

SA

them and us

Hide & Seek. Or a game of chase. With a menagerie of players: A World Bank sponsored road, out of place due to the state of the art and a Ministry of Information & Broadcasting commissioned documentary series with an anarchic captain and his maverick, and for the moment, siesta induced team - in search for something. Our posse of vehicles, single-file, climb twisting turning roads. One long centipede, propelled by a collective velocity that belies the soporific inertia of its passengers. The green head of the white centipede negotiates bends and turns, the body and tail counterparts follow. Sumit, navigator, eager charter of territory, zips forth, the sole active brain in the cell. Next to him, in a bivouac of A/C draft snores Shymole, and in the back seat, ensconced in the recycled siesta air that came with the territory of Goa, lie Shai and Shaina, travelling dreamlands, bit players, lacking spirit.

Dark clouds move up from the south, catching up with the sun, on its journey to the west - The opponents for round 1. Heavy but speedy, they follow the manmade trail. Up and up above the road, they tail the green-white explorer, every now and then overtaking its wake and surging forward eager to conquer and begin their reign on...The earth worm moves faster and faster, but heaven overpowers, and darkness takes over. The caravan slows down; the young driver in the head gives up his chase and succumbs to the force in placid resignation. If they cannot conquer nature, they must be happy subjects, enjoy her rule.

Sumit turns off the A/C and rolls down the car window. A moist wind circulates, stale dreams are given vent and the sleeping bodies rejuvenate. Lucid dreams and deja vu. Unreal. Real. The unconscious and the conscious. A victory shower, light and gentle, falls over the dense foliage saturated deep green in the diffused afternoon light. Now and then, the sunrays pierce through the clouds, proverbial holy light joining in the applause. Having relinquished the battle for supremacy to the powerful and mighty, the caravan speeds on again, undaunted, now round 2 of the game, in quest for another world.

Shai and Shaina stir round and round, in and out of various lands, created and imaginary. The pothole-less road, the cool weather, the lush green pre-monsoon forests; all unexpected cogs, welcome surprises, bonus points, in their journey to the little known and little seen. And this journey. Could they even dream of what they would soon encounter? The graphic imagery of dreams, and the many real lands they create in the subconscious of their minds, overworked as they were with the burden of knowing and seeing would still be stunned by the reality of what lay in store for them, these young women, wannabe filmmakers.

Episode 1

The super smooth highway stretches on, deep forestry hangs down from the lateral edges of the road. Soon, the foliage slackens at sporadic clearings and solitary huts or little hamlets appear down in the lowlands, away from the highway. A rainbow cuts an arc, another imaginary stairway from the known to the unknown. During a common rarity such as this, Indian folklore doesn't send the people in greedy quest for the crock of gold. Quite the contrary. It celebrates the wedding of the fox and the jackal, a freak occurrence like sunshine with rain. While the 'civilised' seek fortune in adventure and exploration, the 'savages' don't attempt to conquer and tame nature, instead they fear and worship and often rejoice in the bio- diversity of the eco-system. Yet, there is no revelry to be seen, this roads is almost deserted. There aren't many people around on this worldbankroad. Now and then, occasional families of villagers pass us by...some on foot; some on cycle...suddenly, a bunch of children run onto the highway...

Sumit jams his foot on the break. In quick reflex, the rest of the centipede comes to a halt and begins to back down a little bit. "These children we just saw...could they be...?" A host of gasps and whispers runs through the body of the unit. A beautiful world. Where women hold their heads high and never have to squint to the sun...where ignorance is bliss...and children only laugh...Shaina wakes out of her dream world and blinks unbelievably as her eyes get a grip on and her mind focuses on what she sees. She pinches Shai, who starts; yes this is not a dream. "Shai...Shai...wake up...look?"

The crew begins to tumble out of the vehicle. Wide-eyed and subliminally conscious of their reactions, they stare around, silent, stunned and overwhelmed. The Africans! The Siddhis of Karnataka! Shai and Shaina fix their gaze on a young lad. Dark black oily skin, short woolly hair, tight taut long legs, lean body... "Hello!", they struggle for a set of words...Hindi...? will he understand. "What's your name?" A brilliant smile, a disarming shy boy grin...Shai and Shaina stay rooted to the ground, in a daze. A rag-tag bunch of children gather about them excitedly. What meets the eye is all too bewildering, stupefying, freaky perhaps. Unreal real.

A lady comes up from a clearing in the forest. She is wearing a saree, a mangal sutra and a bright red tikka on her head. She carries a baby in her arms. Saeed tries to speak to her in Hindi. She looks around shyly. The children scream and laugh. Saeed enlists Raju's help. "Do they speak Kanadda?" Raju gets a ready nod from the woman. Question 2 goes into translation. "Where do they live?" The woman points to the forest. The clearing leads to a path sloping downwards away from the highway. "May we come and see where you stay?" The woman nods again and turns to go down. Some kids follow her. Others linger around. Uncertain.

Directions are relayed from car to car. Doors slam, like clockwork, the unit gets down to work. Still dazed, Sumit, Shai and Shaina make their way to the green Sumo. "Fuck, I can't believe it. Its bizarre, they look 100% African....I know, but yet, they seem 100% Indian!" They grab their shooting gear, handcam and still cameras and follow the agile kids who lead them down. At the foot of the slope, nestled away from the highway are paddy fields and further on, gently fading hills that gradually merge with the sky. The crew can't contain themselves and they gape about over-awed but not dumbstruck. They chatter away, coming to terms with these people they have just seen...hapshi-siddhi-negro-black-beautiful... many terms, many languages.

The little hamlet boasts of 4-5 huts clumped together away from the arable land. Women come out of the houses, babies in arms, curious about the curiosity of the explorers. They appear fairly confident and ready and willing to speak to them in Kanadda. Saeed elicits Raju's help and begins a conversation. "Do they know where they came from?" The question goes into translation. Meanwhile, Shai and Shaina with permission from 2 young Siddhi girls enter some of the huts. They survey the mud houses; they haven't seen very many village huts in their young lifetime. Neat and swept caked flooring, bare essentials piled tidily in one corner. Calendar cutest and framed pictures of Lord Shiva and Parvati - or Lord Jesus and Mother Mary - adorn tiny shelf like altars or mandirs and jostle for space with film posters of Bollywood starlets, Karishma and the ever-popular Mamta. They take in these little vignettes of popular kitsch in rustic surroundings, smile and whisper English words to each other.

A lone dog howls. An ominous long, deep and dark yell that augurs a death-like air. The camera crew is making their entry. More dogs join in, long and sad, this welcome note that portends the coming of the conqueror...rather, the camera: the instrument of the civilised man, the black box, white-balanced, true-colour recording device of the western world, now appropriated so well by 'us'.

Yes. Beautiful magic light, beautiful sunset. Hand-held, through the little hamlet, the camera, boom rod and recorder lead up to the laughing children who have already been captured by other littler boxes. They have been dancing around Sumit, giggling hysterically, awed by what they too see. Sumit replays footage for them. They are aghast, yet delighted as they crowd around the viewfinder of this palm size magic box in Sumit's hand and see their faces in a tiny window. Instinctively their hands cover their faces. "Oh my god, its a TV!" says an older one. Shaina snaps up these priceless moments. It is into this weird dynamic, that the master camera enters, followed by the disquieting wail of the dog. It tries to be unobtrusive, attempting to record the interaction of the unit with these children. A Tele-photo lens, the dizzying swaying movement of the camera magnified, beautiful black faces of beautiful black children float in and out of frame, laughter and wonderment bright on their faces as they witness yet another recording device, this one bigger and better than the other 2. They stare into Jangles camera lens, run behind each other, play with the unit and even jostle for space in front of the camera breaking into fistfights and animated arguments displayed with self conscious glances toward camera. A 2-year-old darling boy hides behind an older girl, and then peeps out of her shoulder to catch a glimpse of the camera that catches a glimpse of him. "Avois, oh my!" The kids float out of one frame, to be caught by another, banging into Sumit while running excitedly from Jangle's approach, being suspended in activity, exposed in real candid action by Shaina's shutter mania.

