

Dear VV friends,

In a rural classroom in Western Gujarat, seven eager young Community Video Producers, all hailing from the nearby villages, are explaining what their goals are for three years from now. “I want to be showing people a new way through my Video News Magazines,” says Prabu, a 32-year-old former truck driver who has done volunteer social work for the past 11 years. Kanu, 22, who has been working in her family’s fields since she left school five years ago, states, “I want to be the chief reporter of the Community Video Unit.” Mansouk, who is also 22 and who was making a decent living producing wedding videos before joining this Community Video Unit, has a clear vision: “I see the villagers waiting for my videos to come out and saying to me, “when will you cover my stories!”” Says Kanchan: “I want to be working here, as a Producer. I want to create my own identity and do things myself. I’ve never done anything on my own.” This is a powerful statement from a girl not yet 17, number eight in a family of 11 daughters. Jitendra, 21, who has worked mostly as a diamond polisher and day laborer says, “I see myself having a lot of wisdom, and understanding what people’s problems are. I’ll be making films on their issues and screening it back to them every month.”

Developing these young people into the leaders they wish to be, and that their community so desperately needs, is a critical part of the training that Video Volunteers and Drishti are providing them.

VIDEO AS A BRIDGE

This Community Video Unit is being hosted and supported by Navsarjan, an NGO that works fearlessly to end discrimination based on caste. Navsarjan has expressly chosen to situate this Community Video Unit amidst 25 of the most ‘feudal’ villages out of the 3,000 in which the organization works. In these villages, the practice of “Untouchability” is still extremely common. Dalit children are often made to clean the toilets in the school, while the other children get much more pleasant tasks. Dalits (the most socially oppressed caste in India) are often not allowed into the temples or to draw water from the village wells, and routinely suffer violence at the hands of the upper castes. The Community Video Unit is an all-Dalit team, but the audience is everyone in the village, upper castes included, and the issues will be of relevance to all. “The Video Magazine needs to be solutions-based. If we give them information that is useful to solving their problems we will get a good response.” reported Jitendra after completing his initial field research and community surveys. Says Kanchan, “Our magazine should serve as a communications medium between upper and lower castes. And we need to include as many people as possible in each program, even from the non-Dalit community.”

Arguably, any onset of violence is a result of a communications breakdown, and so solutions to violence need to specifically address communications, dialogue and understanding. Bridges need to be built that enable groups to unite around their common challenges and future goals. Navsarjan’s two trainers, Siddarth Chaddha and Indu Rohit, want the Community Video Unit to create just such a bridge between people of various castes. The videos will provide *all* villagers with possible solutions to human rights violations in the areas of livelihood, education and health that nearly everyone suffers in this extremely under-developed district—not just the so-called ‘lower’ castes. An all-Dalit team will be providing a very useful service to the entire community, altering power

dynamics in the villages and thereby addressing discrimination.

The Community Video Unit at Navsarjan is one of seven that Video Volunteers and Drishti have recently launched in India, in partnership with seven incredible Indian Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). We will be highlighting the work of all our Community Video Units in a future newsletter we are creating.

PURSUING THE GLOBAL VISION

In January 2006, Gavin White, one of our Board Members, joined Video Volunteers as CEO. Gavin brings skills that are absolutely critical to the organization's development. He has 15 years experience in investment banking, international development, and film and television at companies like Credit Suisse, CNBC and Acumen Fund, his most recent role as Chief Marketing Officer. In a short period of time, Gavin is succeeding in turning VV into a more professional organization. We have a new business plan, a five-year operational plan, and a comprehensive budget. We have increased our staff to ten in the last six months—Gavin, Stalin (the director of Drishti and also the India Director for Video Volunteers) and Jessica Mayberry, as well as six full-time video trainers in India who are all doing an amazing job in the field right now, and a soon-to-be-hired Project Coordinator.

Gavin's exciting vision for the organization will lead us to support the creation of a financially sustainable media industry at the bottom of the pyramid that is owned, managed and produced by local people themselves. The larger vision is of a global social media network by and for communities that offers a global voice for poor and marginalized peoples everywhere. We think it is not too bold to imagine hundreds, if not thousands, of people using community video as a tool to share knowledge, local humor and culture, and information for social change. This is a process to democratize the media at the most local-level possible.

