

Chronicles of oblivion

A documentary film on female fishworkers from Odisha, India¹

*Produced by Dakshin Foundation, Directed by Priyanjana Dutta,
with the support of Duleep Matthai Nature Conservation Trust*

Duration: 25 minutes, Language: English

Odisha means the “land of the people”. There are an estimated 35,304 full-time fishers in the Indian State of Odisha (formerly known as Orissa). Of them, 7,973 are women. Besides these full-time women fishers, there are 12,499 women who work as part-time fishers. The film “Chronicles of oblivion” documents the lives of Odisha’s women fishworkers in different parts of the State.

Among the women shown in the film are the crab-catchers of the Bhitarkanika wildlife sanctuary. Since the entry of these women into the sanctuary area is completely restricted, they have to constantly fight the fear of arrest by forest guards or of being attacked by crocodiles and other wild animals. Many feel that it would probably be better for them to learn some other trade. These illiterate women are often also cheated by fish sellers. Their lives typify the challenges that fisherwomen of Odisha face as they pursue their traditional livelihoods in the face of modern day restrictions from the government and the development process.

There is very little support for female fishworkers in government policies and plans. The focus of existing policies has been on increasing fish production and modernizing the fisheries. They exclude the needs of traditional fishing and of women engaged in these activities. The women, over the years, have developed their own means of livelihood, fishing in creeks and rivers, using small nets to catch crabs and fish. The film tries to show how important it is that these women be included in government planning and decision-making process in the fisheries sector.

But what promise does this State hold for its forgotten people? Women from marine fisher communities have historically been a neglected lot. The stories of women living along diverse landscapes of Odisha’s 480-km coastline are of struggles for survival.

The daily lives of fisherwomen hinge on numerous uncertainties. Confronting a situation of depleting fish catch and unsustainable fisheries, women

located along biodiversity-rich habitats also have to contend with the fickleness of legal conservation restrictions, which have dealt a severe blow to their livelihoods and ways of life. The film reveals the insidious impact of sea turtle conservation as seen through the eyes of the women fishworkers of Odisha. These women and their families are losing access to their land and other resources and are frequently displaced in the name of conservation or development. Further, these fishers also face problems of identity as they are often regarded by government regulators as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

The stories of Odisha’s women fishworkers guide the narrative of this 25-minute-long film, revealing the highly unequal and invisible world that they inhabit.

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