

Eight women and a camera

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The day was January 26, the year 2001. An earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale ripped through Gujarat as the country celebrated its 51st Republic Day.

It was the worst on the country's disaster roster, logging a body count of 30,000 and rendering half-a-million homeless.

The scars still show in the villages of Bhuj, Kutch and Saurashtra, which stood on the line of the cleaving earth. "The pain has dulled, but at a cost," say eight women from the hinterland of Saurashtra and Kutch, who turned filmmakers to capture Gujarat's journey from ruins to high ground.

Our Life, Our Film portrays Gujarat's struggle for survival through stories narrated by these women — some of whom have never seen a camera before. "The film is important in the larger context of culture because most of the media-generated content is driven by vested interest or caters to moneyed consumers," says Zubin Driver, network creative director of *CNBC's TV-18* group, which has short-listed the film for the channel's *Through the Looking Glass* series.

The film, which will be screened this Sunday, begins with the journey of filmmaker Deepa Bhatia of NGO Swayam Siksha Pravog. There, she chanced upon eight women — Hansaben, Ilaben, Gomiben, Kajolben, Hansa Ben Someswara, Kunwarben, Jamunaben, Anuba.

All the eight trained in Mumbai under a professional crew. After initiation rites on editing, camera handling and scheduling, they were ready with the concept and the draft. "I gave them complete freedom to research, plan itineraries and interviews," says Deepa, who accompanied them back to Gujarat, along with a small camera crew.

Gomi Ben, 38, an impoverished Kol tribal from Gujarat who choreographs *garba* nights in her village, set the score for the state's march to recovery. The result: a film full of earthy melodies. Director Hansa, with a seven-month baby strapped to her waist, wanted hard reportage. The crew went to 12 villages in Kutch and came up with startling tales of deprivation, economic inequities and gender fissures.

In Tiramabhau village, the camera pans on to a primary school, which serves as a psycho-social stress care centre and an education hub. Just after the earthquake, the UNICEF set up 2,000 makeshift schools and trained teachers in support methods for children. Out if it emerged the opportunity to redefine education with new-age learning tools and methodologies.

But girls are still at the receiving end of the gender spectrum. The crew captures women in the "durbar" community. "Our daughters are branded badchalan (immoral) if they go out to study," laments one.

Job opportunities are scarce. "I make Rs 500 a month," smiles Shantiben, a cheerful tribal from Kutch. But she spends half of it on healthcare. Women, especially those from the marginal social groups, slog without nutrition. "The men eat first, then the women," says Hansa.

But the women are gradually making their way into panchayats. The educated ones are being sent to work in government offices, schools and NGOs. "I think we have been stifling our women," Hansa quotes a man from a village in Kutch as saying, post *Our Life, Our Films*.