

A Report on Video Volunteers National Meet

Dear Friends,

VV just concluded our joyous 'National Meet,' a five day gathering attended by nearly 200 Community Correspondents, VV staff and social change leaders from across India. This was the largest community media gathering of the year in India, and we want the highlights with you. When Saroj Paraste joined Video Volunteers as a correspondent in 2012, she had never held a camera in her life. As a NGO fieldworker, she was trying to change her community but never had the power of video activism behind her. As she stood in front of the group narrating the journey from her first video report to becoming the elected head of 69 villages, we knew we were doing something right. The fact that the villagers and other government officials elected her – a committed video activist – demonstrates how much the people of rural India want accountability. She has become someone who could not be ignored.

Each morning Saroj and others like her, who traditionally have had no voice or representation in mainstream media, shared their stories of transformation in remote villages of India. They have changed 1.5 million lives, and between them, created 500 visible impact stories in their communities, taking a stand and changing things right at home. They are, as their t-shirts proclaim, 'shooting injustice at sight.'

In a time when so many people the world over feel helpless in the face of increasingly negative global events, these Community Correspondents are fearlessly creating change every day, one village at a time. And it is thanks to you that we are able to empower and amplify their voices to the highest level.

There truly is power in a billion voices.

With deepest gratitude for your friendship and support,
Stalin, Jessica and the VV staff & board

If you'd like more stories of the National Meet and our Community Correspondents, read on...

Workshops on everyday patriarchy and violence against women

The National Meet unfolded primarily as a stellar series of workshops, many led by VV's unflaggingly energetic Stalin K.

In one series of workshops VV rolled out a new project to document "Everyday Patriarchy", which is the root cause of the terrible gender violence in India. Two of India's leading trainers on gender sensitivity, from the women's organisations Jagori and Akshara, led these sessions. Through insightful exercises, the CC's learned how to dismantle patriarchy in their own communities through video activism and video-led discussion clubs. As each gender stepped into the others' shoes, role playing the opposite gender and mapping each other's realities, they understood how everyday patriarchy reduces women to being a man's property or sexual object, leading to violence against women and reinforcing the wage gap between men and women. Gayatri Singh from Human Rights Law Network also taught our correspondents about the legal provisions related to rape, acid attacks, domestic violence and gender-related wage-gap cases, so that the CC's video documentation can be used to bolster legal cases.

Workshops on Media and Journalism

The session on data journalism with IndiaSpend, the leading data journalism outlet in India and VV's partner, represents the next phase of our work, where our video activism will be combined with data collection. The session taught the CC's how to gather data from local government offices, using the Right to Information Act if needed, to address the information vacuum that happens when funds reach the village level and often "disappear."

Bloomberg, whose journalists mentor some of our Community Correspondents, planned out five documentaries they are helping us to produce. There was a healthy debate – as always happens when our CC's meet journalists – about the balance between activism and journalism in VV's work. Arijit Ghosh, Managing Editor of Bloomberg in South Asia, urged CC's to always get the other side and explained how to contact the PR of corporates to get a response from companies, especially for

controversial land acquisition stories. Many of the journalists who witnessed our training reported how the CC's gave them a much truer picture of development in India.

Workshops on Advocacy

Another series of workshops deepened CC's understanding of the key anti-poverty initiatives of the Government of India on which they report (i.e., The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Right to Education Act, the Forest Rights Act, and the government's Clean India Campaign.) Resource people from WaterAid, PACS, Amnesty International, and The Right to Education Forum conducted these sessions. The Convenor of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), from whom writer and activist Arundhati Roy draws so much inspiration, had an instant connect with our video activists. NAPM has been fighting Big Dams in India for over 25 years, and attended the Meet to deepen the impact of our work on forced evictions. After the session, Aruna, from Amnesty International said, that it was "a privilege to see how a truly citizen-led, impact-driven media could work, especially from the lens of those who've been witness to discrimination and displacement on a more direct level. We left the national meet inspired."

Goan Activists Meet

35 leaders from Goan NGOs and village-based movements in Goa – who work on issues ranging from the environment & coastal protection to garbage & strengthening local governance -- joined us to explore ways to further engage the citizens of Goa in social change initiatives. VV plans to adapt its model in our home base in Goa, in order to support micro-volunteerism by the very digitally connected young people in Goa.

