

SNEHA PRAJA VIDEO: A Community Video Project at Velugu (link to www.velugu.org)

Training conducted by Video Volunteers in April-May 2005

Summary: *Community video:* Video Volunteers trained 11 rural women in Andhra Pradesh, South India, to shoot, interview and script a monthly video magazine. During the training conducted for the organization Velugu, the trainees, who were all married as children, produced a half hour video on why child marriage must be stopped. Velugu's monthly video magazines will address community issues and will be screened in more than 150 villages every month, to generate awareness and local problem-solving. The community video producers' motto is, "speaking about our problems is the first step in solving them."

Project description: Video Volunteers' ninth project was a partnership with the rural microcredit program implemented by the government of Andhra Pradesh, the southern Indian state where the 'hi-tech' city of Hyderabad is located. The microcredit program, known as Velugu (now renamed as Indira Kranti Patham), works on a massive scale: they have more than 6 million women involved in their rural livelihoods activities and are present in nearly every village across the state. The video project, if implemented as planned, will also work on a large scale: 75-100,000 viewers a month in one district, before being replicated around the state over the next few years.

Velugu sought out Video Volunteers' help in starting a sustainable community video project that would provide a platform for villagers to share local needs and knowledge. Four trainers from Video Volunteers participated at different points: Jessica Mayberry, the founder of VV; Pavi Krishnan, who is helping to coordinate VV projects in the South of India, and Beth Cohen, a filmmaker and documentary teacher from Maine, USA. The training was led by Stalin K, a filmmaker-activist who is the Director of Drishti Media Collective. Drishti is Video Volunteers' partner organization in India, and their years of innovative work in human rights and media forms the basis of Video Volunteers' training methodology.

The group we were training was made up of 11 rural women, most with seventh grade educations, who were members of Velugu's Self Help Groups. Because of the leadership skills they displayed, they'd been selected to write for a community newsletter, and from there, for the five-week video training. The group decided that their monthly video production will be magazine-style, with different segments like documentary, song, debate, fiction, letters, expose, tips, etc. Each month the video magazine will deal with a different issue, such as gender discrimination, superstition, seed harvesting, alcoholism and microcredit success stories. The program will be very interactive, challenging audiences to mail in their responses to controversial arguments, suggest solutions to the problem, recommend issues or stories for the following month, and to write in about what they liked and didn't like. The various segments of the magazine will be linked together with on-camera anchoring by each woman reporter, to develop their own critical capacities and remind audiences, (as one of our reporters put it in her own narration), "that women's voices, which have been stifled for so long, are finally being set free."

During the training we produced the first edition of SNEHA PRAJA Video (Sneha-friendship; praja-people,) on the subject of child marriage. At the end of the training we

had outdoor screenings of the video in two villages, projecting onto the exterior walls of two village houses, and the audience totaled about 1000 people. It was extraordinary to watch the audience roar with laughter when their village appeared, shake their heads at a particularly upsetting story, or fall silent and attentive when the head of the police department told them they could go to jail for child marriage. After the screening many people stayed around to talk. One old lady said, “What was that nonsense? 13 is the only age to get your daughters married!” while another group talked about ways to address the dowry problem, which, they said, is at the heart of child marriage. Others talked to the reporters about different child marriage tragedies in their villages and wanted to know if we would include them next time. Nobody had answers to the problem of child marriage, but that is not the point. People were talking about an issue they *never* talk about, and, as another of our reporters wrote for the camera, “speaking about our problems is the first step in solving them.”

Why Community Video? SNEHA Praja Video can, if managed properly, become a truly community-owned media project—in which community members create the content, tell their stories, screen them back to the community, get feedback, and input that feedback into the next magazine, generating an ever more powerful cycle of debate, self-exploration, and eventually, problem-solving.

