

their families back home or reconsider their decision to work in Saudi Arabia.

Resettlement measures are ad hoc: when workers, cheated by a company in Oman landed in Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam in October last year, they had too little cash with them for the bus fare home. Sensitised by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Telangana government gave Rs.500 to each of the returnees to head home.

Though this was hailed by some NGOs as a big achievement, the State government did not consider it a priority and the returnees themselves were not aware as to what to do or whom they should approach. NGO representatives in Telangana said that most of the workers tried to go abroad again. Some have been successful, while others try to adapt to their new realities. But the lure of the substantially higher wages for the same jobs they held here is too tempting to fade.

RETRENCHMENT OF WORKERS

"There are some reports of retrenchment of Indian workers and loss of jobs resulting from closure of companies as well as premature termination of existing contracts," an MEA note made available to the Parliamentary Standing Committee says. "Instances of unpaid dues/salaries have been reported from Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman in recent months. Kuwaiti authorities have imposed a hike in [rates in] availing medical treatment, charges for obtaining residency, etc., in respect of expatriate workers. The recent GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] crisis involving Qatar has created financial pressure on companies undertaking infrastructure projects and

may have potential adverse consequences for Indian workers," according to the note. On a question relating to problems faced by migrant workers upon their return to India, raised by a member of the Standing Committee on External Affairs, the MEA said that the government had launched a State Outreach Programme (Videsh Sampark series) from May 2017 to generate awareness in the States, and during such conferences with the States the resettlement and rehabilitation would be taken up at the higher level. But there are many challenges, as a result of which the returnees are short-changed.

In the view of the MEA, the problems include the inability of States to absorb the returnees and offer employment because of the already high unemployment rate, and the States' economic and employment situation not being strong enough to introduce social programmes and sociocultural reintegration of the returnees. The other important issue is the non-existence of establishments at the State government level to guide the returnees in an integrated and comprehensive manner, apart from the fact that the returnees are not preferred for any soft loans or other financial benefits.

It appears that even the system is geared to fleeing the returning migrant labourer. Often, during the seasons that workers travel home, air fares are abnormally high. When this was brought to the notice of the MEA, it flagged the issue with the Ministry of Civil Aviation. But there has been no solution in sight.

"Our mission in the UAE brought to our notice that the inadequate number of flights, especially during the Onam festival period, led to higher fare," the MEA said. "The Indian community in Sharjah and other emirates has also complained about this. Additional flights during this period would certainly contribute to more affordable fares for the Indian working class in the UAE."

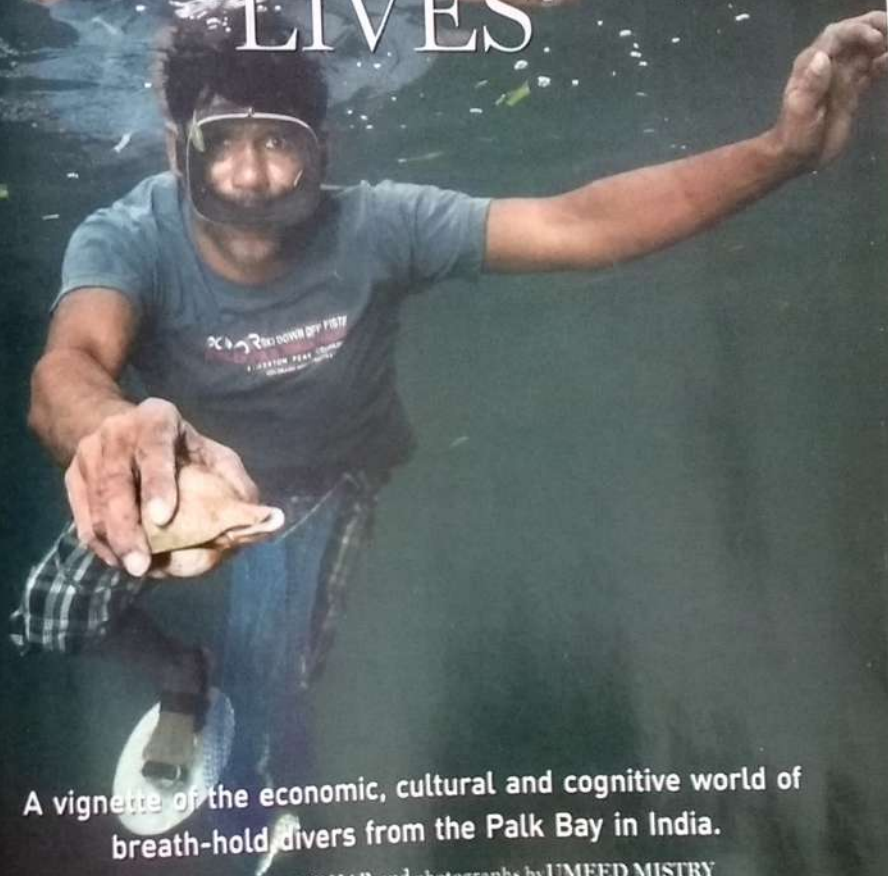
But there is a catch. Price is a factor of demand and supply. Indian carriers have not been able to utilise the full capacity allocated under Air Services Agreements for various reasons while Gulf carriers have been seeking permission for extra capacity on Indian routes. The Ministry of Civil Aviation is yet to take a favourable decision on this issue.

