

Video

Easy to watch and informative

Under the Sun is a film on the transient fisherfolk of Jambudwip, West Bengal, India

Under the Sun, a 33-minute film in English made for the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) by Dusty Foot Productions and directed by Rita Banerji, talks about the traditional stake-net fishery practised in Jambudwip island, and a recent standoff that has ensued between the fishworkers there and the government.

Jambudwip, a 20-sq km island, is just off the southern edge of West Bengal in the Sundarbans biosphere reserve. Small-scale fishworkers have been practising *behundi jal* or stake-net fishery there since at least the 1950s. Jambudwip is the largest local site for this fishery. The skills and knowledge involved in this sort of fishing are indigenous, ecofriendly and, like most traditional crafts, intuitive but transferable.

Enter the State Forest Department, which alleges that the fishermen's use of the island amounts to an encroachment of forest land. And in order to legitimize a ban, it invokes a Central government conservation act issued in 1980, that is, about 25 years after the fisherfolk are known to have started using the island. No doubt, the fishworkers have been using the forestland but only in the same way in which farmers use the soil in their fields—sustainably, and with respect for regeneration. Lurking in the shadows—and throwing light on the sudden embargo—is a plan to build an ecotourism resort in the area. That plan is said to be funded by the Sahara group, one of the few large entrepreneurial businesses originating from West Bengal.

The film documents this scenario in two parts: first, it shows us the technique and knowledge involved in the stake-net fishing process, and then, it analyzes the

standoff between the fishing community and the government. The analysis of the standoff is also a document on how bureaucratic intervention can get things entangled beyond belief.

Under the Sun is a documentary in the descriptive mould. There is an emphasis on delineating things and showing the interdependence among them: topography, people, techniques and processes. As a result, we get to see a variety of visuals that relate to Jambudwip's fishery activities: the landscape, people, shelters, tools and materials, and, of course, fishing and the sea. Where live footage is difficult to obtain, the documentary makes use of simple 3D (three-dimensional) simulations. For example, the position of the creek where the fishermen berth their boats is animated in bird's-eye view. This gives a sense of how intimately connected the fishing process is with geographic features. Likewise, underwater views of the ocean floor and the unique structure of the net are 3D-modelled and intercut with live action. Films that deal with maritime activities often revel in impressionistic shots of the sea and the boats. Not so in *Under the Sun* and, visually, this is one of the strengths of the film. The broad range of descriptive content gives a very real sense of place and context.

Misinformed officials

The second part of the film traces the genesis of the standoff. Lawyers, fishworkers and NGOs clarify that much of the Forest Department's plans and allegations are misinformed. An example: the Minister of Forests, who personifies the establishment/bureaucracy in the film, talks about an alternative site for rehabilitating the fishworkers: "Haribhanga island is ideally suited for this sort of fishing. It has a creek for

parking the boats." In reality, there is no creek in Haribhanga and it cannot accommodate a tenth of the fishworkers. This is besides the fact that the fish caught here are not for human consumption. Examples of this sort abound.


Central to the idea of encroachment is the notion that humans are at odds with nature, and that development is in opposition to what is natural. The film challenges this idea and asserts that from an ecological standpoint, such a notion is myopic and stagnant. For the viewer, however, a philosophical angle such as this can seem out of place.

Aren't the issues involved, and the probable solutions, more practical and on the surface? Living in India, one suspects that relativistic, philosophical discussions on real issues have a tactical function in bureaucracy: it buys time, misleads people, tests their patience and makes them give in to a sense of fatigue before they eventually get done in.

Documentaries also portray the cultural milieu in which they are filmed, as a by-product and outside of their area of specific focus. It is fascinating how this film conveys Bengal's culture of respect for the humane and poetic things in life. Here Bikash Raychaudhury, an anthropologist who studied Jambudwip in the late 1960s, captures the spirit of ecology as he talks about the

fisherworkers' craft in his book *The Moon and Net*:

"Living with the fishermen, quite intimately for some months, I distinctly got the impression that it is not money alone which drives them to such a wholehearted involvement in their work. The challenge and beauty of the open sea, the risk and fun of tracking *shola* fish, setting up the net and hauling up in eager expectation ...all these together have a charm for them."

This sensitivity and awareness—including the joy of reflecting on the fishermen—are not lost on the government administrators and officials either; they talk passionately about the fishermen's heritage, knowledge base and indigenous wisdom. Issues are discussed with depth and élan and all this makes *Under the Sun* an easy-to-watch, informative film. 

This review is by Ramu Aravindan (landeater@vsnl.com), a filmmaker, based in Bangalore, India