...So, for want of a better word, picture this. Brown, Shai and Shaina with still cameras, Sumit with the Handicam, Jangle, Hari and Parvej with the Camera, recorder and gun mike respectively. One group of delightful children aged 2-15. African in face and race. South Indian in language and dress. And one barking dog. Result. Mutual wonderment. That of the crew, 'finding' a piece of Africa in India and that of the laughing children, infected by the exciting and unsettling effect caused by these men and their machines. Was there anything wrong with this little vignette? On the 2 dimensional surface of a monitor screen, it wouldn't appear so. These kids were having a great time, the unit members were actually playing with them, chasing them, coming out of corners, catching them, hiding and seeking. Yet, something was not right...why did no one feel totally comfortable, why was the dog howling so?

At another hut, Saeed and Raju are still in conversation with the lady. She answers their question. "We have come here 10-15 years ago." "From where", asks Saeed? "Over there." She points to the North. "Where is there?" "20 kms from here, Yellapur." "But this is today's time. I'm asking about their history. Did they come here from Africa? Did their parents tell them?" The camera had moved into this space. Not paying attention to the questions being asked, for this was not a formal interview, the camera zooms in to a young mother, sitting out at the front of her house rocking her baby, listening intently to the interrogation that continues via Raju. "These people have been here from the beginning. We were born here is what she is saying."

Jennifer, sitting outside a hut, pen and diary in hand, tries to talk with the women. She deduces that the men are at work on the field. The land around does not belong to the Siddhi people, all 5 families in the hamlet are without land. The men-folk go work as labourers in other fields. Saeed wonders if the unit can return in the evening when the men come home. 'Maybe, share a meal with them. Would that be possible? We would like to shoot as well.' Barkat is consulted regarding the night shoot. "Haan, sure. Of course, it's possible. We have a generator set. And I have my lights. We can light up the whole village!" "Eh! What do you mean, generator? How loud, what about my sound?" Good question posed by the recorder player Hari. "We wont take interviews...only ambience," says Saeed. This is anathema to Hari's ears. "That's worse! if you want ambient sounds...how can you have a generator roaring? Eh no!" A quick consultation ensues, Jangle won't be able to use lamplight. "Or, we'll have to light a lot of lamps in these huts, or mashaals, fire torches..." "Good lord, don't you think that's a bit much...can't we shoot in whatever light the huts provide." Jangle whines a little bit. "You can, but we'll have to shoot on full-open-aperture, on gain, the picture will be very dark and grainy. It won't look good. I think the faces are more important than the sound." Cameraman and sound-recorderist. 2 skinny poles. Always standing apart. Always rigid. One suffering at the cost of the other. Usually sound quality for picture perfection. Thankfully, there are some who think beyond their limitations and constraints. Barkat who has been missing since the start of this conversation jumps down from a tree trunk, red and black alligator clips in hands. "Problem solved! We can shoot...I can tap the current from these electric wires...I've done it before...for foreign film crews."

The children have quieted down now. The experience of the cameras in their faces has left them tired, perhaps the novelty has worn out. The crew gathers around a hut and chats with the women and children, still amazed by the faces. Someone asks the children to sing a song. They stand up, in height order and chant a happy little rhyme. What language is it? Is it a traditional folk song? A hymn? Lilted voices sing the little ditty, the lone dog sleeps peacefully. He warned them about the outsiders. But they are obviously welcome. The song ends, a loud roar of applause for the black choir. Raju has the last word. "That song...its no folk or tradition...why, its the state anthem of Karnataka!"

Episode 2

No longer destination driven centipede, the 4 vehicles charge at different speeds, some eager to reach Yellapur, others too stunned to care about purpose. The green Sumo now tails way behind, severed deliberately and momentarily from the main body of activity. Inside, the young find-outers find their voices and begin to deconstruct the spectacle just witnessed. Little known facts about the Siddhi people that they 'found', they attempt to superimpose on the deeply imprinted visual memory of this first siting. When had they arrived here? How were they so well assimilated into a typically Indian subculture? Did they know how they came to India?

In the ethnically so diverse subcontinent of their country, races and faces found self-evident geographical explanations. Yet, on this jigsaw puzzle map, that they were soon to cover, this little piece, adapted as it was did not quite fit in. It belonged, perhaps elsewhere. In another jigsaw puzzle on another map. But they were here. And explanations, though inadequate were plenty. As, Shaina, Shai and Sumit tried to connect the dots, another nagging spoke, not disconnected from the current game leered it's ugly face, coming up yet again, for the second time in one day and the uncountable time since the start of their 10 day old exploit. Voyeurism. They needed to find some finite answer to this equivocal moral issue. They didn't quite know how. But their consciences were bristling; the stalemate could not last long.

Up ahead, in one of the white bodies of the worm, crawled the production team, inching on to Yellapur in the hunt for a night's stay. Mission accomplished. Sooner than expected, for the little town of Yellapur Taluka, is host to one hotel, large enough to board and cater to this team of 18 members, 3 Sumos and one Tempo Traveller.

The squalid and damp interiors of Hotel Pai Sambhram are soon buzzing with activity as the explorers are allotted their rooms. In 3's and 4's they settle down, Jennifer, Shai and Shaina dump their baggage in a tiny and dismal space of paintless walls and crumbling ceiling. There is nothing they can say about the condition of room and board, this is the best the town can offer and thankfully, no one seems to care. It is almost as though they have larger objectives, purpose of mission. In this given situation; comfort, or rather discomfort didn't really matter. It was inevitable, and perhaps strangely romantic.

Yet, petty squabbles ego clashes are wont to come in the way. The girls need to set up their transferring, the camera attendants need to re-charge their batteries. But, beyond their means and reach, a higher power has decided that neither of the sub-units take his presence for granted. With incredibly low voltage, Parvej & Raju cannot charge, Shai & Shaina cannot transfer. Without batteries, one cannot shoot, without transfers, one cannot log. Collectively, they shed their load onto Barkat & Ravi, for whom 'trouble shooting' and a chance to display ingenuity against odds that hamper current work never fails to bring out due results. Even the simplest problem is given high-energy drive and determination, the solution, when arrived at, comes as testament to their importance as essential and indispensable crew members. From the back of the Tempo Traveller, where in neatly lined trunks lie heavy secrets known only to the 2 of them, comes a little red devil, a new member of the gang; a fat squat little dynamo that the crew hasn't had the chance to meet before. Tanked up with heavy fuel the power generator stutters and starts, the whirring vibrations echo down the corridor. Soon, it's running smooth and gentle, ready to shed light on all that is dark. The boys have triumphed. Applause is due.

But that is not the end of the power games. Now Parvej, determined to pull rank, refuses to give the girls the recorder. He sets up his chargers, and reclines unmoving on his bed, a slimy grin on his face. This is his power trip, one he is determined to enjoy. "The voltage is not stable enough, my recorder and monitor might blow something, I'm not willing to risk that. The transfers can wait.' Not ones to take their problems elsewhere, Shai & Shaina attempt to reason with him, not understanding the futility of their efforts, that annoying them, was what perhaps gave him the biggest rise. 2 fraught women, requesting him, pleading their case, patiently waiting for his consent. Eventually, they relent and seek redressal from the real powers that be. Saeed and Jangle are consulted, Parvej is ordered to set up the transfer.

With the resourcefulness and curiosity that never ceases to amaze the 2 younger women, Jennifer while on the job of finalising the dinner order with Mr. Pai, the proprietor of the eponymous hell-hole...hotel has not been distracted from the main objective that has transported the unit to this small land. She comes up, bursting with energy, eager to share her information with her female colleagues. Pai has given her directions to the Siddhi Sangh, some sort of co-op or government run organisation that might provide them with some tangible information regarding the Siddhis. Sumit is summoned and the 4 of them set out, on yet another search.

Following the directions, they leave the main highway, Sumit guiding the Sumo through mushy wet roads passing tiny villages, fields and forests. Soon, the road ends, a dirt track and a sign board lead them up to the office of the Siddhi Sangh. It is almost 7pm, yet a naked light bulb shining dimly through the window is a welcoming sign. Someone is still in.