Over the next few years, it appears very certain that more Indian labourers who had migrated to the Gulf states—about 8.5 million legally—will head back home. As West Asian countries grapple with their new problems, economic downturn and political upheavals, instances of Indian workers being asked to leave before completion of their contracts will only rise. Cases of unpaid dues and wages have been reported from many countries, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait.

Most State governments are unaware of the issues of the returning workforce unless labourers are in conflict with the law and are jailed in a foreign country. As of now, the returning Indian migrant labourer has to largely fend for himself/herself: rebuild one's life in a setting that was left behind very many years ago and find a job to sustain oneself. □

LIVELIHOOD ISSUES

AMPHIBIOUS LIVES



A vignette of the economic, cultural and cognitive world of breath-hold divers from the Palk Bay in India.

Text by AARTHI SRIDHAR and photographs by UMEED MISTRY



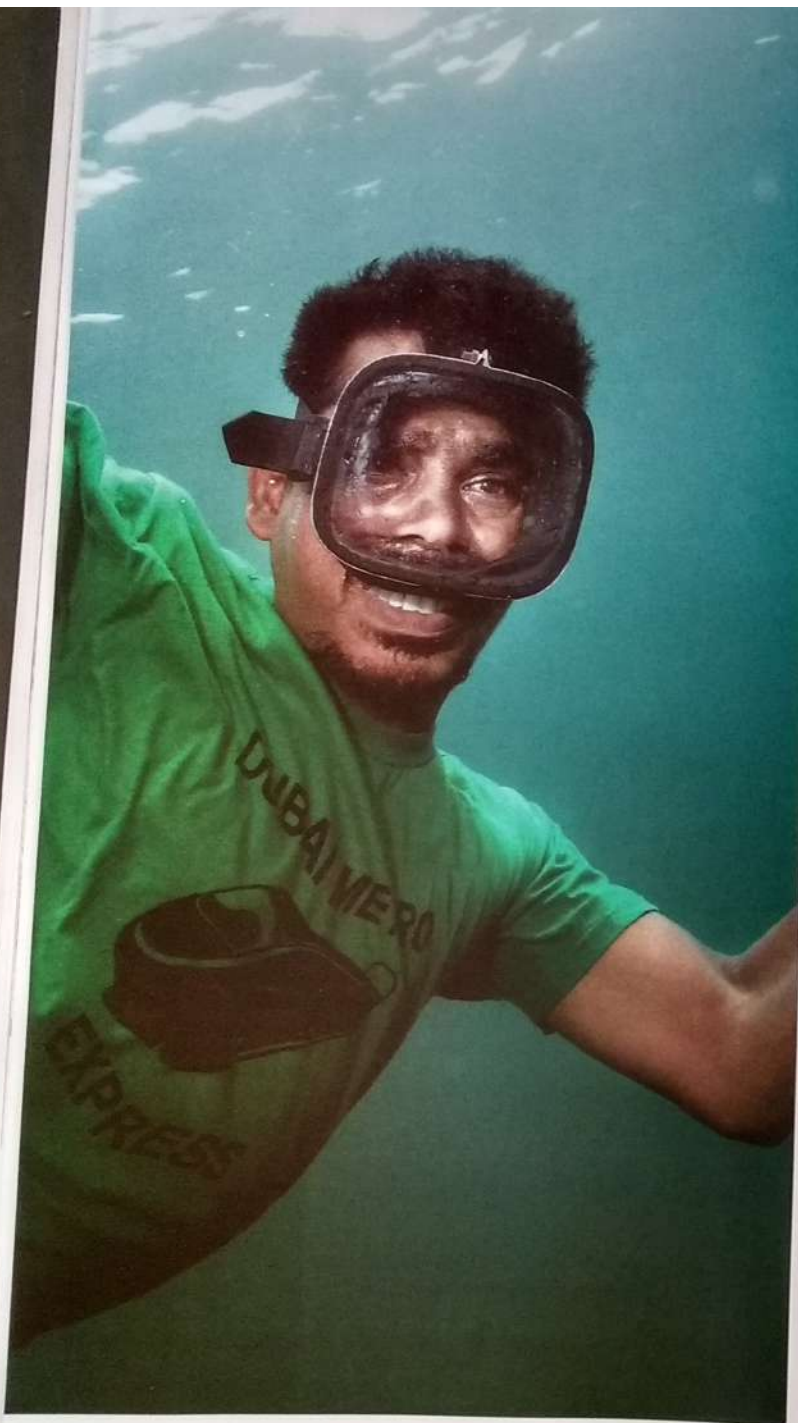
A FAMILY FROM NAGERCOIL in Tamil Nadu on its arrival from Yemen in Kochi by ship on April 18, 2015.