There are several reasons why such an initiative is important amongst disenfranchised and/or poor communities in developing countries. One is the *absence* of debate, another is the lack of *spaces* to debate. People in villages talk about the weather, rising prices, the crops, the bad roads, or grumblings about the neighbors. They talk much less about domestic violence, about caste discrimination, about their constitutional right to healthcare and how to hold the government accountable. In many villages, many of the arguments of which an urban child will have at least a token understanding thanks to school and the media, are totally novel. In many villages, (in fact, in most villages where a rights-based NGOs has never intervened) a woman hearing that girls should be given as much food as boys may be hearing it for the first time.

Secondly, another problem is the lack of forums for debate. Most village-level discussions take place only when politicians come looking for votes, or in village-level institutions like India’s panchayat system, which often excludes effective participation of women and the lower castes, in spite of the mandatory 33% reservation for them. In many villages, there are no spaces for people to address critical issues, and so a critical mass of people asking for change will never develop. Community media—whether, video, radio or theater—can bring together an entire village to be moved, angered or inspired by new ideas, as a unified group. These video forums can add great value to the development interventions implemented by NGOs today: they can jump-start or accelerate processes aimed at creating community leadership and action. Video creates awareness and encourages participation, and is it not self-evident that an aware community will develop faster than a non-aware community?

The Training Process:

The trainees chose the subject of child marriage for their first video magazine because ten out of the 11 of them had been married as children themselves, one as young as nine. Because of child marriage, girls (it really only affects girls because the husbands are

generally much older) are removed from their homes, taken out of school, and live as domestic servants in their in-laws' homes. Child marriage, which is essentially institutionalized child rape, has shaped the lives of more than half the women in a given village. Yet the voices of these girls and women are utterly stifled by the dominant male voice: our trainees reported that all people would say is, "if we don't marry them young, they'll elope." Or, "what's the point of getting a girl educated if she's just going to be married and bear children?" One half of the population was utterly voiceless, utterly hidden. Our trainees decided that in our program we would put their voices and stories—the stories of girls whose lives had been destroyed, and their parents who now regretted it—front and center, perhaps for the first time.

The technical training involved teaching the women how to shoot, interview, log, transcribe, select interviews, write a script, and direct the edit. None of the women had ever touched a video camera or computer. So we used our bodies walking quickly backwards and forwards to show them how to rewind or fast forward, and used metaphors to explain the computer. Stalin would relate it to a big bag where you keep your household accounts in one folder and your farm accounts in another, or a big brain, that remembered the different color threads you had in your sewing kit without having to open it up.

If we compare these community reporters, for the sake of argument, to the mainstream media, the women were particularly strong on story access and interviewing. After coming back from their villages on their research trips, the women had dozens of stories of child marriages—drawn from their own families, neighbors, self help groups, etc. That same strength—that they were telling the stories of their own villages and lives—made them strong interviewers, with both interviewer and interviewee feeling more at ease than an outsider is. It also means they may have greater success at bringing out the critical voice in the community: the voice of protest and change. One of our reporters sat down with her cousin and said, "Saraswati, we are both 23, we both lost our husbands. Our community tells us that we have no opportunity for remarriage and our lives are over. Yet a man in our situation would remarry in a matter of days. I am making this program and speaking out. Will you speak out too?"

The distinction between them and the mainstream media was introduced early on in the training, when we had them analyze the local papers and TV news and make up lists of 'their' issues and 'our' issues. Their conclusions? 'Mainstream media is for 'big' people, urban people and men. SNEHA Praja Video is for our issues, our concerns, our realities.' When we asked them to describe how the local news people acted in their communities, they said things like, "they come to the village for 15 minutes to interview the Sarpanch (village headman) and never talk to the people." "They don't do stories on our issues, and if they do, it is superficial. They do it for money, and not because they care." Respect and care are two values that they expect will make their work important to the community.

This was made most clear on the day of our screening. We told the women that in each village where we screened, they had to show the video to the people whose stories we had told, and ask for their permission to screen the video in their village. If they didn't agree, we would simply stop the tape in the middle of the screening when it came to their story,

and fast-forward to the next section. All but one of the families agreed—very courageously, because in some cases men were saying very shaming things like, “worms were eating my brains the day I got my daughter married and I regret it today,” that they feared their neighbors would laugh at.

