beating them to sleep to put an end to their hunger cries.

Having grown up in upper-middle class suburban America, I had never seen anything like this. But, surprisingly, I was not alone. Rishi, 28, was also shaken; this was his first time working in the field.

"It was very difficult," says Rishi. "People were speaking about their extreme pov-





erty and about being hungry, and other people were just crying. And I wanted to cry too, but I knew I had to be strong.”

Rishi’s strength proved quite valuable when we encountered problems with an elderly woman named Rudiben. During scouting, she had agreed to be interviewed about her situation (her son had been illegally using her food-rationing card). But when we arrived with our equipment, she refused to speak on camera out of fear that her son would beat her. Rishi took time to explain how the importance of this interview and, moreover, the video magazine in its entirety, could help everyone in the community. The son finally gave his blessing, and Rudiben gave us our interview.

Not everyone the students interviewed was a silent victim of a flawed system. We also met very strong women, like Jashiben, the leader of her village women’s self-help group. After the 2001 Gujarat earthquake devastated Jashiben’s village, she led her assembly to the local council where they demanded new food-rationing cards.

Kailash told another success story. She went back to her own village to shoot a segment about two failing government plans to feed and educate children.

“My project was about the government’s responsibility for a healthy child. When this wasn’t working efficiently, my community took it upon themselves to make sure that it worked. It can be an inspiration — that even if the government isn’t doing what it should, you can still make things happen.”

Kailash said she wanted to do something about the school because it was her own and she feels close to issues of children. “What I was not allowed, I want other children to have,” said Kailash.

### The Impact of Umang

After a grueling three weeks of production, Umang, Issue #1 was ready to be screened.

The first screening was for family, friends, and a number of partner NGOs. After the screening, those willing could stand and share their thoughts on what they had seen. The overwhelming response was positive, although we did receive some constructive criticism, which the team took well.

Most surprising was the feedback from Kirti’s brother. Kirti, 38, is a woman who chose an unconventional role in Indian society — first by refusing an arranged marriage,

and also by following a path that led her into a low-paying and “low-status” career: nonprofit work. In a sense, she had “shamed” her family, and there have been domestic rifts for years. But her brother stood up after the screening and said, “I have always thought that Kirti was wasting her time with this line of work. Now, tonight, I realize how important it really is.”

Other students also underwent their own unique personal transformations. Kailash has seen a change in the way her fellow villagers treat her. “I’m getting support and respect from everyone, even from the village council leader. This is because of my work in the past as an activist, but the video makes it even stronger.”

“I threw a challenge to my people and myself,” says Sabana. “I am 22. I have a four-year-old daughter. I’ve been divorced, and have had to return to my mother’s house. I said that I would prove myself and support my daughter. This was hard because I come from a place where I must wear a full burkha after seven o’clock.”

Sabana said that even though videography is a job usually done by men, her uncles eventually came to support her. But the big-

gest change she sees is in her daughter. “She used to be quiet in school and now she speaks with confidence,” said Sabana. “She talks in class about the work I’m doing.”

Our second public screening occurred in a remote shepherd’s village. About half of the town’s 200 villagers attended. The screening was followed by a heated discussion.

Umang had informed the audience that the government’s food-rationing shops were required by law to stay open for 26 days per month. Our audience was outraged. It turns out that the shop closest to their village is usually open only five days per month. If times are tough, and one doesn’t have money during that small time frame, they will likely find themselves surviving on what they can scrape together. Most commonly, this diet will consist of nothing but boiled water with onions.

The post-screening discussion went on for nearly two hours. Some people had too much pride to admit they were hungry. “This is not our situation,” some said. According to ANANDI’s statistics, this is simply not true. Nearly everyone in this community is poor and malnourished. It’s just too difficult for some people to admit that they need help. Other villagers seemed inspired to action, particularly those women who were a part of the village women’s collective.

The village screening took place on our final night in Gujarat. In a sense, to see our work screened and discussed with such passion was the final payoff for everyone involved in this project. This first episode of Umang will be shown in numerous villages across the re-

gion, and will undoubtedly spark many more discussions like the one we witnessed.

ANANDI is already planning the second issue of Umang, which will focus on domestic violence. In addition, there is a long-term plan for the four students to transfer their skills to more people within ANANDI, as well as others. And a number of partner NGOs have already expressed interest in learning videography from our trainees.

“ANANDI is definitely going to continue to use video. It’s not going to collapse—that’s clear,” says Kirti. “We’ve done surveys in the villages to find out who has electricity and a television, and if so, would they be willing to screen Umang. We’re waiting for feedback. We’re also speaking with cable networks to find out if they’d be willing to screen it. Eventually, we will have a strategy to reach out to a wider audience.”

### Postscript

I still haven’t slept. I can see through the train’s window that the sun is beginning to rise over the rural land that comprises 75 percent of this country. We will soon be approaching Bombay, our final destination.

Reflecting on my experiences in Gujarat, a quote by Jawaharlal Nehru (the first Prime Minister of independent India) comes to mind. It seems to encompass an overarching theme that I noticed time and again during our work as video volunteers with ANANDI, with citizens of diverse ages, religions, cultures, and backgrounds—all overcoming fear:

“The greatest gift for an individual, or for a nation, we had been told in our ancient books, was...fearlessness, not merely bodily courage but the absence of fear from the mind .... But the dominant impulse in India under British rule was that of fear; pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear; fear of the army, the police, the widespread secret service; fear of the official class; fear of laws meant to suppress and of prison; fear of the landlord’s agent; fear of the money-lender; fear of unemployment and starvation, which were always on the threshold. It was against this all-pervading fear that Gandhi’s quiet and determined voice was raised. Be not afraid....

So suddenly as it were, the black pall of fear was lifted from the people’s shoulders, not wholly of course, but to an amazing degree. As fear is a close companion to falsehood, so truth follows fearlessness.”

*Jennifer Utz is a filmmaker living in Portland, Oregon. She’s always looking for an excuse to travel, and over the past few years, her work and studies have taken her to over 30 countries. She just returned from eight months living in India and is currently editing a film about the present political situation in Zimbabwe. Contact her at [jen@jennyjo.com](mailto:jen@jennyjo.com).*

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