The women alight and make their way to the one-room hut, a modest structure that stands sturdy and isolated in the woodland. The door is opened by a young man. Again, the women are stunned by his very presence. Startling bright eyes and a wide smile light up his face. His skin shiny black, his hair shaved close to his head revealed tiny tight curls. His body firm and lean, he stood tall and strong, his polyester bush-shirt and narrow trousers, his HMT wrist watch, nothing escaping the eyes of his beholders. Hesitantly they reaffirm if this place is indeed the Siddhi Sangh. The man nods and invites them inside. A tiny ceiling fan whirrs listlessly, the room is bereft of furnishings save for a table and a few chairs. A near empty book shelf rests against a wall, damp and fading posters of the erstwhile and dear departed dynasty, Nehru, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi hang on one wall. Jennifer presents herself and her colleagues. The young man introduces himself as Chandresh. Haltingly, she begins to tell him, in her efforted and contorted Hindi about her husbands documentary film. Chandresh puts her to ease by replying in English. His affable nature and will to please, allays the uncertainty surrounding them and now, undaunted, the women and Sumit, who has just entered, go about their task of 'finding out.'

Behind the table, framed in glass is an outline map of North Karnataka. Fading sketch-pen markings cite the Siddhi dominated pockets of Uttara Kannada, Belgaum and Dharwar talukas, one contiguous region of dense forests. Almost 95% of the Siddhis of Karnataka were to be 'found' in and around Yellapur taluka, That much, these find-outers knew. That's why they were here. Yet, an explanation eluded them. "When did the Siddhis come to India? How did they settle here?" Chandresh is willingly saddled by these questions, all not entirely innocent, for this inquisitive bunch weren't exactly babes in the woods. They had heard rumours, and had come in search of the truth. Complying willingly, Chandresh told them all that he knew. That the Siddhis were probably brought as slaves, by the Portuguese from East Africa. That today, they were found in North Karnataka, Gujarat and even remote parts of Maharashtra; due to territorial affinity with the Portuguese colonies of Goa, Daman and Diu. But there was no collective Siddhi identity. The Siddhis of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka lived totally isolated from each other, spoke and lived the particular languages and cultures of the land. Chandresh also revealed that the Siddhis of Karnataka didn't profess one religion. Shuffling through some papers, he produced a sheet of statistics. Out of the approximately 6000 Siddhis of Karnataka, 26.5% were Hindus, 31.6% were Muslims and 41.9% were Christians. The Siddhis of Rajkot, Gujarat had been recognised as a Schedule tribe, but as per the latest available national census (1981), the Siddhis of Karnataka had been listed under the various religions they professed and not as a 'type'. The only common thread that linked the Siddhis of these lands was the fact that none of them had retained anything of their original culture. They had collectively lost their history.

The light from the bulb began to flicker and waver. Outside the rain was falling, darkness had descended on the forest. The foursome exchanged knowing glances, it was time to head back. The crew might be worried. Yet, they couldn't leave. Questions still remained unanswered. "When did they escape the Portuguese? When did they settle into the forests? How did they come to follow 3 different religions?" Chandresh, perhaps overwhelmed with the well meaning inquisition and perhaps incapable of satisfying their curiosity, handed them a sheaf of documents, a first formal study of the Siddhis undertaken by the Sangh. 'Yes, you can borrow it to read.' Jennifer and Sumit asked Chandresh if we would be so kind as to accompany them back to the hotel. They were keen he meet the director.

Mr. Pai and friends in the reception and dining stare amusingly as the 5 of them make their way up to the first floor. Wires and cables snake in and out of 2 rooms, the whirring of the generator echoing through the damp dark corridor. In a much larger and for the moment brighter room, Saeed, Jangle and Shymole have settled down to enjoy their evening mix of drinks and discussion. Instantly, the party is extended and Chandresh is warmly welcomed, Sumit has proudly introduced him as the first matriculated Siddhi from Yellapur. Awkwardly, Chandresh accepts a whiskey drink and perches himself on the edge of a bed, his wide-eyes transfixed to the monitor. The footage of the little hamlet on the highway is being played back and transferred, now seeing the images as captured by the team, an uneasy quiet runs through the room. Then, breaking the silence, Saeed begins to chat with Chandresh. He asks him to help us identify villages in an around Yellapur where we could find Siddhis. Chandresh rattles off a litany of names, Dandeli, Haliyal, Mungod, Sirsi, Ankola & Supa adding that the Siddhis lived in isolation of other locals, and almost all were landless. He mentions a village close to Yellapur where the crew could shoot the next morning. Excited, Sumit and Brown are sent off with Chandresh on a reconnaissance tour, to identify the village as Chandresh would be unable to accompany them on their shoot.

The remaining crew members begin to discuss the shoot for the next day. All plans to share a meal with the villagers has been thankfully abandoned. It is decided that they will spend 2 days in Yellapur in order to meet the Siddhis, understand them and spend quality time with them. This seems to satisfy Shai & Shaina who exchange knowing glances. They had been impatiently waiting. At long last, they will be interviewing poor villagers, and not middle class tourists. Finally, they will be given the chance to experience Mother India and her resilient and strong children. It was about time.

The guide and adventurers return to the hotel, much excited, with tall stories of fireflies and bears in the forests, Brown spooked shitless and Sumit brimming with excitement of being left out in the great wide open, and a find by Chandresh; a mammoth jackfruit, yellow and ripe to be cut. The boys invite him to stay have dinner with them, Shai & Shaina are strangely not hungry and skip the meal to finish up their logging task for the day. Upstairs, Saeed and his roommates drink on, the girls work away with their notebook and laptop. Work done, the women retire to their room, tired, wired, inspired.

Like 3 stiff corpses, they lie down on the joined single beds, hesitating to move for fear of colliding with the other. Thin mal-mal dupattas veil them from attacking mosquitoes, Lilliputian devils displaying right over might. Sleep was going to elude them, their bodies were tired, but their minds were wired. Together, like under cover dormitory mates whispering loudly past their bed time they begin to bring some semblance of verisimilitude and accuracy to the thinly held facts and figures that prior knowledge and new found information had thrown up before them. That the Siddhis had come with the Portuguese, there was no doubt of. But how was it that they had collectively lost their history. Severed all ties from their ancestry? The research notes showed that the slaves were bought in East Africa, yet, were they one homogenous race or several tribes? And why were they called Siddhis? Weren't Siddhis Abyssynian? Wasn't the Maharaja of Janjira a Siddhi? And didn't the Siddhis come as traders & merchants to the coast of Maharashtra? Didn't they ally with the Bijapur Sultanate against the Marathas? In studying the history of the Deccan, weren't there references to Siddhis who rose to high ranks as generals and navigators? Did these Siddhis come to the coast of India as free men, were they different from the Siddhis who had come as slaves, who were bought by the Portuguese to Goa, Daman and Diu, and made bonded labour or were recruited in the army? There was no historical record of what happened to them after the abolition of slavery about 150 years ago. Logically, it seemed plausible that once freed, they retreated to the heartlands of the coastal colonial empires. But how did they come to profess so many religions? They were records to describing the mass baptism of purchased slaves before they were ship bound to the colonies. Hence, were the Hindus and Muslims Christian reverts, who while escaping from Goa and slavery had come under influence of the surrounding princely states? Or could the Muslims have retained the religion of their African forefathers?

Facts, figures, faces. And a wealth of questions. The tragedy of the Siddhi people perturbed these women. They wanted to figure out a place the Siddhis could be given in post independent India. They felt that they could perhaps, understand and weave together an explanation from the anachronistic, inadequate and often contrary information available and from the current status or more appropriately, plight of these people. That's all they intended to do. That's all they could do. As a film unit. Document with understanding, their lives. Their customs, traditions, language and dress; their hopes and fears, their courage and resilience and thereby, their identity as Indians citizens. With these well meaning and sensitive thoughts, and with some outline to the developing blurry image the 3 shrouded beings crept back into the land of dreams. Tomorrow, they would see the clear & real picture.

Episode 3

12 Kms down the main road of Yellapur, a dirt road led the convoy of travellers to the modest village of Bhagwati that lay quiet and peaceful in the early morning light. As all 4 vehicles arrived at standstill, the soporific village came to life. Old men peeped out of huts and with no more than a glance of curiosity returned indoors. Women holding babies hid behind windows, or on porches and children played in the *aangans*. Pouring out of the vehicles, the film unit acclimatised to the space. The direction & production crew spread out to explore the field and the camera crew set up gear. Neat rows of mud houses lined the path on either side, occasionally concrete buildings painted a uniform Public Works Department blue stood out, incongruous in the rustic surroundings. On closer scrutiny, it had become apparent that the first blue structure was a mosque, the second a temple, and far in the corner, the biggest and boldest, was the church.

