

9.11.01 Tuesday-

We piled out of the Sumo (IC, Ranjan, Ranjeet, PD, Panaki, Nilanjan and the Driver) at a Mosque in a tiny Muslim village. I had been here a year before to scout and I took some pictures. The children there had gathered around and giggled. I thought that it was just the sight of a White man in this village so remote that it didn't appear to have electricity that excited them. Evidently they thought that I looked like South African cricket captain that was all the hype due to accusations of his throwing games. In cricket-mad India, they didn't care about the man's ethics, just that the legend that was on all the media was here. IC told them that I was a filmmaker from America, not a cricket player and they immediately lost interest. I was just an errant tourist. Ho hum.

This Mosque has a wonderful rural setting with a cattle cart laying in the front. I now recognize one or two powerlines that must provide power to the most annoying of all lights, the phosphorous tube that seems to be ten times brighter in India than anywhere else. They are used in equal measure by the bathroom vanity as they are on posts to light entire streets. The colors painted on the side of the Mosque are lovely and the back yard would prove as an ample staging area to run the dolly. The building itself was simply a roof covering a large concrete area with a side room to keep any items that had to be locked up. The main room was layered by carpets for prayer.

In Bengali we talked to the caretaker and explained that we wanted to shoot here for a day and we would give a donation to the Mosque. The caretaker had said that there shouldn't be a problem as there had been film crews here before. I was fascinated by this. The caretaker continued by saying he would have to take it up with the Imam and the Imam would let us know. We were free to look around but were not allowed to enter the open walled Mosque as we were not Muslim. We put our heads together and determined how we were going to shoot around this and decided that for the interiors we could set up using a few Muslim members of the crew. Most shots we could get from outside, no problem.

A few days later IC and Nilanjan would go to the Mosque and give Rs 1500 (around \$35) and say a little more would come on the day of the shoot. Nil would speak to the Imam who says he has to take this up with a local Islamic Council of Imams as he has looked and looked in the Koran and he could not find anything on shooting film. Further consultations are needed, but he thinks it will be OK as he's seen pictures on TV and in magazines of Mosques.

In the village we said our 'good-byes' and that we'd be in touch and drove the Sumo down the same dirt road we drove in on. By this time, around 5PM, some of the locals had quickly manufactured a roadblock. This was not a block that involved real road barriers or construction signs. It was a simple piece of flimsy bamboo attached to another piece in the ground that could be raised by a length of twine. You must understand the absurdity of this. The land was flat as far as the eyes could see, but over the 'dirt-road' bit was a droopy stick. No more than 10 yards on the other side of this engineering marvel was the paved, two-lane highway. We must of appeared as a blur to the buses and Marutis speeding by. I was initially amused by this, others in the Sumo had experienced this kind of this thing before. Respectfully, we did not simply drive around it but stopped there. A little guy appeared out of no where and explained that the road now has a toll of 50 paise. (half a rupee, about three cents) If it were just me, I would have paid and moved on, but to these Bengalis it's the principal of the thing. They were convinced that the road block went up in the first place because a White man and his Indian posse drove the rare automobile up into their village. (What would the price be when I came back blue, I wondered.) IC and the others demanded to know under what authority did this guy have to hold up such busy people as ourselves? "It's a new toll, the local leaders have put it up to raise money to pave the road." This was a joke in itself. Me not being from the area, I could clearly see that vehicles with engines of any kind visit this road, which is only about 1.5 miles long, about once a week or so. Things are very inexpensive in India, but our 3 cents was a drop in the ocean to a pavement contractor. At this rate, the Earth would plunge into the sun before this dirt capillary would evolve into a paved artery.

We then demanded to see his receipt book, all officials carry them. "This is so new that I have not had the opportunity to go into town and get one from the authorities." Well, we won't pay without an official receipt. Who's to say that you didn't just put that up yourself and are keeping the money. (Oh, yeah. Call him out! I thought.) As this went on over and over, and the squabble got louder, one by one folks from this village would appear. Like I said, the land was flat. I still to this day don't know where these people came from. They just

appeared as if they were beamed down from the Enterprise. Like an insect to fire, the volume of our argument had attracted in about three minutes, 30 villagers. I sat in the middle of the back seat as everyone in the sumo screamed at the top of their lungs out of their windows to about 5 guys at a time. At this point there were too many people around the sumo to charge the gate and knock it down. As the language is Bengali and I don't understand what's being bellowed so well, I ask someone there how we're doing? Not well evidently, the guard wants to put a kid on a bike to go into town and retrieve the receipt book. This would take an hour or so. We were, although free to pay the toll and be on our merry way sans receipt. I began to get exasperated. A guy from outside reached over me to wag his finger at IC, I slapped it away admonishing him to never put his finger in my face again. As personal space is a non-issue in India, it was I who looked like the freak. As things got more agitated, one of the most upset villagers picked up a two-by-four and swung it around. The sumo was even being rocked by the mass that had gathered outside. The realization began to sink in that the growing group of 40 Muslims, whose village we were occupying at the moment, were highly irate at the six Hindus and an American sitting in a sumo like goldfish in a bowl surrounded by hungry cats. As the shaking of the vehicle redoubled, the ugly American took charge, "Fine, take your damn money!" and took my half-rupee change and threw it out the window. The flimsy bamboo went up and the crowd parted to let us through. As we left, some of us in the car fired a few verbal spears behind them and some of the villagers were running beside the vehicle trying to get theirs in. "We're going to tell the authorities!" "Better not!" "Don't come back!", etc.