FISHING in marine waters—seas and oceans—demands traversing large expanses of open waters, which is possible only if fishers spend a considerable length of time on fishing vessels using a range of tools. Today, they include a variety of nets, pulleys, winches, ropes and electrical, digital and mechanical instruments. Fishers work with these tools to wrestle with the affordances and constraints of a realm that constantly tests the endurance of humans as a terrestrial species. Many bodily limitations they face out at sea on a constantly bobbing vessel. They have to combat seasickness; long hours of exposure to a combination of heat, cold, wind, salt spray and blinding light from the reflection of the sun on water; and the less-understood experience of *mal de débarquement*, or “sea legs”, the feeling of unsteadiness upon return to land. Great fiction such as *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway or *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck are excellent portrayals of the cognitive, emotional, and social trials of a life spent in fisheries, the former outlining a struggle on board and the latter tracing the (mis)fortunes of a pearl diver both underwater and on shore.

The human body is brought one step closer to an amphibious state in fishing practices such as breath-hold diving. Fishing by diving has been practised for thousands of years and is still prevalent in many parts of the world. Diving itself has undergone many changes to enable humans to spend long hours underwater and has incorporated equipment such as masks, fins, diving apparel, and scuba-related devices such as regulators, rebreathers, compressed air

FREEDIVING or breath-hold diving for pearl oysters (*Pinctada fucata*) and the sacred chank (*Turbinella pyrum*) has been practised for hundreds of years in the Palk Bay. However, today, only a few villages, such as Karangadu, Devipattinam and Olaikuda in Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, are sites of breath-hold diving, mostly for the collection of chanks.



AMONG THE few changes in freediving over the last two millennia is the introduction of the dive mask. It made its appearance in these waters around the 1950s. The design is modelled on the early single-window mask with a flat elliptical lens. The mask is held in place with a band of tyre rubber pulled over the head. The diver grips the rubber lining around the glass by biting it gently with his teeth or just holding it with the upper lip. Fishers find diving with masks more comfortable and profitable; almost no diver enters the water without it today. These masks are made in nearby towns and cities, and sometimes the components are sourced and the mask is assembled locally. Older divers recall buying their masks in Sri Lanka, while others sourced them from Thoothukudi, Madurai or Coimbatore. Unlike the two-window mask used in snorkelling or scuba diving these days, the mask used in the Palk Bay does not allow the diver to use the Valsalva manoeuvre (pinching the nose, closing the mouth and blowing air out through one's nose) to equalise pressure in the ears and sinuses while descending.



SWIM FINS, or pairs of circular fin plates locally known as "thatthu", is the other innovation, apart from the dive mask, in free diving in this region. Made of flattened aluminium with nylon strips as toe and ankle straps, these can be fashioned using even discarded material. The short circular fin plates appear to allow for greater manoeuvrability and, in combination with the sideways kick rather than the up-down motion of recreational swim fins, provide quick bursts of acceleration. Colonial records make no mention of either masks or fins, and fishers' oral accounts establish their entry only around the 1950s. Unlike in the Gulf of Mannar, in the Palk Bay's shallow waters, divers often prefer using a single fin plate on one foot, leaving the other foot bare in order to reduce the extra buoyancy from the fin plate. The final item of attire is a simple waist bag, mostly fashioned out of discarded netting, tied to the diver's waist to store the catch.

