

After the quake, a film

Business Standard

Abhilasha Ojha / New Delhi

September 1, 2007

Eight women from a small Gujarati village have put together a moving documentary about the 2001 earthquake.

In an obscure village in Gujarat, Hansaben is trying to put her little baby to sleep. She has requested me to call her up a little later, after she's done with her dinner. She's still in the process of winding up her day; there's an unwashed cooking pan in the kitchen, bedsheets to be rolled out for the night and the baby's milk to be warmed.

For most people Hansaben is just another woman living in the village looking after her family, busy with daily chores that begin at the crack of dawn, but there's something special about her.

Hansaben is a documentary filmmaker.

Our Life, Our Film might appear an ordinary 45-odd-minute film, but look closely and it's nothing short of extraordinary — something that's been filmed straight from the heart.

Hansaben, along with a group of seven other women along with a cameraperson and a sound recordist, toured six different villages in Gujarat, ravaged and torn by the 2001 earthquake, to film what was left of the state and to show the world how the quake victims coped with painful memories, loss of their loved ones, broken roofs and, in some cases, as the film showed, even dismembered limbs.

"Revisiting memories is a difficult thing to do," says Hansaben, whose voice texture would astonish not just experts in the industry but also the innumerable professional dubbing artistes. Having filmed the entire documentary with her associates, Hansaben has also given the voiceover for the film.

"My own home was reduced to rubble at a time when the earthquake struck Gujarat," she says, adding quickly, "but I feel lucky that I didn't lose my loved ones or members of my family." And, surprisingly, it was only when she started shooting for the film that she realised how lucky she was.

"The power of this film was that it reached out and made people realise exactly that. We showed it at the grassroot levels in different communities and villages, and gradually people came forward to admit that what they lost paled in comparison to what many others had lost."

The beauty of *Our Life, Our Film*, which may not have expertly crafted scenes or technical finesse, lies in the way it captures not just the ravaged images of the earthquake but also the stories of how most people are piecing their lives together and coming to terms with their losses even to this day.

So there's a school where students are studying while a teacher talks to the camera holding photographs of those children who died while attending the same school six years ago when the calamity had struck. Or there's a class where students are singing some of their region's

folk songs, dancing in gay abandon, a reminder of how children (some of whom may not even have been born at the time) are helping the entire community to move ahead.

“Could any metropolitan film director have managed what this ‘band of eight’ has?” wonders Deepa Bhatia, a well-known documentary filmmaker and editor. Bhatia, who is now editing Aamir Khan’s *Taare Zameen Par*, trained the rural women directors in Mumbai after which they returned to filming it.

“I was convinced that only these women could capture what they had once lost. And their dedication to the project was tremendous. Hansaben couldn’t leave her baby and didn’t want to leave the project either, so she came with the child to learn nuances of filmmaking,” she says.

Bhatia, who has edited films like *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara*, *Takshak*, *Dev* and *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Ma*, to name just a few, was approached by Swayam Shikshan Prayog, the NGO which funded this project. Made on a budget of Rs 2.5 lakh, Bhatia thought it was a mammoth task to find women to make a documentary about themselves.

“It had to be a film in their own voice,” she says, adding, “I thought some of them would back out but, surprisingly, all of them stayed and bought out nearly 35 hours of footage.”

For someone like Hansaben, the journey of filming *Our Life, Our Film*, has been a rewarding one. “There were people who sneered at our efforts and thought we were trying to trivialise their loss by ‘simply filming it’. Today the same people, after seeing the film, are appreciating it,” says Hansaben, who is itching to work on another documentary if given the chance.

While experts rue the lack of space for documentaries in India (PSBT — Public Service Broadcasting Trust — encourages documentaries through its annual festival, Open Frame, and other initiatives), Zubin Driver, network creative director of TV18, feels that documentaries in India have to find a well-defined mainstream voice and reach out to audiences all over the world.

Which explains why the channel has introduced *Through the Looking Glass*, a programme initiated by its in-house agency, The Cell, which will encourage documentaries as well as short films. The channel is also in the process of organising a documentary film festival which will be held later this year and will showcase work from new talent.

“Through the programme we wanted to offer a space for documentary filmmakers, especially young students, and those who haven’t had a chance to showcase their work,” he says.

With 25-odd documentaries already in its kitty, CNBC-TV 18 will kick off *Through the Looking Glass* with *Our Life, Our Film*. “In terms of visibility, showcasing the documentary on a television channel seems the most intelligent thing to do,” says Bhatia who, along with Hansaben, and others, is waiting to watch their effort translated on the small screen.

To be showcased in two parts, the first segment of the film will be shown tonight at 22:00 hours while the second segment will be on air at 23:30 hours tomorrow.

Hansaben, along with the other seven directors and their families and a host of residents from their village and others from the neighbouring villages, is already waiting to see how the effort is translated on the screen.

OUR LIFE, OUR FILM

Running time: 45 minutes

Directed by: Anuba Jadeja, Gomiben Koli, Hansaben Jadav, Hansa Someshwra, Ilaben Kubavat, Jamunaben Someshwra, Kaajalben Chauhan and Kunwarben Koli

Produced by: Mumbai-based NGO, Swayam Shikshan Prayog

Cameraperson: Mrinal Desai

Sound recordist: Anita Khushwaha

Editor: Deepa Bhatia

Synopsis: A unique cinematic experiment conducted by eight women from the earthquake-ravaged villages of Kutch and Saurashtra. The women shot a documentary film tracing their journey from disaster to development. The film showcases stories of survival and offers hope through inspirational stories. The script, narrative style and impressions are all a product of these eight women, independently.