The camera recorded the religious facades, in sequence, then collectively, long standing secular testaments as it burrowed its way down the path. A host of people were entering the church, a few were Siddhi, but most were...Indian? Local. Brown. Jennifer, the first to set foot into the sanctum, came out, eager and excited with yet another story to tell. The church was not exclusively for the Siddhi people, Christians from neighbouring villages frequented it. There was to be a ceremony in the church, a ritual of some sort that she was keen to record. The direction crew seemed uninterested in this event, for it did not involve the Siddhis or their customs, and other people and their problems weren't really their concern, weren't on the agenda of their mission. Yet, Jennifer's holistic approach, her all-consuming mind, never losing the big picture, the grand *raison d'être*, felt it necessary to chronicle the ceremonies of a local village church, this one being the singing of a song to alleviate the pain of an individual, the suffering victim being a woman.

With surprising speed and efficiency, the boys descended on the structure, a veritable inquisition and began their self styled re-organising of the church. Windows were swung open, tube lights and bulbs switched on, the door unhinged to let in the maximum amount of sun light. The church resembled a class room, woven straw mats ran across the square room, a tiny altar replaced the black board space, the remaining walls stared at each other, a chalky white. Jangle had set up his camera and had seemed visibly dissatisfied with the vision in his view finder. He needed light. More than the modest church could provide. The concerned party had yet to arrive, the priest informed the unit. The ritual would not begin for another half hour. The cinematographer's prayers had been answered. And Barkat and the boys had been given yet another chance to prove their worth. Since time had taken their side, they decided that nature too could bend her rules. Or be made to. At the end, there was always light.

Excited about shooting with natural light, the boys headed into the bottom of their infamous trunk, their unassuming Pandora's box. Folds of the whitest satin and shimmering silver nylon unfurled outside the church door, metal stands with shining boards 1 2 3 4 stood strategic guard outside each window, ornamental pennants in preparation for the ceremony. Rays of light reflected off their luminous surfaces, the boys directed the brilliance into the sacred space, which soon began to glow in this ceremonial holy light. One last task remained. The seamless satin and silver were spread out the floor. All man power was summoned, and after much screaming and hailing, Barkat & Ravi took charge of booming out orders and the rest of the crew galvanised themselves in linking together metal rods to form a scaffold for the drape.

Shai and Shaina were peeping in and around houses awed by the stunning faces of women, old folk and children. The young men were conspicuously absent, out presumably on their days work. Shai's camera lay unwound, no longer could she snap her shutter like she had, the previous day. As official photographer, Shaina continued her chronicling, on the battered and exposure-by-instinct crew camera. Mesmerised by a group of darling children playing on a bamboo ladder she clicked away, taking care to de-frame, trying her best not to objectify what she quite naturally appropriated as her subjects. They moved around the village till they reached the end of the road and stopped outside the church, a little embarrassed at the full-fledged production that was being played out in front of them.

The pulsing and tinny beats of a popular Hindi film song cut the air. So startled were they by the sound of this seemingly common ditty, that they followed the tune to its source. 2 eager Siddhi youth stood outside a hut opposite the church and stared at wonderment at the elaborate work process that had all but consumed the environs of the church. Shai and Shaina were greeted by shy smiles, the younger of the two nodded his head and beckoned them indoors where they were proudly shown what was without a doubt, the pride and joy, indeed the prized possession of the boys and perhaps the only one in the village. A tiny 2-in-1 and a meagre collection of audio tapes.

So, this is the scene. Jennifer & Saeed are sitting under the shade of a tree. At the church, the boys have almost finished their construction. Reflectors stand tall and bright outside each window, and the skimmer has been successfully mounted on a 10 x 10 foot frame, the satin stretched tight. The girls are chatting with their new found friends answering their questions, explaining to them, the nature of this spectacle. Jangle, Hari and Parvej are taking shots of the village people and their houses.

Ravi, Barkat, KG, Ayub, Mihir & Chandi lift up the mammoth skimmer. They are creating quite a ruckus. An old man begins to shout from outside his hut. Jangle has been taking some shots of him in his surroundings.

He walks up to the unit, his voice agitated. Saeed rushes to calm him down. The man continues rave and rant, he appears to be very upset with what he sees. Saeed introduces himself to the elderly man, who after some deliberation, identifies himself as Hussein. Showing deference, Saeed tries pacify him, and takes him back towards the house. He indicates to Jangle and Hari. 'Roll'

The camera pans slowly and gently from the boys with the skimmer- Parvez abandons his recorder duty and enters frame to help and hold the skimmer that is now being used to throw light on the ensuing conversation- the camera now arrives on the porch of the hut. Saeed puts his hand on the man's shoulder, attempting to calm him down. He speaks in Hindi.

- People are not feeling bad naa, that we've come here like this, so early in the morning?
- People are saying...what are they doing, is its 'program?' At least they should tell us...
Saeed nods in agreement and calmly continues...

-I'm travelling around the entire country. Main purra desh ghoom raha hoon.
-Ghoom raha hai.... voh choddo. Forget that. If you tell us exactly. We'll understand. Atleast explain to us..... Ask us first.

Saeed turns and looks into camera as if to say 'Look...He's right'

We could ask questions like, "What is the history of the siddhis?" One question can be like that. Or "How did they come here?"

Hussein nods patiently. Saeed continues...

- The second question can be "What kind of work do people do, in your gaon?"

Hussein nods again. Is quiet. His wizened face has a hardness, his eyes bear a hostility that his now composed stance does not hide. He patiently listens on.

-What kind of siddhis's are there? They tell us that there are Hindu, Muslim and Christian siddhis. Or are they just siddhis?" And then I'll ask that in these last 50 years of Independence, have good things happened? Or bad? What do you feel? These are the questions. Bas.

Hussein mumbles. Saeed leans forward to figure out what he's saying.

The villagers are saying that people come here and inconvenience us. Camera walle go here in the house and there in the fields...like that many will come and go. But finally there's no one to better our condition. Hamare thakleef, our difficulties we have to deal with ourselves. Abhi dekhne ka kya phaayda hai. What good will 'seeing'do?

Saeed looks into camera. With a sweeping gesture that encompasses the village and the people around, Saeed nods and agrees with Hussein.

-Your telling us that by taking photos and talking to people, baath-cheeth karne se there is no benefit. Koi phaayda nahin?
You come here, go there. What you people do. Khuda ko mallum. God only knows.

A long silence ensues. Hussain Saheb and Saeed look to the ground.

The last time people came here idhar camp maara. For 8-15 days they stayed. Poora photo nikaala bacche ka, gicche ka...They took photographs of children. They asked what work we do...what all we do? Nothing comes from it. Did anything happen? Idhar the poor are left to die. These people stay here, eat here and go off.

Saeed turns to the young man who has been sitting by the door. His name is William. It is apparently his house. His little children are running around. He picks up a little boy and rocks him on his lap.

What do you feel?

They came here into our house. Kitna handi hai, kitna bhandi hai...kuch kheti hai. How many pots & pans do you own, do you have land...

Hussein interjects.

All these questions : how do weddings take place, what happens, where does it happen, how do we eat fish, how do we eat meat, how we dress...All this they see. This is our lot only. What are they going to do?

William adds.

Nothing has changed.

Nothing has changed?

If things change, its little little for say about 16 people. After those 16 people the rest are like this only. Sab aisaich hai. Lots of people try to do things, but where is the phayda?

-What are your problems? Thakleef kya hai?

- Kheti nahin hai. We have no land. 1 or 2 people, Muslim siddhis, have land. Earlier our forefathers used to have land but they lost it. To feed their stomachs they had to borrow money, Rs1000, Rs2000, Rs 3000... like this soon the land was taken away. So for filling our stomachs, we ended up losing our land. Therefore we have no work to do. So sometimes we go to the jungle to hunt. But then we get caught by the police and end up at the police station.

Like this many people see our photos. What phayda to us?

Abhi, at the election time they come to us. We'll do this for you, we'll do that for you. What happens then after the elections? Nothing.

How do other people behave with you? What's the rishtha?

Long silence. Baby plays quietly on William's lap. William ...

And then there's the bank. What happens there? Now there's the gaon ka President. We get him to write the arji for us. Then some money gets sanctioned. Once the money is cleared the bank manager says "Abhi detha hai." But then now becomes tomorrow, then the day after, then the day after that... parso, narso, tarso... So I ask, "when will I get it". There's no work at home, the children are starving, and now this Rs 500 that was almost in my hand is as good as gone. How many times am I going to go to and fro. So finally in anger we even tear up the slip arji and have to go off to Goa or do odd jobs in the jungle like cut trees for the government or collect honey. Anything to fill the stomach. So there's no phayda for us.