But in one village, we had interviewed a young woman whose husband had murdered her daughter because of a fight over dowry. This woman told us, “Please don’t show it here, where everyone knows the story already. You can screen it any other village, and maybe it will do some good for people to learn from my experience.” The trainees were very disappointed about this, but we saw it as a key part of the process of community media. If people are going to speak about sensitive and unspoken issues, they must trust the people they are speaking to. By not showing the story in that village, the women were making a statement about their trustworthiness and their sense of responsibility to the community.

During the five-week workshop our group became very close. Things like car driving lessons, trips to the movies, learning Bollywood dance routines, playing badminton and the Indian game Kabbadi meant we spent as much time laughing as we did working. And these bonds became particularly important because we were dealing with an issue—child marriage—that was intensely personal for the trainees. Classes about how the community could prevent child marriage became sessions on how individual women in our group could handle their own violent marriages.

Developing the women as activists was a critical part of the training, because their videos are only as strong as their own voice. Following the motto of, “first I change myself, then my home, then my community,” we sought to develop their critical understanding of how patriarchy and abuse had impacted their own lives. They needed to see this not as fate, but as systems they can help to end by speaking out against them. Late one night Stalin and three of the trainees were driving back from a rural cinema hall (the women hadn’t been to the movies since before their marriages, so it was a very special outing) when they were pulled over and questioned by the police, who demanded to know what one man and three village women were doing out so late at night. When the policeman finally let Stalin leave the station, Stalin told him he had to do one more thing: submit to an interview by the women. The three women, meanwhile—utterly terrified of the police—were sitting in the car trembling and praying. Thirty minutes later, however, the women were interviewing the police Sergeant on camera about child marriage and drinking cokes, and Latha, who had survived the most unimaginable violence in her marriage, was telling the policeman that she was getting threatening phone calls from her husband. Later on, a different group of women scripted dialogue for the Hyderabad chief of police to read out on camera, a total reversal of the usual power structure. Both of these processes were meant to empower the women to begin viewing the government as responsible to the people, rather than the other way around. Such processes are very slow, and we left Hyderabad without having convinced Latha that she should divorce her husband. But it was as important to us that the women take away concrete benefits from the training (in terms of income, security, or greater educational options for their kids) as it was that they learn to produce videos—and by the same logic, it was far more important for the women to take action in their communities as it was ‘to get the story.’

Our training was not just video training but also leadership training, and one of the trainees, Indhira, is a good illustration of the unique way that happens through video. Indhira was married at age nine. She is a beautiful 23 year old mother of three girls, and she had her first daughter at age 11. On the first day of training, Indhira told us that to her, the hardest thing about being married as a child was that she never got to play ever again, only work. A week later, Indhira was out shooting another story when she came across a nine year old girl named Jyoti who had been married just two weeks ago, to her elder sister's forty year old husband. The sister had failed to bear any male children, so the solution was to marry the nine year old to him as well. Indhira interviewed the little Jyoti, and brought it back to class. Just as we were preparing to screen the footage, Indhira broke down in tears. She had come across these child marriages many times in her life, but never before had its significance hit her like it did now.

We had everyone stop their work, and put the footage up on the TV. What was the point of what we were doing? Was it just to get the story and leave? Was that all? Everyone agreed that it was always more important to address the problem at hand than it was to conduct an interview, and we talked about how, through the NGO channels or the police, they could help Jyoti and others like her. So Indhira went back to the place where she had met Jyoti, but discovered that Jyoti's family—they were traveling street performers and beggars—had moved on to another town. Indhira realized she should have acted on the spot to rescue Jyoti, because now she had disappeared.

The learning process Indhira went through, and the way she will communicate messages to her audience, was reflected in the story and narration she put together about Jyoti. It was a story that combines what Inhdira knew from her childhood, what she learned in the training, the actions she was personally committing to taking in the future, and her vision for how her community could be different: "Jyoti may not realize what she lost now, but in a few years she will. She will realize that in an age when she ought to be playing she was working, and she will regret it. We could not save Jyothi, but please lets prevent other such tragedies from happening in our communities."