A 2004 STUDY by the scholar K. Athiyaman and N. Rajan noted that in order to yield large supplies, pearl and chank fisheries had to be conducted as large-scale operations often with hundreds of boats and skilled divers controlled by the state machinery. Today, breath-hold diving for chank in the Palk Bay takes place as an individual enterprise, a situation that arose after chank fishers organized themselves and wrested control of the fisheries from the Tamil Nadu government in the 1970s.





tanks or access to an above-water air source such as those used in diving bells and "hookah diving" (where long hoses connect a mouthpiece to a compressor on board).

Fishing by simple breath-hold diving, on the other hand, retains, in this contest, the principle limitation of humans as air-breathing terrestrial species and is one of the closest ways in which the human body can expose itself intimately to the vagaries of becoming amphibious.

Freediving in its longer version of breath-hold diving is popular across the world today as an elite sport in which highly fit individuals compete with themselves and/or others to achieve greater limits of depth, technique and experience. Its elite status is partly derived from its practitioners and their purpose—often relatively well-off individuals who dive as a form of competitive recreation even though it can result in economic benefits (through awards, celebrity and exclusivity-related social capital). Freediving also attracts many individuals to use diving as a form of self-awareness and improvement since it forces divers to confront and attempt to transcend their physical and mental limitations.

Contrasted with such diving, the breath-hold diving practised by hundreds of fishers across the world is not quite as glamorous and is akin to an image of labour rather than that of leisure. But is labour all that one can discern from such fishing practices? Does the social status of these divers and their livelihood compulsions obscure their skills, experience and innovation?