The awkward silence of the interview is short lived. Distant cries echo in the air and there seems to be some sort of a commotion. William looks up to see what's happened. The villagers are running towards the road. Hussein gets up and walks off. Saeed is concerned and asks the crew to see what's happened.

-Kya huan? What happened? Go there, naa. Dekho. Cut it.

The crew abandon their current occupations and follow the hubbub. A young Siddhi boy has been bitten by a snake. He has been carried out of the forest and is lying in the front of a hut, some villagers surround him, anxious. Most stare around helplessly, in resignation,. Sumit & Saeed push through and take stock of the situation. Saeed tells Sumit to rush him to the nearest hospital. He tells the camera crew to follow. Within minutes, the boy is carried into the back seat of the green Sumo, a young man holds on to him. Sumit starts up the car and heads out with Brown, Shai and the camera crew get into the white Sumo.

Anxious to get some relief, Sumit, guided by the young man tears through the narrow roads, Shai tails close behind. The nearest help is about 8 kms. away, and they make slow progress through the rough and gravelled road. After a seemingly endless drive, they arrive at a clinic. The squat concrete structure seems deserted, frantic knocks on the door, and another long wait till a nurse comes out. Sumit, Shai and Brown, close to hysterics implore the woman who seems unconcerned and not perturbed by the wounded boy who is sitting on the porch, dazed and in pain. The camera hand held swerves to and fro, an involved spectator. With, disinterest, the lady informs them that there is no one to tend to the boy. "No, no. Please go away. Sister is not there." The crew is horrified by her apathy. "Isn't there anything you can do? Any medicine you could give him? He's been bitten by a snake. Where are we to go?" The woman goes inside. She shuts the door. Lips are bitten in frustration.

Dismayed and disgusted, the crew discuss the plan of action. The young man accompanying them tells them that the hospital in Yellapur is the only other option. Sumit decides to take them there. The camera crew make their way back to Bhagwati village. Silent and shocked.

The church is ready for the performance. Brightly lit by the reflected sunlight, the inner glow defies the morose condition that has cast a shadow on the village. Men and women squat on the mats; in front, close to the altar and camera sits the subject, a young woman whose face bears a wretched stillness that conveys a deep and intangible sadness. The crew didn't know what was the matter with her. Whether she suffered from physical pain, or illness, or was just in shock. But she was sitting there, semi comatose, unaware of the camera or for that matter any body around her. 2 men sat next to her, their drums ready to rock and a few women sat behind her with shakers, cymbals and tambourines. Jangle gave the rolling order to Parvej. Jennifer indicated to the musicians that they could start.

Primeval drum beats fill the room. The tempo is surprisingly upbeat. Shakers and tambourines join in, and soon the crew is foot stomping. Lifting voices ring out in harmony, the simple tune is catchy, though the lyrics are not understood by the crew for they are in Kanadda, save for the forceful chorus.

Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia
Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia

As the song reaches a crescendo Jangle closes in on the woman, for whom this hymn was being recited in order to alleviate her pain. Devoid of any expression or indication of consciousness up to now, she slowly begins moving her lips.

Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia
Alleluia Alleluia Alleluia

The song ends. The priest blesses the woman, who is then led outside. The church empties and the boys begin packing up their unwieldy equipment, this time under supervision by Shai and Shaina, they attempt to lower their voices.

A little further on, away from the cluster of mud houses stands a pukka structure with a tiled roof. Through out the chaos and events of the morning, a middle-aged Siddhi man had been perched on the roof cleaning the tiles. His twinkling eyes and shrivelled up face were highlighted by long vermilion and white markings on his forehead and ears. He had been watching the on goings from his vantage point and hadn't moved. He had been busy with his work, cleaning tile after tile, picking them out of their wedges, dusting them, checking them for cracks and inserting them back in with uniform progress. Saeed had called out to him, and they had exchanged pleasantries. Now Saeed decides to interview him, in his work space.

The boom rod is extended, Shai and Hari hide behind the facade of the house and push the mike up to the roof. Saeed stands on the path, and Jangle positions himself on the opposite side of the house. Camera rolls. Jangle takes an extreme wide shot and establishes the director and Paulo, the house and the road. Then he tilts up from Saeed to Paulo, as Saeed begins the interview, in Hindi.

-So what are you doing Paolo?
-Here? I'm sweeping the tiles and levelling the roof.
-What's that tikka on your head?
-Pandurang.
-What? Oh...
-Yeah, Pandharpur. I'm a devotee there. Bhakti karte hai. It's a tikka of God.
-Accha. So your Christian and you believe in Pandharpur?
-Oi, Yes.
-Very good! And this house? Whose is it?
-It's a musalman's house.
-How long will this take?
-7 days work.
-So you repair roofs? Do you do other work also?
-Yes.
-What?
-Coolie work.

Zoom out to LS. Children laughing downstairs, sitting on the ladder.
Saeed continues..

Our 50 years of independence. Do you know about it?
About what?
About 50 years?
Yeah, 50 years. Aadhi umar ho gayi.
No not your age. 1947 the country got free. Do you know that?
Haa. Oi. (laughs embarrassed)
Have you benefited from that at all?
Yes and No. Sometimes I have to work only 4-5 days. My children are old and they're earning. By the grace of God.

He begins to giggle and mumbles something. Saeed asks... and Paolo giggles again.

"Haaa...he's saying everything in the film". That's what these women in the house down are saying.

He continues sweeping the tiles and giggles intermittently.

So now you'll clean everything and re-lay the tiles?
Haa...from here all the way till there I'll sweep sweep sweep. He'll pay me Rs 60 and if he's happy he'll pay me Rs70. He also gives me chai paani, but food I eat at home. I stay over there, near the tank. Where you were shooting earlier no...there...the house with the tape recorder.
I have 4 children. "Do mard bete, do aurat beti". 2 boys, 2 girls. After that I my wife got operated.

A host of other whispers and giggles. He exchanges some words with the women and looks at Saeed...

What? No I'm talking here. They're asking "Really?" I'm saying Oi, Yes.

He laughs. Saeed laughs with him.

You're quite a happy man Paolo.
- Oi. I'm happy.
Sukhi hai.
Yes.

The Interview ends. Shai and Hari come out of hiding. Hari scrutinises his gun mike. To him, these sorts of interviews weren't sound; all through the take while Paulo brushed the tiles, Hari had suppressed his angst, his fear that Paulo could have unknowingly damaged his mike with a deluge of dirt.

When the camera crew had rushed of to capture the snake-bitten boy, Shaina had abandoned her camera and had begun chatting with some Siddhi women. Sunita, a young slim woman in her early 30's, stunning face and charming manner and Rosu, the older, and more raucous of the 2 had warmed to her immediately and had spent almost an hour telling her about their lives

Rosu regaled Shaina with the village gossip. She spoke of the men-folk, indicated the households with drunk good-for nothing men, and told old tales of how strong women had saved their errant husbands from the impending doom that came with the bottle. Soon Jennifer had joined this little majlis. Very much at ease with these women, both Rosu and Sunita had spoken with a candid grace and spontaneity that was peppered with matronly good-humour and feminine frankness. Sunita had told them that she had worked as a maid in Goa as a young girl, where she had had to face discrimination because of her colour. On a lighter note she had recounted an experience of running into a number of tourists who had perhaps come from her ancestral land. She had spoken of the 'West Indians,' and how some boys had hugged her once, saying, "brother, brother, you come from our land!" Now, her 2 daughters worked there. When asked about India's independence day, 15th August, Rosu had promptly replied that she knew of the day as "swatantra divas." Sunita told them that both her children had been born on 15th of August. This romantic bit of trivia had gladdened both Jennifer and Shaina.

