

FILM

## Women at the Water's Edge: Lives of women in climate changed Sunderbans

English and Bengali (with English sub-titles); 22.36 min.

Directed by Ronodeb Paul; produced and narrated by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

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The Indian poet, Bhupen Hazarika's soul-stirring composition 'O Ganga Boicho Keno (Oh Ganges, why do you flow?),' inspired by Paul Robeson's "Ol' Man River", plays as we see footage of communities facing irrecoverable loss of their homes, lands and assets by an aggressively advancing river. *Women at the Water's Edge* is a film shot on Mousuni, one of the 54 inhabited islands of the Sunderbans delta in West Bengal, India.


The Sunderbans forests of West Bengal have acted as a refuge, albeit an inhospitable one, to several political and ecological refugees for decades. The independence of Bangladesh resulted in displacing thousands of men and women who came to settle in the then forested regions. In other parts of Bengal, as floods ravaged homes and assets, displaced families moved in search of a new life. For more than a century, as a result of these different waves of migration, including of adivasis, or indigenous communities, brought in by the British for paddy cultivation, the Sunderbans—a mangrove delta in the Bay of Bengal—has become home to four and a half million people, the majority of whom belong to historically marginalised communities of dalits (Scheduled Caste), adivasis (Scheduled Tribes)

and Muslims. *Women at the Water's Edge* tells us the story of these people, and of the islands.

The film reveals the catastrophic effects of climate change on the lives of the region's residents. With producer and narrator Professor

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, we traverse the Sunderban rivers and the precarious dirt paths of its inhabited villages. Conversations with residents reveal that it is the women who suffer the most as a result of the havoc wrecked by rising sea levels. Just obtaining drinking water, for example, is a daily challenge. Simultaneously, the islanders' very survival depends on keeping the surrounding brackish water out via embankments. Ultimately, what is most striking is the depiction of the highly contested relationship with water.

The narrator asks, "What will become of these people? Where will they go?" Environmental catastrophe is no new phenomenon for Sunderbans islanders. Floods, cyclones, and tidal surges have repeatedly ravaged the region since time immemorial. Climate change is only one of the many forces of displacement. Equally responsible for displacement are wildlife protection laws, now more stringently enforced by the Forest Department, as sea levels rise. These laws have turned thousands, whose livelihoods depend on natural resources, into 'trespassers.' With small land holdings, and without viable alternative livelihoods, they are forced to migrate to the interiors of India for work, leaving behind their families and homes. Leaving the Sunderbans, their desh (hometown), is not merely a physical departure from one's land, but implies the loss of an entire life-world, of knowledge and social practices.

The Sunderban islanders were being rendered invisible even before the 21<sup>st</sup> century's alarm around global warming. The long history of structural and systemic violence, denial of access to healthcare, roads and electricity—all served to oppress the people. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and director Ronodeb Paul, powerfully demonstrate, however, the resilience of the women even as the islands are on the brink of disappearing. The documentary may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BI2NkP9k9k&t=10s> 



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Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 1200 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women

and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

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