Advocate-journalists: How suffering in India changed our worldviews

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Story By Dani Hayes
Photos by Brian Champagne

LOGAN—It was during a particular photo assignment in India that she felt drawn to something more personal and powerful than traditional journalism. After more than 35 years as a photojournalist for National Geographic and other national outlets, suddenly a young man staring at her through her Hasselblad viewfinder changed everything.

For Lynn Johnson, her job became a “calling.”

Upon her return from India, she called her friend, activist Jen Saffron, and told her that just photographing the world no longer seemed sufficient.

“She told me I had been called,” Johnson told an audience of 150 at Utah State University on Wednesday, standing below a 30-foot image of the young man, Anil, whose story changed her life.

Saffron and Johnson were on campus as guests of the USU Caine College of the Arts and the Morris Media & Society Lecture Series for a presentation about “advocacy journalism” called “Building Bridges: When Journalism and Activism Meet,” illustrated by Johnson’s photographs of “the Koraput Survivors”—the Christian community whose village had been razed by religious intolerance.

“The Koraput Survivors Project is a humanitarian aid project,” Saffron said, “and our goal is to use our documentary images and our writings and talks like this to showcase the plight of a particular village in India . . . and to take a look at how we might use our roles as journalists to actually rebuild this village.”

While on assignment in India for the Geographic’s March 2012 cover story on “The Apostles,” Johnson was moved by the story of the homeless villagers, who have come to be called the Koraput survivors.

Johnson was on assignment for the National Geographic to document a group of Christians in eastern India’s Odisha State who had been driven out of their village by Hindu extremists. In 2008, some 3,000 extremist Hindus attacked the village of 800 residents, driving the men into the surrounding forest and attacking women and children who had not escaped. The extremists sought a return to the ancient social caste system.

“Anil, a young man who had been beaten nearly to death, changed the way photojournalist Lynn Johnson understands the world and her role in it. Photo by Brian Champagne

Humanitarian activist Jen Saffron, seated, listens as photographer Lynn Johnson describes her “conversion” from traditional photojournalist to advocate. Brian Champagne photo
For Johnson, the turning point from traditional photojournalism to advocacy was when she was interviewing and photographing a young man named Anil, one of the survivors.

“They tied Anil to a log,” she said. “They beat him for eight hours. They said to him, ‘Where is your God now? Where is your Jesus? Is he going to save you now?’ My camera is right into his eyes and I hear him say, ‘I thought I was going to die, and I said to the Lord, ‘You can take me or you can let me live. Either way, my life belongs to you.’”

“At that moment,” Johnson said, “I had this realization, that after 35-40 years in the field, photographing all sorts of human conditions, all sorts of depravity and joy and celebration and sadness, I have never been so moved as to listen to a young man’s state in that complete, mature, spiritual place that he has reached in his life. I thought, ‘Oh, my God. I have done nothing. It’s time to move to action.’ That’s why we are here.”

Advocacy journalism is different than traditional journalism, the two women explained to an audience that included many USU journalism students. Saffron said it requires tremendous integrity to tell a story straight while having emotional ties to the people on whom they are reporting.

“Looking at our roles as advocates and journalists, there is tension,” she said. “On one hand, we have to bend down every day and make sure people are clothed and fed, make sure people can get through the rainy season. But on the flip side, we are still working on long-term [journalism] projects.

“So there is a really interesting interplay in this project as people,” Saffron said, “on one hand as advocates and the other as journalists. It has been a real challenge to meet the needs of everyone.”

**Hear Johnson and Saffron’s conversation about advocacy journalism on Utah Public Radio.**

Humanitarian-advocate-journalists Jen Saffron and Lynn Johnson tell the story of the Koraput Survivors, and how they balance journalism with advocacy. Photo by Brian Champagne

It’s not simple situation, Johnson says.

“I think the challenge for us as journalists is how do you operate in the field, how do you gather your information in the field with integrity, with balance,” she said. “I come from a very traditional newspaper view of photography, that you should be gathering and presenting your material from a baseline of fairness and equality of information.

“For me, I’m personally more comfortable in this project with having done the work for Geographic, and having the integrity of that work complete and then moving into an advocacy role in behalf of these people.”

Part of the reason for advocacy journalism is to rediscover a story that may have been lost, said Saffron.

“If you were to look up ‘Christian violence in India’ [on Google],” she said, “you might find some information, but a lot of this information … has been really erased from the media. One of the things that Lynn and I seek to do with the Koraput Survivors Project is to use media to our advantage, to reamplify this topic.

“The initial violence that drove the villagers out of their village happened five years ago. That doesn’t mean that it stopped,” she said. “It’s an issue that has been heavily underreported.”

For Mike Pitcher, Johnson’s photo of Anil in the National Geographic drew him to discover the circumstances the Koraput survivors. “I sent off a letter to National Geographic and ask them to see if there’s a way to contribute to this kid,” Pitcher said. “I got an email back from them with just a link to these ladies’ charity.”

Pitcher contacted Johnson and asked about school for the children of Koraput.

“She said they are not going to school and haven’t been to school for four years,” he said. “I thought that a teacher wouldn’t be that much to hire, so looked online and called Lynn back and told her we could get a teacher for around $100 to $110 a month.”

Pitcher, with the help of friends and neighbors, accumulated enough to send $200 a month to aid the Koraput community, which would support a schoolhouse, supplies and a teacher. Pitcher and his wife Nancy were primarily responsible for inviting Saffron and Johnson.
to come to Utah to talk to various groups about their humanitarian efforts in India.

It was Johnson’s photograph of Anil that pushed Pitcher to act, a demonstration of the impact of a compelling story, powerfully told. That’s advocacy journalism.

“I think you can read a story and it impacts people’s actions,” Pitcher said. “But when you see a photograph, it’s a call to action.”

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