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Hello friends,

Greetings from North Eastern Assam. I'm less than a 100 miles from Tibet and have a clear view of the foothills of the Himalayas. It's an incredibly lush, enticing region, which I would love to explore, but apparently the Assamese border police would stop any day trip into the mountains. All the Indian states surrounding Assam are restricted areas even for Indians, because of insurgents from Burma, Bangladesh and China who support the various separatist movements here.

I'm back in India making films for NGOs. I left Gujarat and the Self Employed Women's Association in July, and came back in September to make a film for Akanksha, a slum kids educational NGO in Bombay. After five weeks in Bombay I landed up on the other side of the country, in these tribal villages that feel far more like Laos or Vietnam than Hindu India. I'm working with two other filmmakers on this trip, Dom Elliot and Charlotte Buchen, both of whom are keen to see how their films can be a tool in solving, not just documenting, certain problems. This is an exploratory trip for Video Volunteers, an organization I'm setting up that will make films for grassroots NGOs and train them to make their own. If you can think of anyone who might be interested in such a venture, please let me know or forward this on.

The NGO here in Assam, I-CARD, works on behalf of the Mising, one of the most impoverished tribes in the North East. They live in the most flood-prone parts of the state, along the banks of the Brahmaputra River, and can rarely grow enough rice to feed their families for a whole year. On top of which they get endlessly pushed around by the government: small tribal minorities in India have no political voice and rarely have title to their land. We shot our documentary in a typical Mising village, whose residents have been ordered by the government to vacate their land—of course with no offer of an alternative settlement. In situations like these, each family will usually try to occupy some wastelands outside a Hindu-dominated town. In a country as stretched for land as India, this often gives rise to violence—and signals the break-up of the tribe.

These villages are without a doubt the most isolated place I've ever been. Getting across the Brahmaputra, at this time of year an enormous flood plain, involved three buses and three boats. They'd put the bus on the boat and go as far as they could by water. When they hit a sandbank the bus would drive until it began to sink, at which point we all got out and walked to the next bus... and next boat... After crossing the river we went upstream in a private boat for three hours, after which some villagers loaded up our cameras, computers and generator onto a handcart, and we all set off along some muddy tracks for a two-hour walk. Even though it was only 4:30 pm, it was pitch dark already: directly north of us is China, which is two and a half hours ahead, but India only has one time zone.

The next morning, the scene that had looked so spooky by lantern-light now seemed idyllic. Dom and I spent the next week zipping around by bike (there are no roads or vehicles) between the little hamlets dotted along the river. We talked to the men about the land while they farmed, and to the women about the economics of their households as

they worked at their weaving or tended their livestock--often the only activities that bring cash into the families. Inside their bamboo stilt houses, the women sit on the 'polluted' lower side of the hearth near the dirty vessels, and the men sit on the higher part. As we ate our meals, we answered their questions. Apparently we were the first foreigners to come to these villages. One ancient lady told us she'd 'dreamed' of such people as us, but never imagined she'd see one. The sweetest moment was perhaps when a woman asked me how I'd come from the place where my home was. "Ask her to guess," I told our translator. "Does she think I walked, took a boat, a car, an airplane?" After a brief consultation with her friends, the woman told me I'd probably taken a boat. When I told her I'd come to India in an airplane she looked totally amazed and delighted, and all through the room people began pointing at the sky and making airplane gestures with their hands. These are the moments that make me yearn to understand how the world looks through their eyes.

The NGO wants us to make a film that will convince both the tribe and outside activists that many of the Mising's problems are due to violations of their constitutional and human rights. Working on the film has been a real education into the process of turning a downtrodden people into fighters: to an extent, taking part in our film has been the first step for many of the villagers: they appear to be learning for the first time what their rights actually are. A particular farmer could easily tell me how many corpses he's taken across river this past year and how many children have died of diarrhea; and he could grasp what I was implying when I told him the two village funerals I attended were the first two of my life. They may be furious there is no doctor in the area, but they also had no idea that there are, in fact, government doctors assigned to their area, who are ripping off the government by drawing a salary and then never once setting foot in their villages. And similarly, they know it's awful there are no schools in the village, but had no idea that the constitution guarantees free primary education for everyone in India.

However, I can tell from our transcripts that as the week went on people became more and more articulate on camera; they began to understand our argument and came to us with stories to strengthen it. Well, at least the men did--with the women it was a different story. More than one woman said to us on camera, "my husband only beats me when I deserve it," and nearly every interview with a woman began, "I don't know anything about that, wait until my husband returns and he can tell you." The only woman to have completed high school in the village put it to us bluntly: "the women are nothing but work animals. No one has ever asked her opinion, so she doesn't have one to tell you." Once again I ask myself, what does it look like from her point of view?

So I would persevere with the women, abhorring the likelihood of an all-male film. I would try to tell the women that I wasn't judging them; that I was only asking about her life because where I lived things were so different. The women usually looked terrified throughout the interview, though, and all I can hope is that when they finally see themselves in the film they'll feel differently.

Dom and I are now back at the NGO's office editing the film on their own office computer, sharing the process with a staff member and giving him small editing assignments. The NGO bought a video camera prior to our coming, in the expectation that when we leave they'll be able to run their own in-house production unit. They have

a number of film projects in mind: for example, they now perform street plays on social issues in dozens of villages; they want to be able to film the plays and screen them to a much larger audience. I-CARD's strategy is quite innovative, and if they document their organization's development over the next few years, they can bring a film to NGO conferences and teach other professionals about their methods. They also seem excited about experimenting with participatory video, where video exercises and games help the disenfranchised articulate their ideas, gain confidence, and develop unity. Perhaps most importantly, they know that in the hands of social or human rights activists, the camera becomes a weapon. They can train one of the villagers I was just filming to use the camera, and she can film the horror that will ensue when the police force comes in to destroy their homes.

My nine months with Video SEWA in Ahmedabad convinced me of the value of video in communicating social messages to illiterate populations—and of the value of those videos being produced by the NGOs. A locally produced film on childhood inoculation, no matter how badly shot, is more effective than one distributed by an international agency, simply because the mothers watching the film can identify. Many small grassroots organizations in India already show training videos to the communities they are trying to empower, and see the value in producing their own. The Ashoka Foundation, a network of 100s of the best small NGOs in the world, put me in touch with the two organizations from this trip, and has identified many more NGOs who'd like Video Volunteers to work with them.

I truly believe that as the equipment needed for filming gets cheaper and easier to use, video production for social action can really take off in the developing world. The purpose of this trip to India is to see what's the most intelligent way that I can help make this happen. As I see it now, I'd like to start by sending volunteers (probably film students either from the particular country or from the West) to different NGOs for four weeks, where they'll make one film for the NGO and train them to make their own. I'd like Video Volunteers to help the NGOs distribute their films, either at film festivals or on development-related websites, and to offer long-term guidance to the in-house production companies the NGOs' set up. From a filmmaker's point of view, I'm excited about the material we could accumulate over the years from the NGOs. It would probably be possible to direct certain films – for example, about the villagers' eviction whenever it happens-- without even leaving home and then edit the material into a more sophisticated television production.

I'll be back in the States in December to start writing grants and approaching organizations. I'm still very much at the beginning of the project, though, so if you can think of anyone who'd be interested in participating or offering guidance, please let me know. You can also read about Video Volunteers at creativevisions.org. Kathy Eldon is the one who convinced me to give this a go, and she's been an incredible mentor the whole way through.

Thanks so much for your patience in wading through this long letter. There's not much to do in Northeast Assam once the electricity goes out, except sit in the dark and type away on the laptop.

Lots of love,

Jessie