

**AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGOT STAGE OF
WGBH RADIO, BOSTON in 1989 ON RECORDING
"GAMV: LIFE IN AN INDIAN VILLAGE"**

Margot Stage (MS): Why are you so attracted to India?

Julian Crandall Hollick (JCH): Certainly not family ties. This isn't another British attempt to relive the Raj. I went precisely because I knew nothing about the place and because I had reported from almost every other Asian country; it was a bit embarrassing not to have been to India.

MS: But you've kept on going back. Why?

JCH: Yes, I've often wondered about that one too. India is a shock to the senses. And I think it's a bit like malaria. It gets into your blood. So every few months you get this incredible thirst to go back and get a good dose of the place. Once it's in the blood I don't think you can ever get rid of it; so I suppose that means I'm condemned to spend the rest of my life going there once or twice a year.

And to be quite honest, why not? It's a wonderful experience.

MS: Yea, but why?

JCH: I think because India forces one to come face to face with oneself. You can't pretend in India. Life is somehow lived much more in the raw, on the edge of survival and disaster. The smells and the sounds and the sights are much more acute; you can never escape them. You have to come to terms with them and this heightens both the senses and one's understanding of self and of others.

MS: What made you decide to go and live in an Indian village?

JCH: Oh, many reasons: one trouble with documentaries is that they tend to deal with themes but not with people. And in the Third World this problem is doubly bad because we already have an inbuilt tendency to reduce people in those countries to cardboard clichés. They're always 'Them' and never 'Us'.

So, we thought that if we could find a suitable focus we could develop a lot of these abstract themes about development but bring them to life.

MS: You say 'We'. Who is the 'We'?

JCH: Quite a lot of people. My wife Martine who takes photographs and helps us males gain some sort of acceptance with many of the women in the village; there's Dean Cappello, my fellow producer and engineer who keeps me on the straight and narrow; and then there's our Indian crew who've worked with us for four years now.

Rana and Raja interpret for us. For this trip we took a female interpreter -Himani- along with us. And then we always travel with our driver Tivari, who basically disapproves of us, I think, because we're not good Hindus and eat meat and fish. But without Tivari and his car we're basically helpless.

The one trouble with this crew is that they all snore at night. You'll hear that in one program. And they have to watch their Sunday morning television soap opera or listen to cricket on the radio. It's absolutely pointless to try and schedule any work when either of those is on; they get mysterious illnesses or the car won't work.

But they do tolerate me so I guess it works both ways.

MS: Well, what did you learn from living in this village?

JCH: Oh many things. That I snore. Until they recorded it I thought it was a lie: Also, that if you don't have boiled water the body soon learns to adapt and survive.

But more importantly I think we learnt the obvious, that most of our ideas about the Third World and, in particular, about villages, are just clichés based on ignorance, on condescension and on sheer laziness.

MS: What do you mean specifically?

JCH: You see, we usually make the mistake of thinking that just because someone is less materially developed than we are that also means they're less developed spiritually, culturally or socially. That, if you'll pardon the expression, is 'balls'.

There are so many cliches about India that simply can't stand up when you actually go beneath the surface. I'll give you one very common one:

Women are supposed to be treated very badly in India, somewhere on a par with cattle. Virtual slaves, never allowed out of the home.

This village is in one of the most conservative and traditional regions in all of India. Women eat after their men; girls are engaged to be married at five or six or eight; and many men sincerely believe that a woman is literally dead if she is not married.

OK? In these four programs you'll hear men and women vehemently defend these beliefs. But you'll also hear these same men and women treat each other with affection and consideration.

For example, in program three, Divas and Chandai, our hosts in the village, argue about why Chandai, the mother, turns a blind eye and lets her daughters play hooky from school. Chandai says girls don't need schooling because they get married and move away while they're still teenagers. Divas agrees and he wants to marry his eldest daughter off before she's thirteen because that's the way these things are done in Jitvapur.

So they argue right in front of our microphones, totally unselfconsciously. And what you realize is the tremendous warmth and affection between these two people who are supposed to be master and servant. All our stereotypes are literally stood on their heads. These people, like people everywhere, live quite happily with their contradictions.

That's just one example. But there are many, many more.

These people in Jitvapur may never travel outside their region, never earn more than a few hundred dollars a year. But they possess a very rich oral culture, they form a community, they have roots and identity, and they have great dignity.

The other point is that more than half the world still live in villages. This particular village happens to be in India. But the broad patterns and rhythms of village life are common across Asia, Africa and Latin America, even most of Europe. Anyone who's ever lived in a village will immediately recognize what's going on here.

MS: Was it physically difficult to make these programs?

JCH: Yes and no. Jitvapur is a hell of a place to get to. 120 miles but it takes 6 hours by car. And we went there just after terrible floods that had killed thirty people and ruined the rice crop.

Vegetables and fruit were very scarce. But at least the chickens were good: Our cook used to ask us which chicken we wanted to eat and then go out and kill it for dinner.

Electricity was spasmodic. We slept part of the time in the village itself. We brought bed rolls and mosquito nets and paraffin lamps from Calcutta.

MS: What was the reaction of the villagers? Did they accept you?

JCH: We had been there once before and asked them if we could come and live with them to make a program. I think they probably thought we were mad. But by and large they seemed to think it was quite amusing to see us heading out with all our equipment to record them working or washing or eating. When you think about it like that it is pretty strange.