HOW IT ALL HAPPENED

For the first 2 ½ years of the organization, we decided to carry out numerous, low-cost, flexible projects in order to develop a model of sustainable, community-owned media in which we could be fully confident. We early on partnered with Drishti, (www.drishtimedia.org) a media and human rights organization that has fifteen years experience in documentaries, theater, community radio and campaign design, and is one the leading development communications pioneers in India. By January 2006 we had conducted sixteen projects, of which six were trainings in video production with NGOs who all continue to use video as a tool in their work.

VV and Drishti have developed a unique approach to applying communications media to the problems in the developing world: the “Community Video Unit” (CVU). The CVU model involves our forging a partnership with a leading local NGO, who selects 5-10 community members who become full-time salaried Community Video Producers. We hire and train a Video Trainer, who is placed in each CVU for one year to train the Community Producers in all aspects of video production: research, shooting, scripting, editing and distributing. We create a local Editorial Board made up largely of community members who decide on a different issue for a monthly Video News Magazine to address. Each month's Video News Magazine is made up of short segments such as ‘success

stories,’ ‘documentary,’ ‘vox pop,’ ‘music video,’ ‘local arts and culture,’ ‘tips on government schemes’ and ‘video raids and expose.’

MASS COMMUNICATION

Local distribution is critical to our model, and we set a target of 10,000 people reached every month per CVU, so that the cost of reaching an individual person is reduced to little more than a cup of chai (tea). We reinforce in our Producers that NGOs are investing not in film productions, but in the communities that see them—in their mobilization, development and participation. One of the unique aspects is that unlike one-off screenings of educational documentaries, we will be returning to the same audiences each month so that communities not only *create* this media, but also *participate* in it and eventually *own* it. Each month, one member of the CVU will be selected to exclusively manage local distribution screenings. The video will be taken to 25 villages or slum areas each month for nightly screenings on wide-screen projectors in a central, outdoor community area. The Video News Magazines end with a ‘call to action’ that is easily executable by community members, and the Community Producer (supported by the local NGO) leads a discussion about the issue, and about actions people can take to participate more fully in their development. We will be gathering data on a regular basis on the communities’ media needs and interests, the number of people attending the screenings, and what actions were taken, among other key performance measures. The CVU is envisioned as a permanent and on-going community activity, and towards the end of this year we will be creating financial sustainability plans with each of the NGOs.

The goals of each CVU are to provide a platform for dialogue, information, rights education and community-led development by using a popular medium—video—that can bring large numbers of people together. Our earlier NGO partners, whose models are closest to this, are witnessing success: there is tremendous leadership development in the Community Producer. Community members are eager to ‘voice’ and tell their stories on camera; there are high levels of turnout for screenings, tremendous viewer identification with the stories onscreen, and participation in post-screening debates. There are even prosecutable cases uncovered during the screening debates that the NGOs are now engaged in on behalf of their community.

OUR PARTNERS

In May, Video Volunteers and Drishti held a conference in Ahmedabad, where we are based, for ten NGOs to whom we had presented this concept. To our delight, all ten of them agreed to start Community Video Units. Seven started in July, preceded by a one-month ‘Training of Trainers’ workshop here in Ahmedabad. An additional five will launch between November and January. What’s more, these ten NGOs agreed to fund their local training, equipment, salaries and travel for their CVU on an on-going basis, an investment worth about \$300,000 in the first year alone. This makes us very proud, because these are among the most well-regarded, people-oriented, rights-based organizations in India, whose networks and influence extend throughout the country and internationally, and this significant financial investment is perhaps the best sign that we have identified and developed an effective model for social change. We have seen that there is a great understanding on the part of NGOs of the importance of processes, like the Community Video Units, whose goals are empowerment, community-led development and communications. In the future, Video Volunteers intends to demonstrate

to funding agencies that communications and media are not frills; rather, communications, dialogue and understanding are at the very heart of social change.

HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING

The first seven Community Video Units are located in the states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra:

- Akshara (www.aksharacentre.org) in Bombay is a leading feminist organization known throughout Asia that creates highly visible gender campaigns and works intensively with college youth and slum-dwelling youth, including those in Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia. At Akshara one focus is to create high quality productions that can compete in Mumbai, the highly media saturated home of the Bollywood film industry
- Dappu (www.sakhiap.org) is a social movement organization working on the human rights issues affecting Dalits and organizing labor unions. Dappu's all-women team represents media produced by arguably the most downtrodden community in India: rural Dalit women
- Laya works across a large and sparsely-populated area of Andhra Pradesh on the land rights, livelihood, legal education and empowerment of Adivasis—India's indigenous Tribal communities. Their all-Tribal team will be producing videos that reflect Adivasi culture into the Tribal communities at a critical time. Local cable television is just now beginning to reach these villages with its destructive inroads into local culture
- Navsarjan (www.navsarjan.org), described above, works for the livelihood and human rights of Dalits in 3000 villages of Gujarat
- Saath (www.saath.org), in Ahmedabad, works on urban slum issues and has developed a widely-replicated model where government, residents and corporate organizations invest in slum infrastructure development. One of Saath's goals for their eight Community Producers is to provide slum dwellers with information on government schemes and to lead to an increase in the number of people availing of government services
- Yuvshakti is an organization that works for peace in between Hindus and Muslims in Panchmahal district, the area that was = most highly affected by the Gujarat riots of 2002. Their team of eight Producers includes Hindus, Muslims and Tribals, who purposely appear on-screen together to address the 'real' issues of this community, such as high unemployment. They already have their CVU's website up: www.sakshimedia.primetap.com
- Yuva (www.yuvaindia.org), in Bombay, was started twenty years ago to address urban slum issues and has since expanded across the state. Its CVU will be focusing on urban slum issues such housing, water and migration, to mobilize the community to demand their rights.

For any of you interested in the development challenges of India, I urge you to visit the websites of these organizations and learn more about the extraordinary work they are doing.

As of this month, there are fifty Community Video Producers working full-time, of which more than half are women. Between them, these fifty Community Producers will produce

seventy videos over the next year that will reach thousands of people a month in their own communities. These are significant numbers. I might venture to say that in some mainstream media markets there are not so many trained reporters capable of all production tasks—shooting, writing and editing their own stories. Video Volunteers will be working on behalf of the partner NGOs to leverage the voice of these communities to a wider audience through networking, advocacy and campaigns, and mainstream distribution. To that end, Video Volunteers will start pursuing mainstream distribution later in this year to Indian and US television channels, and of course through the Internet. We are also planning on undertaking campaigns, where all or some of the CVUs produce Video Magazines on a particular issue (for example, the upcoming village-level and national elections, or international Human Rights Day), and will we work to bring these productions to policy and mainstream audiences.

THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING

It has been a tremendously exciting and busy six months. Our main work at the moment is to provide support to our trainers, ensure that the media produced is high-quality and meaningful and that local distribution works effectively. We urge our friends to visit our CVUs where you can meet the trainers and reporters, and learn more about the local NGO partners' goals for the CVUs.

As with any growing organization, we have many needs. More than anything else, we really need to financially assist the creation and ongoing expenses of our Community Video Units. There are many other ways that people can help also, from suggesting a new name for Video Volunteers, to sending us contacts for fundraising, media or other people you think we should connect with. (And as a note for the filmmakers in our circle: our volunteer program for filmmakers *will* continue as an important program in support of Community Video Units as of 2007.)

If you are able to help, please email myself (jessica@videovolunteers.org), Gavin (gwhite@videovolunteers.org), or Stalin at drishtiad1@gmail.com.

I will leave you with one last image of hope from the CVU at Navsarjan. The team was out in the villages doing Participatory Video games with villagers to understand the communities' issues and find stories. The local Sarpanch, or village headman, took them to the village temple, saying it was a local site worth documenting. As I said above, Dalits are not usually allowed into temples, but this time, the whole team was able to enter unimpeded and film. Not only was this the first time that any of the three Community Producers had ever been inside a village temple, but it was also the first time that the Sarpanch, himself a Dalit, had been inside this temple—despite his status as village leader and having lived in the village for 55 years. For Jitendra, this was empowering personally and a mile-stone in his village. It was also an event that made him personally understand the power of the camera. “Without the camera they would never have let us entered the temple, but when we went with the camera no one bothered us. Look at how easily were able to break down this barrier, this act of discrimination. And we didn't even intend to do it! Think of all the things we can do in the future.”

Warmest regards to all of you, and thank you for your support. Please come visit the team in India, and Gavin in New York!

Warmly,
Jessica