Now, they are sitting on the porch outside Sunita's hut. Rosu is telling them about their marriage ceremony. There is no hard and fast rule. We both spend. Husband's side and wife's side." "Do you wear white?" asks Jennifer. The camera crew has finished with Paulo's interview. Now they train their attention and gaze on the women. Instantly Jennifer and Shaina become aware of the camera. They become conscious and exchange uncomfortable glances. "No, never. We wear whatever colour we like. Green, red..." Shai trains the boom on them. Rosu falls silent, and the breezy ambience that had enabled this flow of conversation soon turns oppressive. For a few minutes that seem endless, all 4 women stiffen and murmur under their breaths, exchanging furtive glances. Jennifer whispers to Shaina, " They know the camera is on them. I'm myself can speak no more, we've lost the conversation." Shaina looks towards Shai and indicates that they leave or cut.

Saeed is briefed about Sunita and Rosu. Here were 2 great candidates to interview. Articulate and confident women who seem willing to talk about themselves and their lives. They decide to set up the interview in Sunita's house. The main room is devoid of furnishing, Sunita brings out a straw mat and places it on the floor. Sunita's mother-in-law, watches silently and retreats to the inside room. The crew asks Sunita to request her to be part of the interview. After some hesitation, she agrees and seats herself on the floor next to Sunita and Rosu. Behind, on a long bench sit Sunita's husband and a bunch of children who have been silenced from their play and games. On the wall is a small altar, posters of Jesus and Mary, a candle stand and some plastic flowers adorn the rudimentary wooden shelf. Saeed, Shaina & Shymole sit near the camera, out of frame. Shai stands next to them, boom rod pointed in the direction of the frame of reference that makes a beautiful, poignant tableau; 3 sari-clad Siddhi women, delightful Siddhi children and one quiet Siddhi man. They begin to roll. Saeed begins his questioning in Hindi; his voice gentle, soft.

Sunita I'll ask you the 1st question. From where have the siddhi log come to Karnataka, do you know?

What do I know. They tell us that we came during the British kaal.

British time? Why? When? Do you know?

No...no.

Is there some old person or buzurg in your family who knows when you'll came.

Our dadi used to tell us British kaal mein aaya hum log. They got them here for battle. Then they lived in the jungle and after that there were jhopdis, huts and settlements. So even we made. I also remember my dadi saying that our land and all is really there, elsewhere and that those people only will take us back. But they never did. More than that I don't know.

Do you have zameen?

No what land?

Was there ever a time when you had land?

Kya malum? Whether my dada dadi had land or not or what they did with it, I don't know.

This film I'm making I'm travelling the entire country talking with people and finding out what they feel. In the past 50 years of our independence have you had any benefits or not?

Humko kaisa phaayda? What benefits for us? Like you have come. You'll say something, others will come and say something else. But what's it got to do with us. We have to roam in the jungles only. If we get only Rs10 how will we send our children to school? How will we eke out a living? In order to send my children to school I'll have to stay at home. If we stay at home how will we eat. We have to work. If both the husband and wife wake up and go to work how will the children go to school? They'll be playing in the mud only.

Long Pause.

How many languages do you speak? I heard that you speak...Hindi...?

Oi, yes. I know Hindi.

And Marathi?

Yaa, Marathi too.

And Kannada?

Oi.

And Konkani too?

Oi.

So you speak 4 languages?

Oi.

Your children also speak 4 languages?

Oi.

So in my estimation you all are completely Bharatiya, Indian. It's a good thing to know 4 languages. Do people of other communities doosre jaath, regard you as Indian?

Long Pause. Camera pans up to altar with Jesus photos, candles etc.

Aisa kaise manega? Why should they?

Sunita begins to mumble under her breath.

No what I'm saying is do they think of you as Indian?

No!

Why not?

How will they? Here there is no "support" for us. So how will they accept us?

-Today if there's a meeting how will I go? If I go to the meeting I won't be able to go to work. So instead I'll starve to death.

Silence ensues.

No Sunita, the question I'm asking you is something else. I am saying other Indians are not Siddhi. See, you'll be Siddhis. What must be the population of Siddhis...about 15,000-20,000? In all of Karnataka?

Sunita nods her head and vaguely says Haa.

Saeed continues.

Other jaaths and communities do they consider you as Bharatiya or do they think that you're another type of person? What happens over here?

What're you saying...how are they...how are we... What you're saying I'm not able to understand.

Shaina interjects.

No. Sunita, I'll explain.

OK.

When I was talking to you earlier...

Ya?

You said that for example – like when you went to Goa to work....or ...like now, we have come over here. Now we look different, you look different. Your hair is different you had said...your face is different. Mostly in India people look like us, not like you.

Oi. Oi.

And because you look different...is what he's saying...than the rest of us; like when you go out to Belgaum or Goa, do the other's treat you like an Indian or say that you all are a different type of people. That's what he's asking.

People know that we're Indian, that we're in India. The people who don't know ask us where we're from. And if they ask us in English I say "No, English. All this we've not learnt."

You were saying...in Goa..?

People come from abroad...'lal' log and also people with hair like ours, they only speak English, nothing else.

No Sunita, I was saying, people come here and take photos and go?

Oi. That happens. They come, the 'lal' log, red coloured people, hippie log, they come.

Husband adds.

They don't come here like you. They come during work hours, to the main road where we work, take our photos from far and leave.

Rosu? May I ask you something? We're all Indian. What sort of India do you want? What should India be like?

Silence. Saeed continues...

Sunita...? Have you ever thought about this?

Rosu mumbles to Sunita. Kids are fidgety. Crows kawing...camera zooms in. Rosu's eyes are lowered. She shuts them. Saeed continues...

How should it be? Should there be Bhaichara, brotherhood? Should everyone work together...that's the question I'm asking you.

Husband answers.

Oi. Everyone should be together. We shouldn't make enemies.

Sunita, What do you think?

She looks down. Silence.

Shaina asks...

Sunita, you have 2 children. How do you know when its their birthday?

Oi. August 15. Both my kids were born on that day. That's how we remember. Otherwise we don't remember dates. But whenever 15th August comes, I know that one year is over, that they are older.

How do you know its 15th August? What happens?

-The police come here. "Jhanda ooncha..." Flag hoisting, they say. Everybody goes there, we sing in praise of India, they give chocolates to the children...that's how I remember the day.

Is there any meaning or importance to this event?

There must be. I mean, that's why they have all this.

For one it's your children's birthday. Then as Rosu was saying earlier it's swathanthra day. All of India is celebrating this day...

Saeed cuts in...

So what do you feel?

It's a nice feeling. Everyone's happy. Means what...we go together for flag hoisting...we roam around and then come back to our homes. They call that day swathanthra day so we also call it that.

Shaina asks her...

When you see the flag of the country, what do you feel?

What do you mean? It's a good day and the whole village is going to see the flag, so we also go.

Saeed asks...

What's your prayer for your children?

Baccho ke liye? Wake up in the morning, wash your face, hands & feet. I'll pray to God to give them strength and shakti. I just want to be able to bring them up.

What else do you ask for?

What else will he give me? My grandparents couldn't earn, we couldn't earn or learn, now how will we send our kids to school. How will we eke out a living. I've led such a life. I hope my kids survive. This is what I think of in my heart.

CU of hands with bangles, red nail polish.

Shaina asks husband.

So you work in Goa?

Yes. I came back 15 days ago for my holiday.

And where are your children?

They live in Panjim. Miramar, you know? Near there is Tonca. They live there. They work in homes as help.

My patroa, boss is there, so they work in his house.

They take good care of them, naa?

Oi, Oi.

How old are they?

13 and 9-10.

Both work in the house?

Yes.

Rosu do you work? Tell me...

Yaa I do. I do coolie work.

- What did you do as a child?

I was in a hostel in Yellapur.

Hostel means?

Sister...convent...over there.

So you worked there?

Saeed enters conversation.

- You are Christian?

Rosu doesn't answer.

Here some siddhis are Christian, some are Muslim, some Hindu....

Oi.

Do they intermingle with each other.

Sunita's husband replies.

Haa. Haa. Everybody meets and speaks. Their religion might be different but we are all one.

Rosu says.

If there's a fight or something, they come and help us and we help them. It's like this.

And this government? Do they do anything for you? Do they help you?

No.

How did you build this house?

I built this house myself. With my own hands. I didn't give anybody even Rs10 to help me.

You didn't take a loan?

Yes later on they gave us Rs3000.

-What is your prayer to God?

What prayer? Keep our hands strong, let me earn 2 paise, keep my children happy. That's what I wish for.

What do you feel about the future? Kuch pareshaani hai? Is it tension filled?

I just have to go about doing my work. If I think about my future daily I'll cry over it and my stomach will not fill.

