

# Following Fish

Since the late 1980s, thousands of men from the coastal villages of Andhra Pradesh, India, have travelled to Gujarat to work as skippers and crew on board mechanized fishing boats

On clear nights, when the fish are aplenty in the nets and he can take a break from steering, S Apparao thinks of his little house in Srikakulam on the northern coast of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Two lamps, one in the cabin and another on the mast of his 15-m boat, Parshuram, light up a tiny circle of the sea as it rolls under him. The first time he'd been out to sea as a boy, fishing near Visakhapatnam in his home state, this gentle motion that now rocks him to sleep had nearly thrown him overboard; he'd been sick for several hours afterwards.

That day, he'd set out before dawn, and the sun had risen ahead of the boat. These days, he looks toward the land

trade—which was losing out to modern shipping—and moved into fishing. Today, Gujarat's boats account for a quarter of the country's marine fish catch and over 8,000 registered boats pass through the state's busiest harbour, Veraval, alone.

Over the years, deep-sea fishermen from Andhra Pradesh have replaced those from Valsad and Kerala as workers on the boats. Though there is no official count, anecdotal estimates put the number of migrants at 25,000 every season. They earn up to three times as much in Gujarat as they do fishing in small traditional canoes back home. A *tandel* like Apparao, with over 10 years of experience, makes Rs 21,000 every month and a *khalasi* is paid about half that sum (one US\$ was equal to Rs. 68 in December 2016).

The highlight, they said, is the steady salary, paid in a lumpsum at the start of the fishing season. "Fishing is a gamble," Apparao told me in July, standing outside his home in Srikurmam Machilesam village. "You don't know if you'll catch anything on a given day." Apparao himself only studied till the fifth grade but he said that most of the migrants over 40 had never gone to school. After nearly a decade in Gujarat, Apparao was able to rebuild his mud house with brick and cement, and aims to complete another floor for his son by next year.

## Punishing work

In Gujarat, the money is steady but the work is punishing: an average fishing trip is nearly 20 days long and the men—nine to a cabin the length of a small car—have no steady work and rest hours. The hunt for a big catch takes them as far south as Karnataka and Kerala, which doesn't win them any friends among local fishermen.

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for the sunrise; on the small radio in the cabin, the voices of other fishermen in Marathi or Malayalam alert him to where he is on the Arabian Sea.

Since the late 1980s—when there were too many fishermen and too few fish in the water—thousands of men from Andhra Pradesh's coastal districts of Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam, have travelled to the busy fishing harbours of Gujarat, working as *tandels* (skippers) and *khalasis* (crewmen) on mechanized fishing boats owned by local *kharwa* merchants. Only a fraction of Gujaratis eat fish but in the 1960s the state's enterprising sea-faring castes had spotted the opportunity early and shifted from traditional maritime

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“We’re in trouble if we ever run out of fuel in these areas,” said M Sandiyya, a *khalasi* also from Machilesam. “The local fishermen don’t allow us to dock our boats on shore and sometimes they even confiscate our catch.”

Back at the Veraval harbour, the boats dock for just a day or two to restock fuel, ice and rations. During the eight months they spend in Gujarat, the men wake up every morning on a boat.

Veraval lies three hours south of Porbandar on Gujarat’s 1,600-km-long coastline. On streets that smell of fish and damp wood, almost everybody is employed in the fishing industry, but the town is better known on Gujarat’s cultural map for a few shabby hotels that house pilgrims to the Somnath temple 7 km away. Once every week, the Dwarka Express travels 52 hours and nearly 3,000 km from Puri—mostly ferrying migrant workers from Odisha and Andhra Pradesh to industrial centres in Gujarat—stopping at the Veraval railway station to drop off fishermen like Apparao. But in earlier times the port saw visitors from other places than Srikakulam. It’s now forgotten history to most of

its residents, but for a few old Muslim sailors, that its merchants traded in textiles, dates and—even earlier—in horses, from West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula.

A few old merchant buildings crumbling in the sea air—one houses the Customs Department—hint at this history. But the Gujarati business classes are not the nostalgic kind; there’s little time for anything but work and the *aartis* at the famous temple next door. Most conversations begin with the salutation “Jai Somnath”, even among the Andhra fishermen when they’re in Veraval. The closest movie theatre is nearly two hours away in Junagadh. (Srikakulam has at least seven theatres, all packed through the day.) In most cabins on the boats, the tiny 10-inch television-cum-DVD-player is equipment as essential to the men as Garmin GPS systems or fish-finders.

Besides being the country’s biggest fishing harbour, the town has a thriving boat-manufacturing industry, a large number of ice factories and over 100 fish-processing units, most of which export to Europe and China. One such

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Workers pack fish into crates to be unloaded from the fishing craft as it returns to the Veraval harbour, Gujarat, India. The boats dock for just a day or two to restock fuel, ice and rations. During the eight months they spend in Gujarat, the men wake up every morning on a boat

unit is managed by Kenny Thomas, whose company Jinny Marine is one of the larger exporters approved by the European Union (EU). Inside its sterilized factory, over 300 local women clean, sort and pack squid and shrimp into neat, impeccably labelled containers headed for supermarkets in Spain and Portugal. “Women are preferred because they can do this sort of work faster and more efficiently,” said Thomas. Nimble hands, he explained with a shrug, for customers that wouldn’t want any grazed calamari on their plates.

