

## Seaweed Cultivation in the Gulf of Mannar Women of Ramanathapuram dive deep to make a living

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● **WOMEN'S ENTRY** : Tamil Nadu coast is divided into four sub divisions—Coromandel, Palk Bay, Gulf of Mannar and the Western coast. Although each hamlet has its own unique character, all of them treat it the sea as a male preserve and discourage their women from entering it. But a few thousand women divers have defied social convention to take up seaweed cultivation.

● **TYPES OF SEAWEED** : More than 140 seaweed species are found in Gulf of Mannar. Indigenous *Gelidelia*, *Sargassum*, *Turbinaria* harvested in Gulf of Mannar, a protected area. Red algae seaweed from Philippines, Indonesia are also cultivated.

● **SEAWEED CULTIVATION** : Cultivated in Palk Bay area from Rameswaram to Pudukottai, employs about 25,000 people.

● Green, Blue and Brown algae are harvested by women divers.

● Women divers number 5,000; are spread in 25 fishing hamlets of Ramanathapuram.

● **THE ECONOMICS** : Diving for 8 hours, a group may harvest nearly 400 kg of fresh weed, which will shrink to 150-200 kg after drying.

● Green algae sold at Rs. 8 per kg, brown algae at Rs. 15 per kg when dried.

● Seaweed processing majors buy it at Rs 4 per fresh weed and Rs. 25 for dry weed.

● **USES** : Fresh seaweed is used to make organic liquid manure for plants.

● Carrageenan extracted from dry weed, used in foods, cosmetics like toothpaste, soft drinks, and chocolates.

● Research is also on to use this seaweed for bio-diesel extraction.

● **LOCAL CUISINE** : Green algae boiled to extract gel like substance. Milk, sugar added to make a sweet.

● Dried seaweed powder or gel obtained from boiling green algae used to make seaweed tender coconut halva.

As heavy winds lash the Ramanathapuram coast, A. Mariammal and her niece M. Rasakka sit outside their shanty and stare listlessly at the turbulent sea—the same blue space that swallowed their tiny fishing hamlet and their friends who ventured in to eke out a living that fateful morning on December 26, 2004. But the two can't wait for the gale to calm to take on the waves. Every day lost comes at a price.

"The tide at this time is dangerous as the winds are

strong and unpredictable. Four women who went diving recently drowned", says Mariammal, "But if this continues, we have no choice. We will have to say our prayers and enter the ocean," she says. Mariammal and Rasakka, who live in Sadaimunivalasai, 30km from Ramanathapuram, are among 5,000-odd women divers who have turned breadwinners for their families after they lost their men to the tsunami.

But dividing for seaweed in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mannar is not merely a source of income for women in hamlets along the Ramanathapuram coast, starting from Valinokkam to Pamban. For many, it's also the road to gender empowerment in a deeply patriarchal society—fisherfolk treat the sea as a male preserve, with the women usually confined to the task of selling the produce or processing it.

As dawn breaks, these women head into the water with a pair of goggles and makeshift flippers. Till noon they harvest seaweed, which is then carted off to the market for supply to a growing food processing industry. Carrageenan extracted from dry weed is used in foods and cosmetics including toothpaste, soft drinks, and chocolates. "Life hasn't been easy though," says Rasakka.

"Not only has the harvest dropped drastically, we are also frequently harassed by forest officials who say this is a protected area", Mariammal and Rasakka are first generation divers, who found themselves at the cross-roads after the giant waves swept away most members of their family. Rasakka, 35, had never ventured into the sea, until the tsunami. In most fishing villages, it is considered taboo for women to enter the sea. Tamil Nadu's coast is divided into four sub-divisions—Coromandel, Palk Bay, Gulf-of-Mannar and the western stretch. While the church plays a big role in the Gulf of Mannar and the western coast, village councils dictate terms in Coromandel and Palk Bay areas. Although each hamlet has its own character, all of them discourage women from setting out into the sea, "Women take up as much work as men, but we stick to the shore. We wait for the men to return with the catch", says Fatima Babu of Veeranganai Movement in Tuticorin.

"There is a popular belief in many parts that women venturing into the sea will defile it," she says, But in several pockets, economic circumstances and social changes have prompted them to defy convention and take recourse to the same sea that swept away their families. The women seaweed divers of Ramanathapuram are among them. Not everyone has