Is it that you didn't get any help from the govt.?

No. I got Rs. 3000 for this house. The govt. did not give this to us, though. Our father is there no, the priest, he came here and saw the plot and gave us the Rs. 3000. Otherwise there was no monetary help. Like this 3 houses got made in the area. Each got Rs. 3000. Yeh hi hamaara ashti hai. This is only our space. There's no where else and nothing else.

Is there anything else you want to say? I would like to listen. Anything about the country, about yourselves? Sunita you tell me. Would you want to give a sandesh, ajeeb sa labz hai....strange word it is...a message to the country.

To who do we say and what are they going to help us?

Rozu mutters and gets restless. She's now obviously tired of this questioning. Sunita takes off here. Gets aggressive.

Who do we tell? Like this people come and say things to us and go. Its our life finally. Look, if today we haven't gone to work, we'll have to starve in the evening. We'll have to sleep hungry. If we go to work we'll get money. This is how it is for us. We can't say, "give us advance Rs.100/-, we'll come and work all of next week." If he (the boss), gives Rs.50/- even, a kilo of rice costs Rs.10/- then if we buy 5 kilos, what about a little salt and chilli and other things?* Then we have to go to work to pay our dues. If we manage to pay back, acchha hua. But if we don't, then tomorrow he's not going to give us any money again. He won't even give us work and he'll ask for his money back. Where do we get the money from? We don't have any?

If someone falls ill, one has to leave the sick person here and go to work. After working for 8 days, you ask for money and the boss says, no pay. You are paying back your debt. If you argue, you end up losing your job. There our security is gone, and here, aadmi bhi gayaa. The sick man dies. Aisa hota hai

Saeed asks

People of other Jaath, do they trouble the Siddhi log? Takleef deeya?

Takleef hai. We have problems. Now look, someone was sick here. Your car was here, so you took him. Otherwise he'd have to take a bus, and if he didn't get the bus, he'd die. He should get a bus no? Buses don't come on time. Only if he has money in his hands will he be taken in to the dawa khaana, otherwise, no. And if we ask the bada people to give us money, they won't give it easily.

Long silence. Zoom into CU of face.

See, you'll were here and in time, you took him in the car. If he had to take a bus, how would he go?

Silence. Zoom in. ECU of sad face.

If he takes Rs.100/- from somebody, then he has to work 8 days to repay it. So before he's even recovered, he has to go back to work. "We've given you money, we got you okay, now you have to pay us back."

If one of us dies, there is no money. Then you give 5...me 5...he 5...like this we collect money for a coffin to put him under. Other people don't help. There's nobody else to give us 'support'.

Other people don't....?

Nahin. Nahin. People of other castes do not give us any 'support'. ...support koi nahin deta. Now someone of mine is sick. There's no money. You have to ask for donations, chanda. It's like begging. You give 5, someone else gives 10, only then can he be taken to hospital.

Only siddhis give?

Ya, only Siddhis.

And other people?

Bahar ke log, don't give anything.

Why don't they give?

Why should they give us? They say, "let them die. What do we care?" That's what they say.

Anyway, see if you have pity on us, and say, "OK, they are poor people," and give us Rs.5/- today, with that out stomachs will be full today. But then tomorrow, what will we do? We have to think of tomorrow also, no?

Now see we go to work at the stone quarry. The rocks are so high, and here we are down, breaking stones. If from the top a stone falls and kills someone, then no one would care less. The seth will say, "he's dead, what can we do? Is the job done or no?" They are huge rocks. If one rock falls on you, you're finished there only. This is how it is.

Pan left to old lady. Hiding her head, looking down, resting her head on her knee.

Now see, like this boy went to the jungle to cut trees. There the snake bit him. Now you happened to come and you managed to save him. Otherwise what would he do?

Long silence. CU of Sunita. Shaina asks...

- Rosu, what do you feel...?

Sunita bursts in again.

Now look if I had some extra money, I could send my children for some schooling. If there is not enough for the stomach only, what can I do?

Saeed asks...

Your kids have no schooling?

Obviously not. They have absolutely no schooling.

Because you have to work...? (soft voice, sheepish ...)

Yes we have to work. People come here because they need servants to wash dishes at home, in Goa and all...so both my children have gone there.

Shaina

So how much do they earn?

How much will they earn? One gets Rs 200/- Other gets 150 per month* food water and clothes are given to then.

Silence

If I had my own money, wouldn't I want to send my children to school?

So what do you want for your children?

If I had money I would send my children to school *

Okay, so you'll educate them well...after that, what else?

See, if I educate them, they'll study and might be able to earn a living at least, no? They could perhaps become a teacher or a master, somehow make a decent living. See, how I had to cry on my parents shoulders, my children will also have to cry on my shoulders* Now look, if we want to take a bus, we have to ask others, "where is this bus going?" They say, "you haven't been to school or what?" If our parents didn't learn, then how will we learn? (Pause). Such are our difficulties here.

Long pause. Silence. Zoom into her eyes, welling up with tears.

So you think your halaat is like this because you haven't had education or learning?

Yes of course. With education only can one come up in front, go ahead. Now look he (husband) goes to Goa to work, he earns Rs. 50/- but with that he has to feed himself first. If he does that then there is nothing for us. He needs to send us money at the end of the month. Here I'll be left saying, "my husband is away earning, but he's sending no money". And there are bills to pay here. So in the end, I too have to go to work. Then my children are at home, they play all day in the mud, who'll send them to school? If they go to school, they are told, "hey, your clothes are filthy, move aside, baju ho.

Your children's friends? Are they of other jaats too?

Yes, Oi.

But your kids don't go to school, right?

Yes, but they all come to play...those people from up there...long hair, straight hair...form there, where you went to have tea, no? Their children come to play. Holidays are on, now. So, those kids too have no school.

They're not Siddhis?

No no, they are not Siddhis, the Siddhis are only on this road.

Husband says...

The people near the tea stall are others.

Shymole.

Have you been to Bangalore?

No.

Goa?

Yes, I've been to Goa.

So there, when you see Bade log, with big cars and big money, do you feel angry?

Angry? Why should we be angry? Its their fortune. Their parents have earned, so they are well off. By getting angry with them, are we going to get anywhere? We can't afford to shout and get angry with them. They are big people. they'll just put us in jail. "You've come down from the hills, ghaati log, they say to us.

Silence

So you're not angry?

No I'm not. Its our fate. This is what god has given us. Yeh hamaara takdeer hai. Now, you'll roam in cars. If we question as to why you are a bada seth, you'd probably hit me and put me inside, or probably turn around and tell me, "Hey, 'Negro' log, why have you come here, there are so many of your people else where, with big governments there. Why are you here?" We don't know anything about all this, we will say. The people who look like us, who come from abroad, they speak English. They say "English?" We say "No English". They go away.

They call you 'Negro'?

Yes they call us Negroes.

Who?

There in Goa, they call us 'Negro'. Over here they call us Siddhi log. Half of them in Goa call us Siddhi log, the other half call us 'East Indian'.

How do you feel when they...?

They say it now. If our jaat is only that, then if they call us Negro, what are we to say, we work for them. We go into their houses; we have to obey their rules. Whatever they say, we have to shut up and listen.

You feel bad?

Of course, I feel bad! It hurts in the heart. Jaan churchurra hota hai. Where have we come from? I don't know anything. It hurts that we're so helpless sometimes.

Zoom into her eyes. ECU. Tears well up.

Has it ever come to your mind that you could all find a way to go back? Have you ever thought about this?

I might have thought about this, but some one has to take us, no?
But back where?
Where will we go? Our dada-dadi nana nani were here. They couldn't go back.

ECU silence. Tears.

Shymole...

Does this not feel like your own country?
Of course, now, this is our country only.
Its been 50 years of our independence. Have there been any benefits for you?
We need something to get us 'support' no? Now look, if I did have some land, I would some 'support' at least.
We have to feed our kids, give them clothes, send them to school...how do we do all that?

Long pause.

Now look. 12 years I worked in Goa. I told my seth, my house is breaking down, what not I told him. He gave me an advance of Rs. 5000/- Then to re-pay that, I had to work 4 years. I bought some ladi-cement, made these walls a little stronger, did this and that. No one else supports us. Now I've worked that loan off and come back.

4 years?

Yes, 4 years.