Thomas, though, is one of the responsible employers in a more regulated arm of the industry. Kenny’s father, K M Thomas, arrived in Bharuch as a fisheries officer in 1963 and was instrumental in introducing mechanized fishing in the area. He later became a fisherman and went into the export business himself. Jinny Marine has fair working conditions and even hostels for its migrant workers; labour inspectors and EU norms ensure greater labour protection in the processing units than on the boats.

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Srikakulam is a bustling coastal town nearly three hours northeast of Vishakhapatnam. There, I met Mylapalli Trinada Rao, who has tried to draw the government’s attention to a darker side of the migrant’s experience. Last year, Rao, a stocky, affable director of the state Fishermen Co-operative’s Federation (APCOF), wrote to Prime Minister with a list of over 60 names, of fishermen from the district who had drowned in Gujarat, Goa and Odisha since 1990. The number may not seem alarming in a country where industrial accidents and farmer suicides are all too common, but Rao pointed out that not one body has been returned to the families, who have also not got

the compensation promised by state laws. He didn’t expect a reply from the Government but claimed that there’s been no action from the Fisheries Departments of any state.

In the Srikakulam villages I visited, some of the men spoke a little Hindi and Gujarati but the women only Telugu, and they’d never talked to their husbands’ employers in Veraval. Apparao remembered the time when one of his crewmen fell into the sea and was later found tangled in the nets. “It was too late when we brought him up. We packed the body with ice in the fish hold and turned back towards Veraval,” he said. But in that instance, the *seth* sent the body back to the village with another *khalasi*.

Apparao’s *seth*, Tulsibhai Gohel, is president of Veraval’s boat owners association, the Kharva Sanyukta Machhimar Boat Association. It’s the only grouping resembling a union but designed to service capital rather than labour. Gohel is a lean, light-eyed and respected president who, like several investors in the trade, owns about half a dozen boats. Apparao said his *seth* is a good man, one of the few who gives his crew a bonus every year and doesn’t grudge when they return with a meagre catch.

When I met him in Veraval in July, Gohel was finishing with a meeting with local officials to launch a *Swachh Bharat* (clean India) drive at the boat jetty. Dressed in a formal shirt and derby leather shoes, he was driven in his Toyota Innova to a modest association office, where, seated on a faded cushion on the floor, he oversaw the settlement of a few minor disputes. There was no mention of the workers in the matters that came up for discussion. Later, I asked Gohel how he dealt with cases of men drowning at sea. “There are very few because we don’t let the men carry alcohol on the boats,” he assured me. “All the accidents happen at the harbour when the boats are back. The men sometimes drink at night and fall into the water between the parked boats.”

Apparao agrees. (He stopped drinking a few years ago while on vacation in Srikakulam when he realized he was draining his savings.)



Migrant and local fishers always work separately to avoid fights. Labour inspectors and EU norms ensure greater labour protection in the processing units than on the boats

But others in his village denied that the deaths were caused by drinking alone. “How many deaths can you have at the harbour?” asked Sandiyya. Marine fishing laws require all boats to be equipped with lifejackets, buoys and even portable toilets. Few boats in Veraval have lifejackets and for toilets the men sit precariously on the narrow bulwark, hold on to the rigging and point their backsides outward as the sea pitches the boat from side to side.

In Veraval, the sun-bleached marine police station sits on a deserted beach outside the town. Inside, a Constable, thumbed through a large register to find me the information on deaths at sea this year. There were two: a Bhagwan-bhai from a village in Valsad and Ramlu Badi of Dagalu in Srikakulam, as they appeared in the careless handwriting of a station officer. There was no other information; when I tried to find Dagalu in Srikakulam, I was told there’s no such village.

One morning at the start of June, with the sun rising over Veraval *bundur*, the *Parashuram* set out on another long trip down the western coast, packed with over 7 tonnes of ice and enough ration for Apparao and

his crew. This was the last trip of the season. The radio crackled with greetings of “Jai Somnath” between the other boats sailing out, and through his cabin window Apparao could see the giant temple on the edge of the coastline. They’d pass Mumbai in a day or two. The sea was a lot rougher because of the strong monsoon winds, and the men held on to the ropes. Normally, they could stand on their feet as the sea tossed the boat and still haul in the nets and sort the fish, but the men hadn’t been home in eight months. No accidents on this last trip.

Apparao thought about the festivities in Machilesam the previous year. It had been his village’s turn to host the *panchayat* for the feast of their guardian deity, Polamambamata. Most of the other tandels did nothing but eat and drink for the four months they were home. Not him; there were debts to settle and work that needed to be done on that first-floor bedroom. He felt the engine roaring under him as he turned the boat southward in the direction of the other boats. The screen of his fish-finder glowed with numbers and broad strokes of blue. Somewhere in there was that prize catch. 3

#### For more



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**A Study of Migrant Fishers from Andhra Pradesh in the Gujarat Marine Fishing Industry**