A reflection on time & timeless

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meanwhile

Earth Witness deciphers the ABC of climate change in a comprehensive manner. It does not preach or blame, it simply tells a story of people.

International leaders and diplomats, passionate rows over treaties, global conferences in exotic locations, activists protesting outside Conference- zones are instances that flash when climate change is mentioned these days. Amidst the high adrenalin frenzy, Earth Witness, a documentary by filmmaker Ataniksha Joshi, reflects on the climate change through common people with a warm place for earth in their hearts. She trains her lens on the lives of people who are least responsible for the negative changes on earth but facing its direct consequences.

A father, a shepherd and a farmer — find themselves on the front line of earth’s biggest, most complex crisis: “climate change.”

Belonging to India’s ancient tribes, they bear witness to the changes that affect their day-to-day life. Living in diverse climatic regions — the mountains of Nagaland, the grasslands of Kutch, the Gangetic delta and the forests of Central India — they have learnt how to be one with nature and survive. Their lives journey through the dark labyrinth of the multidimensional crisis, reflecting upon the stories of our times of trees, mining, monkeys, logging, rivers, seeds, waterfalls, flowers — and the spirit of the timelessness.

For Joshi, whose work ranges from short telefilms to documentaries, Earth Witness is an attempt to come closer to nature. “I really wanted to connect with earth, but had no clue how. I can’t immediately start at a river and talk. I knew there were certain people who live as a part of it. I knew their relation with the earth is from within. What we call an ecosystem is their home.”

The film, which won awards at CMS Varanasi Environment and Wildlife Film Festival 2011, explores various ecosystems to narrate its tale of nature.

The opening shot zooms into a forest ecosystem in Chhattisgarh where the father, Shikari Baiga lives. The ancient tribe of Baiga has always been a part of the Central highlands of India. This protagonist reveals how he has been witness to massive soil erosion and decreasing level of water in a short-span of 10 years. Choosing lucidity over jargon, he says, “In Daldali 75 villages have been removed to make way for the bauxite mines [the not needed]. Due to the blasting, the water level has gone down further.”

Shikari, who is planning to create a collective seed bank for climate emergencies and future generations, points out at various indigenous seeds which can be grown even in unfavourable weather conditions.

The concept of packet seed from some other place is alien to this teacher. She believes what is gifted by nature is best suited to the place and humans should not create confusion among various ecosystems.

Dryland ecosystem’s Doongra Rabari, a shepherd, appears on the story-line with herds of sheep in a village near Reni of Kutch. This young boy of a semi-nomadic tribe shares a piece from his “not very old past” — the time when he would go back home early after his animals would graze. This was the time when rains would quench the thirst of mother earth without delay and the Rabaris and their animals were invited by farmers to their fields over husk grass. This was the time when they did not pay the farmers to stay in their lands, or run on tar roads for a number of hours in search of forest lands.

The next character, Sudhakar Mondal, shares his wisdom on the screen from the coastal ecosystem of Sunderbans. Mondal, the farmer, believes that through storms, earthquakes and floods, the nature is giving signals to humans to give back her jungles. He has been observing the high frequency with which the Gange is continuously pushing back humans from its shores. Mondal, who depends on natural resources for farming and surviving, is training other farmers of his area for sustainable farming to save the soul of earth.

Earth Witness deciphers the ABC of climate change in a comprehensive manner for common people. It does not preach or blame. It simply tells a story of people and their journeys with nature. Joshi strikes a perfect balance between the hardships of documentary movies and a creative style of storytelling.