For Rs. 5000/-

Yes, for Rs. 5000/- They gave me Rs. 200/- and food and clothes while I was there. Now if we go to Goa now and say, "baba there's a wedding", they'll give us Rs.10,000/- Then we will have to work it off for years. To survive here we have to depend on Goa.

When people call you Siddhi. You don't feel bad?

Feel bad? But what can we do. Our jaat is only like that. They call us this name, so they should understand na?

Is Siddhi a race or a caste?

Who knows? You ask me, "what are you?" I'll say, "we are Christian". Then they'll say, if you're Christian, then how come your hair is like this. Now, what am I to do about my hair? God has given this to us. Allah, Bhagwan. Where are our people, we don't know.

Long pause. Saeed's voice, tight. Uncomfortable.

Do people make fun of you?

Oi, they make fun of us.

Here? In Karnataka?

Oi, Yes, here too. Now you see people passing by the highway and they're told "People like that live here" (She screws up her face)

Where did these people come from? How is their hair like that? Why aren't they fair? They see us and ask questions like this.

Silence cuts the heavy air. The camera pans right to Shai holding the boom and zooms in. She stares angrily into camera, her eyes moist. Then looks away.

Now at least as I answer you, as I tell you we're hungry, we're dying, we're starving I have hope that there will be some 'support', some improvement. The older generation here they will tell you off directly. "What difference. They'll come. They'll go. Forget it. Why bother with them." And they go inside, like she (points to old mother) was going away inside. We made her stay and sit down for the interview.

-cut it.

The old lady gets up from the mat and heads inside. The children run outside, Sunita and Rosu remain seated on the mat. The camera crew packs up and leaves, Saeed and Shymole wait outside. Sumit, Shai, Shaina and Jennifer remain in the room, rooted, emotionally exhausted. Shai & Shaina don't know how to deal with this situation. It had never happened to them before. Here was a woman, whose house they had appropriated, whose sensibilities they had exploited.

How could they up and leave, now that their work was done? Guilt, laced with a pragmatic and utilitarian reading of the situation, prompts Jennifer to suggest, with embarrassment, some monetary compensation for Sunita. Mortified, Shai and Shaina rush out, for they want nothing to do with this offensive any more. Jennifer, too can't bring herself to present the money. Eventually, Sumit, who hadn't been present for the interview, is made to hand Sunita Rs. 200/.

As the impact of their hours spent at the Siddhi village of Bhagwati sunk in, Shai and Shaina, assaulted by contradictions and the inexplicable equivocalness of their mission, that exposed apart from all-important ethical and moral issues, their naiveté, silently negotiated their roles in the creation and capturing of all they had experienced. Was this what they had been looking forward to? A chance to live out rural India, to experience the duality of hope and fatalism of the poor Indian, to understand it's complexity with sensitivity and arrive at some tangible truth about the land and it's people, the via- medium being a video camera and an unwieldy crew. That was foolhardy, but not entirely unimaginable. Most believed that they could make a difference. Yet, confronted with the brutality of truth, their personalities. What was happening with these young women, fresh and romantic as they were, said more about their and less about the crew and the documentary in the making. Bhagwati village had brought to the fore, all the issues that had troubled these women since the advent of their journey.

Why were they such a big crew? How could they justify the use of reflectors, cutters and skimmers in documenting village life and customs? What good would that do for the villagers, if their situation is what they had set out to chronicle? Hussein's sahib's anger reflected the futility of their endeavour. He had clumped the outsiders, into one huge gang of worthless do-gooders. Social workers, NGO's ethnologists, anthropologists, filmmakers, he had meant them all. One lot of virtuous well meaning educated bleeding heart intelligentsia. 'Us'. With their correct issues of colour, gender, equality, right and race. They had badgered Sunita for almost an hour, getting her to repeat what she had candidly revealed in an off-camera conversation; that people discriminated against them on the basis of their colour. Heavy loaded questions had been launched her way, till she was confused and cornered; yet racial discrimination had remained the least of her immediate concerns, a full stomach, hand to mouth, and 'support' for a marginally better life that could afford her children a basic education seemed her sole desire, one that would bring empowerment and dignity to her family. Destined to her meagre existence, she still had hope, for otherwise she would not have spoken at length to them and unlike Hussein Sahib and poor other elders of the village whose cynicism and bitterness justified the way things were and bore testament to the reality that nothing really changed, for theirs were eyes that had once too seen hope, that had perhaps once held on to the belief that 'Us' could bring positive change for 'Them'.

Shai and Shaina were aware that they had overreacted. They knew that they were being rather harsh on themselves and their crewmembers, for most did their assigned jobs to the best of their abilities and thought of little else. They knew that their director was one of the most respected names in the field and that his sensitivity and heart was large. Yet, they had been appalled by the sequence of events. Maybe, they would harden. As time would pass, they would probably become used to what the senior and more studied members of the crew regarded as their rightful duty, part of their jobs and nothing more and they would be able to sever their minds from their tasks. But could the 2 be separated? Could they go about their jobs, when their idealism and sensibilities did not permit them to? Maturity and work ethics notwithstanding, they realised that the answer was unequivocal. This kind of filmmaking was either for them or not. And right now, in week 2 of their journey, they perhaps wanted nothing more to do with it. Yet, they were young and romantic. They too had hope. And believed they could fight for change.

Episode 4

That evening, 2 Sumos, accompanied by Chandresh headed off into the hills, to Mungod. A bitter discussion at lunchtime had called for a serious rethinking into the manner of shooting. The unit was going to shed some weight, so that less could be thrown around the country side. Barkat, Jennifer, KG and Ayub 1 had gone off to Hubli, back on the worldbankroad to make a new purchase, for Barkat had reasoned that a powerful mirror was all he needed to reflect light. With the impending onset of the monsoons, it was decided that the cutter stands and reflectors that took up all the carrier space were to be sent back to Bombay at the earliest possible date.

Chandresh took the unit up a scenic incline, deep into the hills of Uttara Kannada. He guided them to a vantage point from where the unit took shots of the thick wooded forests below and the Mungod falls, the lesser known sister of the famous Jog falls. Then he took them deep into the forest, where a single unit Siddhi family, one of the few who owned some land, lived in complete isolation from the rest of the hamlets and villages.

Saeed did not want to conduct interviews. They had had enough for one day. He told Chandresh that they were interested in taking ambient shots of the family at work. The unit was led to the back of the house, where on a small tract of land, stood a couple of Supari and coconut trees. The camera was mounted on a small tripod. Two young Siddhi boys were made to climb the trees. Jangle turned his panning rod and took some wonderful low angle shots of the boys as they scaled up the trees, their taut muscular legs locking into cut grooves, ascending with ease and agility. They waited at the top of the tree, as Jangle turned his lens a full 360 degrees. Then they plucked coconuts and threw them down and then pretended to tap toddy. Jangle cut. The men climbed down.

Inside the courtyard of the hut, was an old woman. She had a big red tikka on her forehead. Spying a dusty chakki in one corner, they requested her to grind some wheat. The stone grinder was cleaned. Out of a bag came a handful of wheat. The grinder hadn't been used in months. Now the woman sat in the center of the yard, and attempted to turn the grinder, round and round, round and round, making for posterity, a very pretty picture of rural India.

Lastly, the 2 able coconut tree climbers were positioned, one near a haystack, the other on top of the thatched roof. Saeed stood behind the camera and yelled "action!" One of the boys lifted a huge mound of hay on his shoulders and walked towards the ladder. But Jangle's pan was jerky. So they cut and requested him to do it again. Action And again. Action. And again. Finally, the shot was Ok'd, the boy climbed up the ladder and half-heartedly helped the other boy superficially rearranged the hay, pretending to re-thatch the roof that didn't need a fresh layer. Saeed swept his hand in the air and yelled 'cut' with the élan and experience of the veteran director he was. He turned to the crew. 'Pack up.' The Siddhi boys were left standing on the roof. The crew headed back to the cars.

Shai and Shaina had been silent spectators to this madness. Were their fellow team-mates really this insensitive? Had they forgotten the morning's experience? Or had it not bothered them in the least? No longer able to contain herself, Shaina went up to Saeed. "I can't believe you really did that. You rolled, actioned and re-took as if you were shooting an ad film. You made them perform. And then you said cut, and walked off. Why?"

After a moment of contemplative silence, Saeed replied, though not with answers to her questions. "But I said thank you."