

DOCUMENTARY

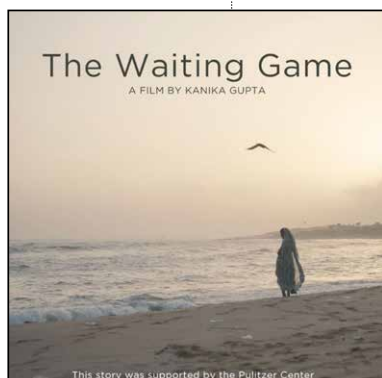
The Waiting Game

**Directed by Kanika Gupta; Produced by FairPlanetTV;
Duration: 18 mins; Language: English**

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“Our fishermen are innocent. They only go out to catch one tiny fish and they are punished for 4-5 years. There is so much inflation, we are not able to feed our children properly. And we are also not able to send them to school for education. That’s all we are requesting. Set our fishermen free. That’s all”. Damu ben’s passionate appeal to the governments of India and Pakistan falls on deaf ears amidst strained diplomacy between the countries and rising tensions.

Pulitzer grantee, Kanika Gupta’s moving documentary “The Waiting Game” shares the stories of those most impacted by the imprisonment of Indian fishermen in Pakistan when they inadvertently cross the IMBL (International Maritime Boundary Line). The film focuses on the lived experiences of mothers, sisters, and wives left to shoulder the burden when their fishermen are imprisoned and weaves these stories together with an activist’s perspective that provides the larger socio-legal-political context of limbo within which fishworkers and their families exist.



Every year, dozens of fishermen from both sides of the IMBL are affected, either through the impounding of their vessels or imprisonment, when they cross the boundary in pursuit of fish. This geo-political issue is explored in the film through a humanized, patient, and gentle lens, which brings into sharp focus the domestic impact this situation creates within Indian fishing households.

The documentary presents the heartrending stories four individuals: Ravi Bariya, a returned fisherman; his mother Bhanuben; Manju ben, a mother of five whose husband has been imprisoned in Pakistan for the last three years and Nidhi Chunnilal, whose brother languishes in a Pakistani prison. It sheds light on their untold stories through the lens of journalist-activist Jatin Desai, who has spent years fighting to bring these men home and speaks to the broader context and history of this enduring issue. Their voices offer viewers poignant access into the homes and lives of the women left behind, while also providing an understanding of the history, challenges, and possibilities surrounding this crisis.

The women share their stories of how they manage life once their fishermen, usually the sole earning member of the household, are incarcerated. These women are forced to shoulder not only household and caregiving responsibilities, which have traditionally fallen to them, but also the task of earning an income to sustain the family — a tall order under any circumstances. Manju ben has had to work tirelessly to support her family; she is able to educate her children, but only up to the 10th grade, beyond which she cannot afford their schooling. Nidhi had to drop out of school to take on additional household work when her brother was arrested. And Bhanuben lost her husband to the unending grief of their son’s disappearance.

The film also explores the impact of a father’s absence on children, whose lives and education suffer not only due to the loss of an income but also the loss of care previously provided by a mother who is now forced to work. Many children drop out of school and take up unskilled labour or fishing, putting them at the same risk as their fathers.

Jatin Desai traces the volatile history of both countries’ efforts to repatriate fishermen. The India-Pakistan Judicial Committee on Prisoners was formed in 2008 and last met in 2013. Since then, it has become defunct. He explains that prisoners are entitled to consular access within three months of their imprisonment, yet this is rarely provided, leaving fishermen languishing in prison for years despite activists’ efforts. Since the pandemic, prisoners have also been unable to communicate with their families back home. Together, these actions by both governments amount to violations of the human rights of fishermen.

The film also delves into why fishermen are increasingly crossing the murky waters of the IMBL. Industrialization along the Gujarat coast and the disposal of untreated wastewater into the ocean have pushed fish, once abundant near the coastline, into clearer waters farther out, where fishermen follow and inadvertently cross the IMBL. The impacts of climate change, combined with unregulated industrialization, have also contributed to the migration of fish.

This documentary provides an intimate window into the pain and suffering endured by the fishing community in Gujarat, especially the women and children left behind in fractured communities. It is beautifully shot, sharing vivid visuals of the lived experiences of these women and a fishing community that continues to ache. **M**

The film is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDf3Cva29Lo>



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Writers and potential
contributors to YEMAYA,
please note that write-ups
should be brief, about 2000
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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