After we returned to the lodge, as was our routine, we went to the refrigerator in the lobby and got a coke or Thumbs-Up, or Limka or Orange Crush and the man behind the counter gleefully put them on our bill. IC went to his room and I went to mine. I turned on the TV, the reception was shitty on most of the channels. The sound was mostly static but I put it on the BBC while I changed out of my sweaty, dusty clothes. Through the swirling screen I saw the image of a plane hitting the first tower. I watched it in passing thinking that it was some graphic meant to display the possibility of such an attack. With this TV, one couldn't tell the difference. As I was going over notes, cleaning up, putting things away, they kept showing it over and over. Bizarre for the BBC, they don't usually need to hit their audience over the head so many times to make a point (unlike some US news.) I switched over to CNN International which came in a bit better. The scene was played out in graphic detail; the second plane hit and as the first tower fell, IC and Ranjan bolted into my room and saw that I was already aware. I was just numb. I couldn't speak. I could only watch it happen again and again in silence as if serving some demented prison term. Others in the crew filed in, but we decided to go to IC's room as his reception was the best. I kept hoping against hope the second tower wouldn't fall, there must be some integrity there, the enemy could fuck us up but it couldn't kill us. Something must stand, some large fragment, something. Something to show you can't knock us completely down. There must be some shred of invulnerability, we're America... the second tower fell, completely to the ground. Our team lost, is how I fell initially. The one thing we (I) took for granted was over, someone hurt us badly on our own turf. The strongest, most advanced had finally been proven what it refused to believe, what every third-world country secretly (or not) wished. The giant bleeds. The Great Satan is not invincible.

It was getting dark when I collected my wits enough to go to the STD (Indian pay phone). I had to try to quickly imagine worst case scenarios and figure out how to deal with them before I called home. Parents were all fine in NC, but what about Pia? Today was our one month anniversary. Negative imagery crowded in my head. If she was killed or seriously injured, what would I do? I could already see the cards and sympathy that would come. I'm not a pessimist but that's the way my brain works; all the catastrophe has got to be accounted for before I'm able to act and think rationally. What would I do, I would probably move out of NYC for good, I couldn't live with that pain in my adopted home. I would go back to my real one in NC. What about Leif? What about all my other friends and workmates? What about my old neighbors in Tribeca? Rationality slowly took the helm. The time was mid morning in the U.S., Pia should be at work in midtown by then, she does take the train that runs underground near there, but not directly under the towers. Leif works all over, his schedule teaching art to kids takes him mainly to the boroughs, unless he was in transit he would be OK. After a mental account of the whereabouts of my peeps, the only worry came from old neighbors down where I used to live. This was the second most tortured two-hundred yard walk I have ever made.

Arriving at the STD, business seemed as usual with the two boys that run the two room internet and telephone shop. The two phones are occupied but I notice that they are local folks that are just calling for quickie chats. The phone becomes free and I sit in the small booth. I dial the number trembling and wait for

the lines to connect. Phone rings five times and then the recording, "All lines to this destination are busy. Please try again later..." I open the booth to get air and try again. One of the boys notices my grief. "Is everything OK?" he asks. Still dazed, "Have you heard the news? New York got bombed." "Oh, is that where you're from?" "Yes, I'm trying to get through but the lines are busy." "Oh, I'll get through, what's your number." I write it down and he tries from the other phone. No one there seems the least bit moved about my huge proclamation. They know me as the visiting American filmmaker at the lodge with the crew. They almost seem like I'm making general chit chat. "How's the family?" "All dead." "OK then, see you tomorrow". Come to think of it, this was their initial reaction when they asked about me the first time we met. "Oh, yeah? Here in ole Shanti making a film with the greatest living Bengali actor? That's nice, should be a hot one today..." Later after a few hours, the weight of the situation sank in with them., They were going to do everything they could to get me through to the States. But now there was nothing anyone could do. After about half an hour holding up both lines, they said that I should come back in a couple of hours and they would keep the shop open just for me. I slowly, full of dread walked back to the room wondering what my city looked like and if I would ever see it again.

I don't know if it was my first return to my room or subsequent ones, I was a little out of it and in two hours prescribed, I visited my friends at the STD four or five times, a message came for me. The manager called said that my Choto Masi (wife's aunt) had called from Calcutta and was able to get through to my In laws in Long Island and the whole immediate family had checked in and was safe. The Vice Chancellery does have its perks, even so it would be three days before I would be able to speak to New York. At best I could relax a notch knowing my wife was physically unharmed. I closed the STD and sat in IC's room with PD and a few others of the crew that stopped by to check on me. We ordered some food and had a little whiskey while watching the scene unfold over and over and over. At this point there was speculation about who was the culprit. Was it a suicide group from the States themselves, foreign terrorists, green men from outer space, no one knew but folks seemed to feel it came somewhere out of Saudi Arabia way. The Hindus were fairly convinced that this was Muslim fanaticism, perhaps with links to Kashmir. The one Muslim I did see at that time was Mohammad Ali, our make-up man. Even though we could only communicate in the most rudimentary of English, he stopped by to wish me well. He was very, very kind (as was everyone) with their White boss and felt some general internal commitment to make sure I, as a friend was taken care of in this time of need. Without fail this brought the core of the crew together regardless of the religious overtones of the script or the personal spiritual convictions of each individual. To me being away from home, I was in the safest place I could be, within the gaze of a protective group of people who now had a mission. I don't mean we all held hands all the time thereafter, as with any film shoot there was plenty of bickering, name calling and other trying things that did not promote harmony in our little Benetton part of the world. But I was looked after and checked on warmly, after what I saw on the TV this was what I needed.