

# Tug-of-War

***Shifting Undercurrents*, a 20-minute documentary directed by Rita Banerji and produced in 2012 by ICSF, reveals the problems of women seaweed harvesters**

In the genre of social-issue-based documentaries, *Shifting Undercurrents*, a 20-minute film, produced in 2012 by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), is a welcome addition, dealing with the little-known aspects of life on the margins of development and landscapes. The film seeks to sensitize viewers to the conditions of women seaweed harvesters in the coastal villages alongside the Gulf of Mannar National Park (GoMNP) in Ramanathapuram district of the south Indian State of Tamil Nadu.

The subject of the film is fascinating, dealing as it does with how the politics of livelihood and conservation shifts between the logic of marine and terrestrial landscapes. The subtext that I read into the film was even more intriguing—the challenges, freedoms and ingenuity that the underwater world extracted from the women seaweed extractors of the region. Despite poor underwater visuals, the film provides a first-time glimpse into the form and materiality of seaweed harvesting. The mask and flippers, and the training, knowledge and technologies employed by these women stand in stark contrast to popular images of underwater diving and divers.

The film begins with an established format of tracking the everyday life of its protagonists, instantly taking the viewer into the intimate space of the home and the community through stunning visuals of the coastal space. M. Laxmi, a woman seaweed harvester, sets the context of the fragility of eking a livelihood out of seaweed collection in the waters of

a globally recognized biodiversity area—the Gulf of Mannar.

The film's crisp commentary reveals certain interesting facts: The GoMNP was declared in 1989; around 5,000 seaweed collectors from 25 villages in the Gulf of Mannar depend on seaweed extraction for their livelihoods; and in 2000, the women were expressly forbidden from entering the park and extracting seaweed. Normally, large quantities of seaweed are sent to distant processing centres from where they go to units in

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the food-processing industry, which uses the carrageenan extracted from seaweed as a vegetarian alternative to animal-based gelatin.

In the film, the fragility of the women's profession is introduced to the viewer at multiple stages. Working underwater, which involves daily hazards, the women have to deal with two fundamental conditions to draw wages from the seaweed traders who are their paymasters—access to the resource, and a market for it.

## Corporate whims

The lives of these women appear to be firmly wedged between the whims of corporate entities like Nestle, Coca-Cola and the Himalaya Drug Company, who are the principal buyers of carrageenan, and those

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RITA BANERJI



The film focuses on the problems of the seaweed collectors of the Gulf of Mannar after the declaration of a national park

of a conservation regime. The film focuses mainly on the latter theme, drawing attention to a legal conservation framework that alienates the women divers from the waters of the GoMNP.

Created under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, the GoMNP is now under the custodianship of the Wildlife Wing of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, which appears, at best, duty-bound to implement a

draconian and unimaginative conservation law. The GoMNP could be said to be geographically unhappy in its location adjacent to the coastline of the Gulf of Mannar, which is today dotted with numerous industrial units, commercial ports, harbours and thermal power plants. The pollution caused by these industries, overfishing by mechanized vessels, and the damaging effects of coral mining are now part of the local legend of the environmental degradation of the area. *Shifting Undercurrents* points to the irony of governmental environmental agencies turning a blind eye to the misdeeds of powerful external agencies, even as they unjustly harass the marginalized women seaweed divers.

The film highlights the contrasting narratives that mark all conflict and actors in the area, who occupy opposing poles and have contravening rationales. Laxmi, the seaweed collector first introduced to viewers of the film, points out that the law is oblivious to the realities of the marine life she is familiar with—seaweeds do not grow on live corals; they can indeed be harvested carefully, for which the women have the requisite skills; sustainable harvest of seaweed in a protected area is, therefore, possible; and marine boundaries defy logic.

Shekhar Kumar Niraj, the Director of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, says that seaweed harvesting is not a “foolproof system”, and is faced with another kind of uncertainty—the impacts of a thriving business on coral biodiversity. Such uncertainty and the absence of sufficient scientific evidence is reason enough to restrict seaweed harvest in the GoMNP. Though the film does not offer statements of government officials about the certainty of environmental damage to the area from polluting industries, the implicit message comes through.

The film suffers from some shortcomings. I longed for greater detail on the historicity and political economy of the profession of seaweed harvesting, and the views of the two important sets of actors involved in the GoMNP management process—conservation organizations and scientists. Nonetheless, *Shifting Undercurrents* allows us to explore many of those facets in a fuller fashion. More importantly, it begins many important conversations. Those interested in the tug-of-war between the intractability of the world of legislation and the contest for control over nature's terrain must add this film to their collection. ❧

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