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Mannar's notes from the underground

RAGINI BHUYAN 9th Sep 2012

You might have sampled seaweed in sushi rolls, but did you ever wonder how it is harvested? Well, filmmaker Rita Banerji's documentary, *Shifting Undercurrents*, screened at the Jeevika Livelihood Film Festival in the capital recently, brings to light the reality of women seaweed collectors in the Gulf of Mannar. Banerji and her team followed some women in the Bharathinagar village in Ramanathapuram who are engaged in the profession, and have been pursuing it for decades, learning the trade from their mothers.

A still from the movie

The women leave early in the morning, getting into boats that carry up to 10-12 women and head out into the sea. Between 7 and 11am, they dive underwater with only a rubber slipper or flipper on one foot, old rags tied around their fingers to protect them from getting injured, and a mask. They hold their breath under water for up to one or two minutes at a time while doing their pickings. They look for areas where seaweed grows — rocks, dead corals and stones. The risks involve getting hurt by live corals.

While skilled collectors get paid up to Rs 210 per day, unskilled collectors can take home anything between Rs 100-150 per day. About 5,000 women in the 21 islands located in the Gulf of Mannar depend on this activity for their primary sustenance. The two species of seaweed that they harvest include sargassum and *gelidiella acerosa*, and companies which buy seaweed include big names like Nestle, Coke, and Himalaya.

These women might have peacefully continued with their traditional occupation had it not been for the government, which, without consulting stakeholders like them, declared the Gulf of Mannar to be a national park. Things worsened for them after a larger area of 10,500 sq. kilometer was declared as a biosphere reserve in 1989 under the UNESCO Man And Biosphere programme. Harbouring 3,600 estimated species of flora and fauna, the Gulf of Mannar is one of Asia's biodiversity hotspots. *As Shifting Undercurrents* informs us, it has 147 species of marine algae. Clearly, there is every reason for the area to be protected.

What the documentary does highlight is the plight of native resource users in the region whose livelihoods are threatened by top down decisions like this. Resource extraction is restricted in areas declared as national parks under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The Tamil Nadu state government and the forest department authorities discourage and often harass the women from pursuing their profession, arguing that they are damaging the corals. However, as the women state, and as Banerji subsequently informs us, seaweed grows on dead corals, and the women stay away from live coral, so the question of damage to corals does not arise.

"The government at the same time allows the multinational giant, Pepsi, to farm exotic seaweed in areas adjoining the park, without caring about the ecological threat that this poses to native species. It instead targets vulnerable people like these women, without actually addressing their concerns of profitable alternative sources of income," Banerji says. The film argues for a debate on the need to protect livelihoods and biodiversity, a burning issue in India today.

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