

Director's Cut

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Eight women from rural Gujarat, who'd never seen the outside world, take the director's seat to capture lives of people hit by the killer earthquake. Come September, their film goes on air on CNBC TV 18.

What happens when someone is given a camera and the responsibility to film people shattered by nature's fury? And what if these filmmakers happen to be women, sans letters, residing in remote villages? Well, what comes out is nothing less than human grit and determination to get on with life. So it is with eight rural women of Gujarat who took to filmmaking, which was never their domain, not in their wild dreams even. Their first film goes on air on September 1 and 2 in two parts on CNBC TV 18 under its 'Through the Looking Glass - A show on documentary films' series, conceptualized by 'The Cell', an in-house agency of TV 18 Group.

These eight directors work in the farms, some in diamond cutting industry and some manage homes in Saurashtra and Kutch. But they'll not be able to watch the film because like many other luxuries, the channel is yet to percolate into their villages. But the experience of making the film has certainly changed the way these eight women will look at the world for the rest of their lives.

Our Life Our Film, speaks about the impact of the killer earthquake which ravaged Gujarat, especially Kutch, and highlights the resilience of the community to get on with life after the disaster.

It has not only explored other issues confronting the community, but has also changed the lives of its directors during the course of its making.

Editor and documentary filmmaker Deepa Bhatia says that the process of making this film started three years after the quake hit the State and remains an unforgettable experience for her. The idea was to take a look at the quake-hit community through the eyes of their women.

So, a Mumbai-based NGO Swayam Shikshan Prayog, which funded the film, started a hunt for rural women who would actually make the film. Subsequently, eight women- Anuba Jadeja, Gomiben Koli, Hansaben Jadav, Hansa Someshwra, Ilaben Kubavat, Jamunaben Someshwra, Kaajalben Chauhan and Kunwarben Koli- were identified by Bhatia who were ready to take positions behind the camera.

"Finding such women, who would step out of the four walls and actually make a serious film, was a herculean task. And after we found them, my work started right on the field. I traveled with them across villages extensively telling them about basic techniques of research," says Bhatia.

Later, they were taken to Mumbai to train them about filmmaking and the art of extracting information. In about a weeks time the team hit the field. "The idea was to let them have complete freedom in making the film," Bhatia says adding that the women not only scripted the film but also took all decisions pertaining to its making.

"Initially, they were working for me, but soon they were in control of a serious film. And this was by women who did not even know their letters. I think that was my biggest success," Bhatia remembers.

They also took the opportunity to explore issues confronted by women and children. While deciding upon whom to interview, they made it a point not to visit houses where too many family members had died. "Here, they showed such sensitivity which we as professionals have long forgotten. This was a lesson of humanity for me," says Bhatia.

Hansa Jadav, one of the directors, is working with an NGO in Jamdudhai village in Jodia taluka of Jamnagar district. Recollecting her filmmaking experience, she says, "We had witnessed the devastations of the quake ourselves, but when we set out for making a film, we had no idea on what we were getting into."

She says, "Film mein kahania hoti hain lekin hame to sach dikhana tha, logon ke dard bahar lane the." (A film depicts a story but we were to show the reality, bring out people's agony).

"It was a strange experience in the beginning as we had never stepped out of our homes. But now, all fear for the outer world seems to have diffused," says Hansaben.

"The local people in Kutch would get suspicious on seeing us approaching with camera. Kids, who were stuck in school during the quake, were still gripped in trauma and wouldn't speak to us. But eventually everything was sorted out and we did it finally," she says with a feeling of pride.

Although she is little upset, as they cannot watch the film, cheerfully adds, "Deepa madam has promised us that she'll send us CDs and DVDs so that we can watch our film."

For now, when the rest of the country revisits the survival stories in Kutch through the film, life will continue to be the grind it was for these eight women. They are dreaming to do something similar, once again, for another reason.