

Whose coast is it? *Resisting Coastal Invasion/52 mins/Director: K.P. Sasi*

film review by GRAIN

What is important for many fishing communities is not just that the sea continues to have fish, but that they continue to inhabit the strip of land along the coastline so that they can have access to the sea. It is said that two-thirds of the human population live in coastal areas. Yet in some parts of Asia, private interests are driving fishing communities away, often with government backing. This is the case in India. In his latest documentary work, "Resisting Coastal Invasion", Indian film-maker K.P. Sasi turns his lens on coastal communities in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The film is premised on the central question: who has the rights to the coast in this era of globalisation and privatisation?

In exploring the many facets of the complex struggles of coastal communities in Kerala, K.P. Sasi focuses on the importance of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) on local lives and livelihoods. Local people had hoped that the CRZ,¹ which forms part of the only environmental legislation in India, would protect the interests of small fishers in the coastal areas. But the zone has been a disappointment, as it has been poorly implemented and widely violated, but now worse could follow with the proposed replacement of the CRZ with a Coastal Management Zone (CMZ) scheme. The CMZ, it is feared, will exclusively favour industry and construction at the expense of small fisherfolk.

The film exposes many violations of the CRZ, looking at them with varying levels of detail. Aquaculture, primarily shrimp farming, which contaminates sea water, is mentioned. There is a fuller account of a titanium factory (Travancore Titanium Products Limited) that throws its waste in the sea, causing a serious decline in the fish catch and compromising public health. Local residents claim that there is now widespread leukemia, skin diseases, and eyesight and bronchial problems in the community as a result of the factory's operations. Even more thoroughly examined is organised sand mining controlled by a mafia that reportedly works hand in glove with political parties, and which reportedly uses physical violence to silence anyone who questions their operations.



Hauling in the morning's meagre catch near Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Photo: GRAIN

The film's emphasis on sand mining reflects the immense problem that it creates. Some recount how coconut trees are uprooted and roads disappear as they get "eaten up" by the sea owing to sand mining. Olive Ridley turtles and rare species of mangrove are disappearing. Drinking water has been affected. According to some residents, the coastal strip used to stretch several kilometres inland, so groundwater was protected from seawater seepage. But now all the wells have salty water. To cap it all, the fishing communities are losing their livelihoods. Most fishing in Kerala is land-based seashore fishing. This has come to a standstill as the coastline shifts. Seawater flooding has become a regular occurrence after the removal of sand from a tourist village. In the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram, between 100 and 500 bags of sand, loaded on to an outrigger boat, are reportedly removed daily. In Valiaveli, sand covering about 175,000 square metres, to a depth of 4 metres, has reportedly been removed.

Even though the CRZ was never properly implemented, some activists say that industrial interests saw it as serious barrier and were constantly campaigning to weaken it. The film claims that it has so far undergone 19 alterations, each of which has authorised additional activities within the regulated zone. More recently, however, industrialists have been pressing for it to be scrapped altogether. In a report submitted to the central government in 2005, the M.S. Swaminathan Committee recommends that CRZ be replaced with Coastal Management Zone (CMZ). The report envisages an integrated management plan covering the coast and coastal waters to 12 nautical miles (22 km) out. Many view this report

as a roadmap for further opening up India's coast to an influx of private and commercial interests.

The film follows the activities of the Kerala Independent Fishworkers' Federation, which says that, if the CMZ is implemented, it will create a number of problems for them. First of all, it will enable sand miners to extend their activities to 12 nautical miles out to sea. Worse still, the fishing communities will lose housing rights, as they will not get titles to their land. Their customary access to the waters and the adjacent lands is thus in jeopardy. When interviewed in the film, Swaminathan (formerly director general of the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines) distances himself from the central government's decision, repeatedly downplaying his committee's role. "It's only a report we submitted", and "It's the government who will decide what to do with it", he says. The Kerala fisherfolk know exactly what to do with it. The film includes footage of a protest in front of the fisheries ministry office, where fisherfolk burned the Swaminathan report to show their indignation.

The film, despite its slow pace, tells a moving story of the interests of the small being sacrificed for the benefit of the big few. More importantly, it shows that the small are fighting back. Although set solely in India, the film captures very well one of the realities of globalisation: the marginalisation of small fishers for the benefit of commercial interests.

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/52cghw>

To order the film, visit <http://www.visualsearch.org>

To learn more about the struggles of the Kerala fishers, visit <http://keralafishworkers.org/>