MS: Tell us a little bit about the village: how many people? What's it look like?

JCH: There are about 600 hundred families; probably three-four thousand people. Thirteen castes, with Brahmins and Kyastras owning most of the land. There are Untouchables and Muslims. Jitvapur's about five miles outside the local market town of Madhubani.

It's basically very green and flat. There's one single-track road that runs right through the village from Madhubani.

JCH: Most families live in single room bamboo and mud huts, spotlessly clean by the way, grouped round a courtyard. Castes tend to live together in clusters. The clusters are connected by mud paths and they're separated by mango groves and palm trees. Day time temperatures around 85 and nighttime down to 50. And the village's dotted with ponds.

I found it a very beautiful place. I hope we can go back in a few years time and see how things have changed. It'll be good to see everyone again.

"More than half of Mankind live in villages, villages of all shapes and sizes, villages that have sprung up within cities, villages with metalled roads and forests of TV antennas, and villages that can only be reached during the dry season down mud tracks, and which are all but invisible to the naked eye.

No two villages are alike; in some class and caste conflicts simmer, in others they're non-existent; some villages are rich and mechanized; others live in another age; in some villages, there is comparative equality between men and women; in others the old hierarchies dominate; some villages are open to change; others fear it like the plague.

Jitvapur is a small village in Bihar, in the North of India just below Nepal. 600 families live in Jitvapur, a total population between three and four thousand. Nobody's quite sure. There are thirteen different castes in the village. Upper Castes, Brahmins and Kyastras make up nearly half the village; the rest are Harijans and other lower castes. In one corner of the village live several hundred Muslims. Jitvapur is also five miles outside the local market town of Madhubani. The area is famous all over India and beyond for its distinctive Mithila wall paintings.

In many ways, Jitvapur is very traditional: Bihar is backward and change has come slowly and belatedly, and Madhubani is cut off from the developed part of Bihar. There's just one rail link and one road to the South; both are useless during the monsoon. In one sense Jitvapur's obviously unique; but in another it's a metaphor, not just for rural India but for all the villages in Asia, Africa and Latin America where the majority of the world's population lives, often in poverty and hunger, but also with a furious joy and appetite for survival.

In November 1987, Julian Crandall Hollick, his wife Martine and Dean Cappello, traveled to Jitvapur with Rana Behal, Raja Chatterjee and Himani Kapila, in an old Ambassador car driven by Bijoy Tivari, driver *sans pareil*, and lived on the village for several weeks. These recordings were made digitally using a Sony Digital microprocessor and portable Beta video recorder, with Neumann JKMR 81 and stereo RMS190 microphones.

In the first program, the listener meets Divas and Chandai and eats fried pumpkin leaves for breakfast; we find out why the village road is named after Ramji Jha's father, and meet three ladies of the Night who paint tattoos on their customers. In the second hour, we meet two of the Untouchables - Binda Devi and her son Rodi Paswan and find out if the caste barriers have softened; We talk with an Upper Caste farmer and an Untouchable sharecropper as they plough their fields, and visit the nearby village of Raiyham where a group of thieves are trying to go straight by learning to weave carpets.

In many respects Jitvapur is typical of all of rural India, where 600 million people, three quarters of the country's population, still live. But change has come slowly to this corner of India. Communications with the rest of the state and the rest of the country are poor, just one road and one rail track, and they're frequently cut by flooding after the monsoon rains.

At the time these recordings were made, Jitvapur and all of Northern Bihar had experienced its worst flooding for thirty years; deforestation in the Himalayas in Nepal, just 30 miles north, meant that the monsoon rains ran unchecked off into Bihar. The increased water had caused the rivers to burst their banks; crops, cattle, homes had been swept away, much of the area was under several feet of water for more than a month; over 300 people had died. It's not surprising that villagers often feel deeply fatalistic about life and nature.

Yet change is coming to Jitvapur in fits and starts. Education opens the door to jobs that may take sons away from the village, threatening its social stability. Women are starting to find work outside the home. But old attitudes and customs die hard and are fighting a tenacious rearguard action. In the third program we learn how to make cow dung patties for the cooking fire and visit the local tavern. We attend the primary school, where we talk with a teenager about leaving the village and discover why Chandai thinks school is unimportant for her two daughters.

Though the pace of change is accelerating in Jitvapur, the village is still very conservative and traditional. Progress is not an idea that comes naturally or automatically to many in the village. The Muslim weavers, for example, weave cloth and carpets on pedal-powered looms for just 60 cents a day, but would never dream of

investing in electrical looms to make a better living. That would mean risk-taking and insecurity, and the weavers find this unsettling.

And many villagers still have very traditional attitudes towards women. It's normal for children to be married off at seven or eight years old; some in the village are still in favor of *Sati*, the custom where a widow throws herself on her husband's funeral pyre so that she may end her life with his. Those who survive as widows are usually ostracized by family and society and treated as lower than the animals. In the final program we discover why Vijay the Brahmin priest thinks the old order is still the best. We meet two women widowed when they were only thirteen years old and visit the project that's trying to help them earn their own living, recover their self respect, and fight for the right to rejoin society.

Editor's note: we've often talked about going back to Jitvapuri since, but somehow it's never quite worked out. Each of us went their own way and developed his or her own career. If we went back today, maybe the village would be physically unrecognizable. But somehow I suspect much would have remained the same.