

Bridging the Cultural Gap

An American student films his experiences in India

By **MOHAN RAMAKRISHNA**

"An Explorer's Journal," is a cross-cultural documentary that builds a bridge between India and a classroom of American students. Written, edited and directed by Paul Ginocchio, it tells his real-life experiences as a college student during his trip to India. Paul uses his journal from India to narrate his feelings of fear and fascination, share stories of friendship, poverty and everyday life. He shows an understanding of the people, their beliefs and cultures and through this, the universality of all cultures and races.

"The purpose of the video," Paul says "is to create a media that incorporates messages that will revolutionize the ideas of human education. I want to share with people. Build a community. I want to help open other humans up to the gifts that reside in their own souls."

Ginocchio grew up in a white upper middle-class neighborhood in Walnut Creek, California, devoid of any exposure to other cultures or poverty. Cultural awareness and diversity were not integrated in the school curriculum. This lack of exposure, coupled with a longing to explore the world led him to India along with a group of 20 others led by his college professor, Bill Van Groenou. Van Groenou had a profound impact on Paul's education, his views on people and cultures and the oneness of all humanity. He introduced Ginocchio to the lives and works of people like J. Krishnamurti, Jean Gebser, and Carl Jung. His teachings and classroom discussions inspired Paul to explore life around the globe and himself.

"I had no knowledge of India, never even considered traveling there, but, I felt this strong urge to investigate." Before leaving for India, he borrowed a video camera from California State University, Hayward. He joined a group of 20 other strangers to experience a vastly

different reality. He was one of the youngest members of the group led by Van Groenou. The tour itinerary included the cities of Bombay, Udaipur, Jaipur, Delhi, Agra, Khajuraho and Varanasi.

"On arriving in Bombay, the bus ride through the city caught me unawares; I saw a drastically different world than I had ever known." No sooner had he walked out of the bus and set up his camera and tripod than a

crowd had swarmed around him. He was fearful of his own safety as well as his belongings. "Once I started to make eye contact with the growing mass of people, the fear turned into a comfortable fascination. I felt warmth and simple curiosity. I soon realized that my fear was caused by my own uncertainty." His attention was drawn to a snake charmer with a basket holding a cobra inside-he began filming his trip!

The poverty was intense. "I was intimidated; I found myself swinging between empathy and frustration." Yet, the cheerful countenance of young boys and girls waving and yelling "hello", the warmth and spirit of the people who have so little, the connection between suffering and inner beauty and the association of spirituality with the daily lives of the people, left Ginocchio surprised and in awe. "The warmth of the people there made him curious about inner wealth. "The notion that happiness is associated with prosperity and material comforts was disproved by what I had seen," says Ginocchio.

One of the stories in the video tells of the generosity and friendship of a young village boy. "When I met him, I was very skeptical about the reason for his friendliness. He begged me to visit his village. I thought that he simply

wanted some money from me.” However when Ginocchio visited his village, the boy presented him with a wooden elephant obtained from his uncle’s gift shop. When Ginocchio tried to hand him some money, the boy refused. “He was almost offended and asked me to remember him instead!” Ginocchio saw the everyday life in an Indian village. He could see the village folks’ pride and happiness in their everyday lives. “I unknowingly ended up shooting the most valuable footage for ‘An Explorer’s Journal.’”

This story, vividly portrayed in the video, illustrates that illiteracy, poverty and economic backwardness do not necessarily reflect one’s character and personality. It is easy to assume that the prevalent social and economic conditions would force one to exhibit dishonesty, greed, mistrust, and theft; but it takes great courage and will power to demonstrate acts of friendship, generosity, and trust.

The last leg of the journey took Ginocchio to Varanasi. On an early morning boat ride up the Ganga river, he learned that the river is very holy to the Hindus, that human dead bodies are burned and the ashes spread on the river, consummating the tradition and the belief that the cycle of death and rebirth will end and the soul will rejoice in heaven.

The trip culminated with the celebration of the festival Holi, commemorating the onset of spring. Ginocchio participated in the colorful ritual of spraying and decorating people’s faces and clothes with colored dyes and paints. Holi fosters friendships among people and welcomes the new season. The colored faces and clothes implored Paul to believe that he belonged to a new tribewhere the differences in human races were smeared with a new set of colors, signifying the oneness of humanity.

It was by sheer accident that Ginocchio brought Holi to the American classroom. Towards the end of the trip, a young boy tried to sell him Holi colors in Varanasi. His backpack being too full, Paul refused. The boy began to cry. Paul bought some of his wares.

Paul had no idea that he would be sharing his experiences with students in an American classroom. He filmed a classroom session in a school in Seattle where his mother teaches. The students watched Paul’s video with keen interest; they were amused and inspired by some of the Stories. It seemed like a bridge was being built between the Indian experience and the American students, a set of children learning about others halfway around the world.

Making “An Explorer’s Journal” was not an easy task. It took Ginocchio almost three years to shape the documentary into its present form. A lack of support coupled with no concrete direction almost axed the project. “I wrote for grants, received none, and ended up spending my entire savings account to complete “An Explorer’s Journal.” It won the Third Prize for Creative Excellence at the

U.S. International Film and Video Festival, 1998. “An Explorer’s Journal” has also been telecast on PBS stations.

Now his challenge is to integrate the video into schools. He believes that there are valuable messages for all in it. “Can we develop humanitarians in the classroom? Perhaps the children of tomorrow will fear each other less and understand one another on a new level.” He has also designed a web-site and study guide for a complete interactive educational experience (<http://www.augustprod.com>).

Ginocchio continues his quest for human connection and inner wealth. He is currently researching Australian aborigines for the second production of “An Explorer’s Journal” educational documentary series.