

Interim Narrative Report

A project around women and pottery that one had long wished to do; a research based film that would have its own pace of work; a journey from the far northeast to the remote west of the country—all this was a reality now on which one had to embark. It was difficult to make a beginning. It is important to make note of the troubleshooting en route to arrive at the experience as a whole.

Somehow it seemed better to begin at home and so it began with the first schedule of Bhopal with Shampa. The subject being personal I chose to work with a junior cameraperson, who I also happened to know from before. It seemed alright to go in for a sense of comfort and familiarity to begin with. We discussed things and tried a schedule of four days with Shampa and to my dismay I realized things were not working out. The film in fact seemed to be pulled apart in two different directions. There was a very open interaction and feed back on each day's footage yet things did not seem to work. Things in fact worsened. There was a certain dissatisfaction on my part that mounted with each passing day and it seemed best to stop work and contemplate what it had been thus far.

It was a good decision. Viewing the material again I realized the mistake that had been on my part. The subject was, apart from being personal, very specialized, in being concerned with a whole different world of the traditional craftsman/artists that called for some prior experience of working with them. It therefore was frustrating to engage with someone who had no entry into the ethos and dynamics of the theme. Much time was spent in elaborating upon inanities and many magic moments lost in the process. Considering all these issues I was compelled to look for someone else as the cameraperson for the film and was lucky to find R.V.Ramani who has done a lot of work in and around the arts. I looked at some of his work that was centered round the arts and the crafts and felt the kind of ease-with-the-subject I was looking for. It seemed to relate to the images I had in mind and seemed possible to further probe the subject in its many details.

Again the program had to change a couple of times before one could actually make those trips. Initially it was the big trouble in Manipur that just about coincided with the first schedule planned. In addition to it we were here dealing with an aged woman who wasn't really keeping well. And being a film on a potter it made most sense to go and meet her when she was in the best possible shape to work.

Considering all this it seemed wiser to make the Kutchh trip before Manipur, since things seemed more plausible at this end.

It was a complicated and far away route to begin with and took us quite a while to reach. But the advantage with the longer route is that you actually feel the journey so also observe the landscape changing from a green to a colourless desert of the remote west bordering the Rann of Kutchh.

Work began from the very next day because there is no rest in the potter's house and everyone finds occupation in some or the other way. I knew Sara had many more responsibilities on her head than the pottery related activities but still there was so much that was different from the last visit I had made to their house. It was interesting to note that in an individual based project like this how unreliable it can be to rely on the reconnaissance experience. For instance this time around it so happened that the two daughters-in law were pregnant, all the three sons out of the village for work, a couple of children falling sick and finally Sara not feeling too well either. These were the circumstances that one could not know before coming here. All this could not be predicted because one had a very contrasting picture in mind of the previous trip. Moreover it is often very difficult to have a clear dialogue with these folk artistes on the phone from far. Its difficult to ask questions and more and more confusing to try explaining things to them on the wire.

So it turned out that one had to be prepared for surprises, accommodate the changes in the script and go on from one day to the other as it came. It was a difficult but valuable lesson to learn while you went on building the film that kept changing with each passing day. However through all this the refrain remained unchanged-- to portray and observe the woman and the artist as and where she lived and worked. So what changed actually were the circumstances; what got modified were the expectations.

However we did get some things as part of this new scenario that we might have missed otherwise. And that is the magic of non-fiction—the unplanned, the unpredictable just slipping in. What is more important than making the film as one planned, is to be ready to respond to the new and being spontaneous to chronicle them as they unfold. I am glad we were able to do that many times in the entire shoot.

Manipur was better in a way because one had no prior experience to stand by. But then unknown details have their own anxieties.

It was now the other end in the north-east almost bordering Burma. Moreover owing to the most unfortunate demise of Ramani's father we had to however cancel the first trip and return from Kolkata once. I was already there when we heard the sad news. It was a difficult moment. Ramani talked from Mumbai and suggested taking someone else from Kolkata. Everything had been fixed in Manipur, all the people in Neelmani's family had made arrangements for things, some had taken leave and so on. It was difficult to take quick decisions. Shampa too incidentally had had a lot of trouble in getting leave for that particular duration of time. She had almost come after a lot of opposition at the IGRMS where she works. If we went back it seemed difficult now as to when we would be able to make it next. In the middle of all this I was supposed to be talking to a couple of people in Kolkata for camerawork but then it just seemed not right to go ahead at such a point. It was finally decided to postpone the trip a little further and go back for the while. Things did not seem to be going the right way.

In the middle of all this something curious happened that I must mention as an aside. In total exhaustion after all this running around and worrying over things,


I and Shampa were passing a wayside fortuneteller with a parrot on our way, sitting under a Shirish tree on the pavement. Suddenly Shampa looked at the parrot and asked the man what it did. He pointed to a pile of envelopes on the side from which the bird, he said, picked one out for your name. 'What is your name' He asked and after hearing Shampa, got the parrot out. It came took the gram seed from his hand, singled out an envelope and went back to his blue cage. The man read," It's a bad time for you. Whatever you set out for will not be accomplished ...but worry not, have patience coz its going to pass too....and so on. I was intrigued. My name is Rajula Shah I said. Out came the Tota again and yet another envelope...but what he read was exactly the same.. it's a bad time...and so on. I asked him how many copies of the same card were there and he said there were two of each! The poor fellow got a bit nervous at what seemed unfair to his two clients in a row and wanted to try again asking me 'What is your 'real' name?'

The next trip was then planned after one and a half weeks, all the tickets cancelled and rebooked, one whole hectic day of running around and a lot of strain on the budget. Finally the next trip that got fixed keeping in mind everybody's time table, turned out to be the time of Holi. This was also one of the difficult aspects of this particular project that there were so many individuals involved whose dates had to be matched and considered that often it kept delaying plans. It so happened in the second planning now that somehow we were getting less time in the schedule. We could not slip in a couple of buffer days as earlier.

Again the flights to Manipur were tricky, got late, postponed and also cancelled without much notice or option. As luck would have it ours had to get cancelled that same day and we lost a whole day in bargain. The bad times had not ended after all!

However once we reached Imphal, we were met with Neelmani's daughters Revika and Bala who had come to pick us up all the way from the village, and after meeting Neelmani back home, all troubles seemed to evaporate. The happiness on her face was too much to merit any complains. We were very worried about how well she was keeping and a little more skeptical about things after the Kutchh experience. But from the next day itself it was amazing to see her up and about on her feet since early morning hours. We had been hearing of her ill health for a while now, but she seemed to be in good cheers. She said she was feeling better after seeing us. But of course we could see it was her work.

Most of the things were so much in contrast with the desert front back in Kutchh that it took us a while to adjust. For instance the day began so early here. But once the routine was set it was perfect. There were a couple of things that went wrong here too. There was Holi that ensured a lot of noise in the neighbourhood and trouble on the road, since there were gangs of children at every ten meters that stopped you and asked for toll! But it was also a lot of fun. There is so little one knows about this part of the country and things have been so troubled in the past that it was almost a relief to witness what looked like 'normal' life.


(RAJULA SHAH)