A well-deserved celebration for our CCs

Every evening, we had a cultural night where correspondents would pull variety acts out their hats with barely an hour or so to prepare after a long day of workshops. Nadia, a female correspondent from Jammu & Kashmir, was one of five CC's who danced for the first time in her life at the National Meet. She astounded everyone with her great moves.

Their dances, their music, their improvised stand-up comedy and mimicry acts showed the diversity of our network, hailing from 24 of India's 33 different states – there was a Bollywood masala number by female-to-male transgender Christy, followed by tribal dances by the Maharashtrian team and Adivasi dance from the Chhattisgarh retinue. "I feel free here. This is freedom," says Rohini Pawar, one our correspondents from Maharashtra, who could forget her role of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law for a few days and rejoice in her role as senior Video Volunteers correspondent, who has earned her stripes as a journalist – and most recently, halted a mass child marriage ceremony.

Our closing ceremony was headlined by Abhay Deol, an A-lister in the Hindi film industry. Stalin joked that this was probably the biggest press conference ever in Goa, with reporters from 24 states. Abhay believes that filmmaking can be used for grassroots change, which is why he has been a stellar ambassador for Video Volunteers' work for more than five years. Known as a thinking man's actor and starring in films on displacement and forced evictions (Chakravyuh and Shanghai), Abhay enjoyed fielding questions about the accuracy of his films from the very people –displaced Tribals -- on whom the films were based!

He closed the event by giving out the "COSCAR" awards A.K.A. "Community Oscars," a much anticipated annual awards ceremony VV organizes. Shabnam, one of the 22 winners in the category of "best online impact", got teary with emotion at being recognized by a big star, as she received her prize, a new Nexus tablet to use for community screenings. Shabnam's original video on missing toilets was broadcasted on CNN IBN and one of the viewers built 1000 toilets for Shabnam's village.

Some stories our correspondents shared:

Each morning, five CC's made one minute presentations at the mic about how the impact of their association with VV on themselves and their communities. Here are some of the highlights:

Bipin, from Gujarat, shared how he went from being an unemployed youth to a gainfully employed one who could fund his own education and become a lawyer. He also found the love of his life, Yashodra, another veteran Video Volunteers correspondent and married her!

Sarita, a CC who has made wonderful gender videos and who has been promoted to State Coordinator running a network of 17 CCs, proudly said, "My videos were instrumental in shutting down polluting stone crushing units in five panchayats in Orissa."

Varsha's reports on an acid attack survivor from Bihar was so powerful that it went viral on the VV Youtube channel and was screened at the meet as a teaching tool on how to report on violence against women. Last year her work was instrumental in getting the sale of acid banned.

Sajad, state co-ordinator of Jammu and Kashmir and who also manages Video Volunteers' KashmirUnheard network, has put together a team of Correspondents. The hall echoed with applause when he recounted that their team had filed 13 videos on human rights violations like torture, disappearances and killings. He also shot the Best Impact video that led to the shutting down of a firing range, because of which 64 shepherds were killed. Shutting it down changed the lives of 60,000 people living in the area.

Anil, our correspondent from UP, shared his story of impact, turning emotional, when he recounted his success in helping 10,000 MGNREGA workers like him to get the wages they were denied under the National Rural Employment Act despite doing back-breaking work as manual labourers.

Amarjeet, our Bihar correspondent, reported how he risked his own life to capture his story on the mob violence unleashed by 300 upper caste men who attacked a Dalit temple. His video reports secured compensation, amounting to Rs 9 Lakhs 40 thousand (\$14,400) for those killed.

Savita Rath from Chhattisgarh was profiled by Amnesty International India as a brilliant example of a human rights activist, for her incisive video reports that revealed the ravages coal mining has wrought in her community in Raigarh, Chattisgarh.

Sulochana, our correspondent from north Goa, was given the Zila Mahila Saman award by the Ministry of Women and Child Development on Woman's Day, this year for her work. She also won Best video on Environment for her video activism against Teso Waterfront Resort that was ruining the ecosystem of an entire river and community. There was a great wave of joy at the meet when she announced that she had been selected for a PhD. program and that she would be presenting an academic paper based on VV's maternal health campaign.

Mary Nisha asked for advice on fighting corruption: she'd recently been offered 10 Lakh rupees (\$16,000) to withdraw her complaint by an official whose wrong-doing she had exposed, and she'd not taken the money. This courageous Adivasi woman hails from Gudda, Jharkhand, the district with the second worst maternal mortality rates in all of India. Her hidden camera video documenting the horrendous state of public health in her area has picked up by numerous media outlets.



