

(GLOVES OFF)

The Ring

A three-year project by two Montreal-based independent film-makers could result in an engaging account of the struggles and triumphs of the Indian woman boxer. *BY JAIDEEP DAVE*



The national women's team at Port Stadium, Vishakapatnam, last year

Three years ago Ameesha Joshi, a 37-year-old independent film-maker from Canada, chanced upon an exhibit in Montreal featuring Indian women boxers training at a Chennai beach. Joshi was amazed at what she saw. These were courageous women, she thought, from a country with traditional mores engaged in a sport that doesn't conform to the stereotypical notion of "what women ought to do". In November 2006, she landed up in Delhi with a mission to breathe life into her idea: to make a documentary on the "ups and downs" of the Indian national women's boxing team. She was accompanied by Anna Sarkissian, a friend and former classmate at Montreal's Concordia University.

Today, they are trawling through 142 hours of video footage. According to Joshi, the documentary, tentatively titled 'With this Ring' and expected to be released next year, will give the audience an idea about a day in the life of an Indian woman boxer, about cultural obstacles and governmental apathy, and also about rebellion and freedom. And it is not just about boxers who are women but also about women who are boxers. "Boxing is a passport to better financial opportunities, and a new sort of freedom for these girls," says Sarkissian.

Joshi and Sarkissian started their journey with the 2006 World Boxing Championship in Delhi, where the Indian team came out top with four golds, four silvers and a bronze. They also went to Manipur to



Joshi and Sarkissian's docu will be out early next year

meet four-time international amateur boxing gold medalist and M C Mary Kom, who was recently — and very belatedly — awarded the Khel Ratna. "Mary's parents came to know about her boxing pursuit only when they saw her photograph in a newspaper after she had won a state-level boxing event. She used to fund her boxing training from the expenses that were meant for food," says Sarkissian, 27.

On their second trip to India last year, the duo put up at training camps in Vishakapatnam and Hisar in Haryana and the experience left Joshi in the awe of the adaptive skills of the women. "The training facilities in India are not fully up to the mark. There are times when there's no water, no electricity and yet, the boxers continue with their training unruffled. These are not just any women, they are fighters in every sense of the word," says Joshi. Sarkissian, though, believes that Indian women boxers are better off than their Canadian counterparts, in one respect: "The medal-winning boxers of India get government jobs and get travel and boarding expenses; the Canadian boxers have no such privileges. They are on their own." In Hisar, Joshi and Sarkissian also visited

Preeti Beniwal's home. Beniwal's father, a boxing coach, had actually encouraged his daughter, a 22-year-old former North Zone amateur boxing champ, to take up boxing. "Preeti is one of the few boxers studying and training at the same time," says Joshi. It's not easy for these women to juggle any other occupation with training, because, as Sarkissian puts it, "they spend 10 months a year in national training camps or training at sports centres in their home towns."

Joshi and Sarkissian also followed the boxers to China in 2008 for the World Amateur

Boxing Championship and then headed back to Ambala to stay with three-time national boxing champion (50 kg category) and World Boxing Championship 2006 bronze medalist Chotto Loura. "Chotto lives alone in a cement bungalow with two rooms and a small kitchen. She was recently robbed of everything she owns and had to borrow two beds from a neighbour for us to stay with her," writes Joshi in a December 2008 post on her blog on citizenship.org. The duo also visited the Indian Railways employee at work. "She does little actual work, and laughed about it as she sat at

her desk, clicking her pen. She took out a folder at one point and started writing as Anna filmed her. We asked if she was just working for the camera, she smiled," writes Joshi, who also met this year's Arjuna award-winner Sarita Devi. "Her moves are quick and graceful and she lets out a shrill sound while throwing punches and jabs," says Sarkissian.

Joshi's and Sarkissian's most heartfelt moment was when Mary Kom returned to her training after she had given birth to twins. "It's inspiring to see her straddle motherhood and boxing training," says Joshi.



Fiesty women like Mary Kom (second from top left) and Sarita Devi (above) are among our brightest Olympic 2012 hopes