

Elizabeth D Costa about BANGLA SURF GIRLS

“If it tastes like sand, you have to clean it”

In Cox’s Bazar, on the Bangladesh coast, a young girl is riding the waves on her surfboard, all confidence and grace. “All my dreams are about surfing”, says Shobe. But those dreams might be different from the future that is awaiting her and her friends. Now that the girls are growing up, sooner or later choices need to be made, and conflicts will be unavoidable. In the coming of age documentary BANGLA SURF GIRLS Canadian filmmaker Elizabeth D Costa captures this gang of young *surfettes* at a crucial moment in their lives.

Elizabeth D Costa: Shobe and her friends are marginalised, trying to break with the traditional woman’s lifestyle of being inside the house, taking care of the family. They have dreams! Surfing is the vehicle that makes them move forward as equal human beings in a conventional society.

Is the Bangladesh coastline a surfer’s paradise?

Costa: Cox’s Bazar is one of the grow-

ing tourist places in Bangladesh. This is the world’s longest sand beach; there is huge potential for this area. Surfing itself is a new concept in Bangladesh. The waves in Cox’s Bazar are perfect for beginners; this is a safe haven to strengthen the basics and slowly build up your skills. More and more locals are showing an interest in surfing; the subculture is growing.

How did you come across these girls?

Costa: I went to visit Cox’s Bazar and saw little girls selling jewellery or hard boiled eggs to tourists at the beachside. I was kind of sad to see them as young as 12 or 13 working so hard to make money. Then I met the same girls at the beach, carrying their surfboards. That is where my curiosity kicked in. I found out about Rashed, teaching them how to surf. I had the chance to visit the girls at home, and they welcomed me with open hearts. When I saw the contrast between these same girls in their houses and at the beachside, I knew this was a story that needed to be told. I spoke



to Canadian producer Lalita Krishna and that is how BANGLA SURF GIRLS was conceived.

Water and salt don’t seem like a perfect match for a film crew. How did your camera survive?

Costa: Who said it survived? I had to give up on my first ever camera, one GoPro and a tripod! This film stands on lots of sacrifices. Water and sea

salt were our enemies, and then there was the sand. Every day I had to spend approx. 3 hours cleaning every piece of equipment. After you think you have cleaned your devices, you should use the tip of your tongue, and if it still tastes like sand, you have to clean it once more. During the rainy season salt got into my main camera, and ruined the motherboard. One GoPro was washed away, and the sand that



got into the tripod ruined its stabilization system. At first, I worked with a DoP and a sound recordist, but we all felt that whenever they were around, the raw candid moments and true observations were getting interrupted. So I decided to take the camera myself. The houses had no constant electricity nor enough space, so operating as a one-person-crew was the only way to record intimate shots.

The girls sound super convincing. How did you get them this far?

Costa: It was a matter of trust, as well as the girls being super talkative anyway. Shobe was always confident about herself, even with the camera pointing at her. I guided them a little by saying that the film might be watched by many people so we'd better not sugarcoat anything. What they gave me was total authenticity.

Their situation is defined by social structures like the role of the parents, relations between fathers and daughters, the judgement of the community, etc.

Costa: The film shows you all these different sides of the community. These girls did not have any icon or idol to follow in their families when trying to break with regular norms in a male-dominated society. But in the



end, poverty is the defining factor.

What about their mothers? Might they somehow support their daughters, and secretly be proud of them?

Costa: It is not easy for a mother in this country to show her support in a big way. Of course they are secretly supporting them; their silence says everything. They can feel their daughters gaining freedom and independence through surfing, which in a way are the opportunities that they have always been missing.

How difficult was it for you to stick to your neutral position? Can you imagine that at a certain moment you would have actively intervened in the lives of your characters?

Costa: We discussed in our Chicken & Egg pictures lab about the director's role. Finding balance was indeed super difficult, as I am also acting as their big sister. I always showed them several options and the consequences of their choices. Ultimately they made their own decisions. I wanted good for them but at the same time I wanted to tell authentic stories for the world to see them.

People watching this film might feel the urge to give a sign of support.

Costa: We certainly want to achieve something tangible with our film. The Surf Club is dependent on sporadic funding from the US, which is not sustainable. Lalita and I have partnered with a local NGO; Jaago Foundation,

a registered charity. Through them, we have set up an endowment programme that will ensure that our girls can continue to surf, teach swimming and surfing to the younger ones, and continue their education. We hope people will learn more about this programme on www.banglasurfgirls.com and make their contributions to ensure the security of future generations of young girls.

Is it possible that change might come?

Costa: Change takes time, and comes with frustrations. Shobe and Ayesha are role models, they can change the lives of future generations. The film demonstrates how small interventions can bring about a huge change.

Does the ending feel like a victory to you, or like a defeat?

Costa: To me, this is a 'Don't give up' moment. There is both victory and defeat, but we assure you these girls won't give up.

–
Gert Hermans
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