Future plans: management, dissemination and feedback: Now that the training is over, what happens? The women are competent in the areas of research, shooting, interviewing, logging and transcribing, scripting, and directing the edit. They can produce their own stories, but they also need an 'Executive Producer,' a media-person with a strong commitment to participatory processes who will let the women make the decisions. This person can give them further political training on the issues, and training in other non-documentary formats. For the near future, they will also need someone to train them in editing and to operate the computer as the women direct the edit. We made decision, with only five weeks, to focus our training on activism rather than editing, and on production rather than post-production.

The women will be producing one video a month on a different issue, and the dissemination and feedback plans are as follows: Velugu plans to purchase ten wide screen projector systems (a package comprising a DVD player, speakers, basic projector and a white sheet) that will travel each month to 15-20 villages around which each of the ten reporters live, for a total of approx. 150 villages a month. The projectors will travel to the same villages each month, and the reporter living in that area will be responsible

for collecting community feedback from local volunteers in each village and then reporting it in editorial meetings. Velugu expects to reach about 75,000 people a year this way.

Velugu will also use the videos in training sessions and try to broadcast them on the local networks, but the community screenings with projectors is the primary distribution. Why? Because it is a ‘closed loop:’ the community watching will know who their local reporter is, and she, in turn, will be responsible for creating content that reflects their requests. At the end of one year, village committees will be asked to pay for the screenings. If they like it enough to pay, that will be the sign of its success. If they don’t, the project ends.

Lessons/Concerns: Are there lessons from this project that will be valuable to other organizations interested in community processes, and considering undertaking a community video initiative? One is that a successful community video project requires a high degree of institutional buy-in at all levels. The scale of the Velugu project had not been defined when we arrived, and so Video Volunteers and the organization’s Communications Department developed the distribution plan during the training. In our last week, we presented our plan to the second highest official in the Andhra Pradesh Rural Ministry—an extraordinarily forward thinking bureaucrat named K. Raju—who has his own clear vision of community participation, and who immediately saw the value of this project. He approved the plan on the spot, but it remains to be seen if the coordination at Velugu’s field level will work.

Another barrier for many organizations will be cost. Community video is expensive—there is production and distribution, and then support and training of the community producers. But bear in mind that community video may in some cases reach many more people than other grassroots interventions: people have an innate attraction to film screenings, and with video the literacy barrier is absent. Spread over one year, the cost of bringing these social messages to 75,000 people a month is less than 1 Rupee (2 cents) a head.

Apart from cost and infrastructure, a major concern is that the women will be treated as only technical operators, relegated to the limited task of shooting visiting officials and group meetings, and never scripting, editing or producing complete programs. It has been proven at many NGOs around the world that literacy and education are no barrier to bridging the digital divide when it comes to camera work. This was a major breakthrough, but the value of these women’s work lies just as much in their hearts and minds as in their hands.

Another worry is that it will become ‘NGO-directed,’ as opposed to community-owned. It is very possible that, as the various departments in the NGO start to see the value of these video programs, the women’s time will be taken up shooting pre-scripted videos for different departments in the NGO—videos that would be screened not to the whole community but just to the NGO’s members. Velugu staff would be dictating the content and arguments, as opposed to committing to participatory processes and developing the skills of the women in drawing out stories and ideas and developing their own style and voice.

Of course, both of those outcomes would still be very positive: if the women's main work were to be shooting official visits or local weddings, it could be a successful income generation project. And using media and video as part of educational programs or to spread certain messages in a campaign can undoubtedly strengthen an organization's effectiveness. And both such projects have the added benefit of being less expensive and time-intensive processes. But neither technical operation nor "NGO media" should be confused with 'community media,' which has goals of community participation and community ownership in addition to awareness-raising.

True community video is a harder goal to reach, but one worth committing to: the goal is for new ideas and conversations to be introduced into community spaces; for marginalized voices to be heard for the first time, and for other marginalized people to discover a forum where they can be heard; for a more accurate self-representation to inspire people to take action; and for unique, community-driven solutions to emerge through debate and through the creation of a new community forum.

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