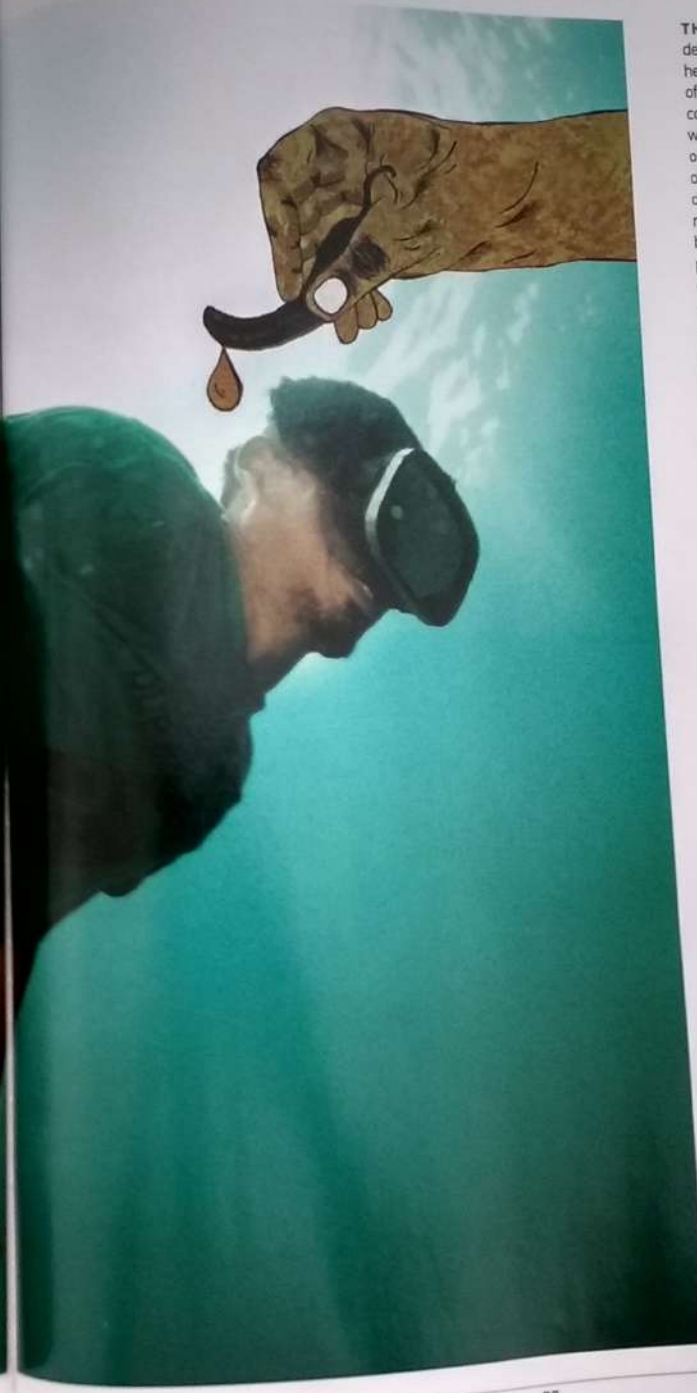
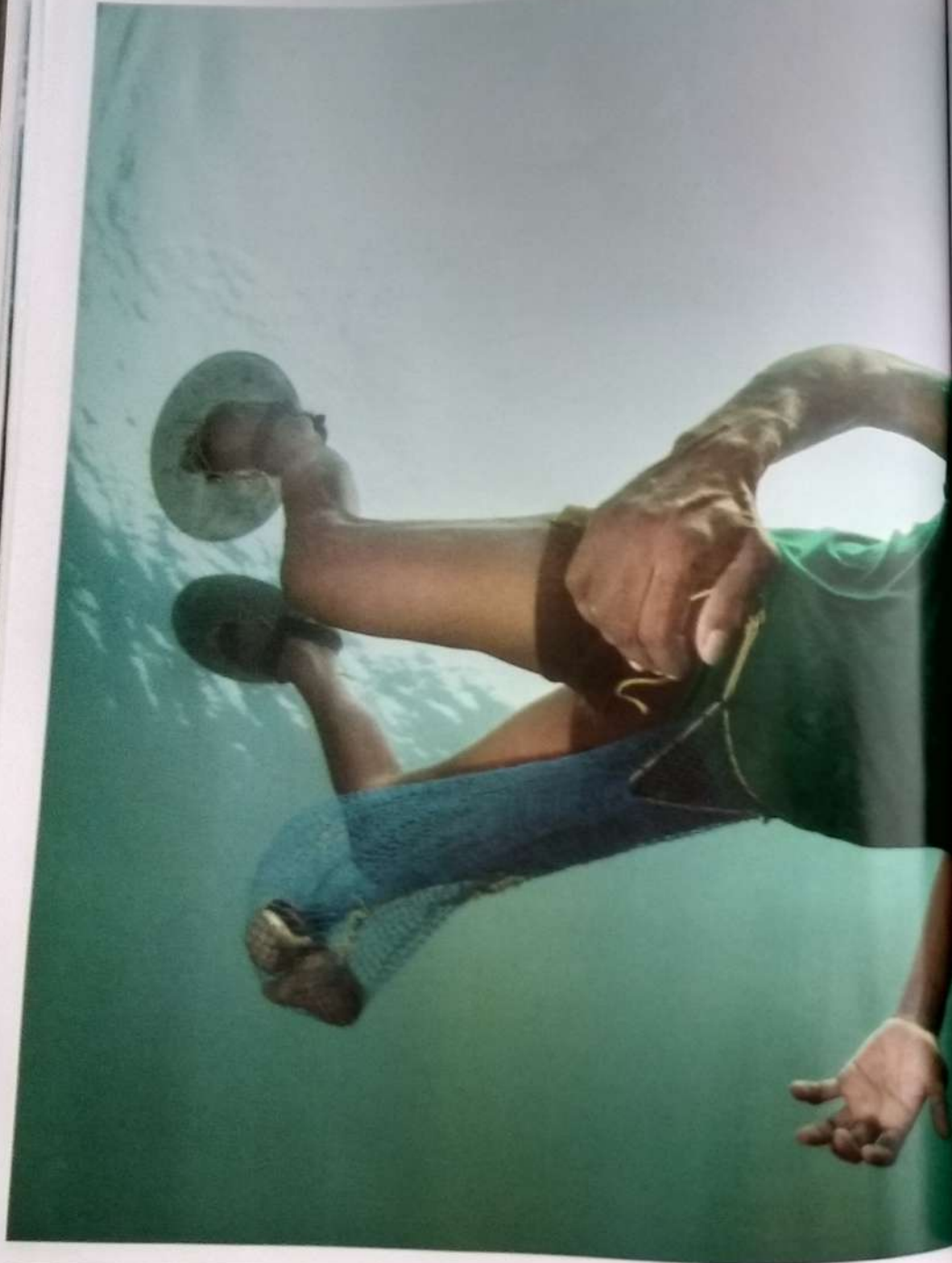
This photo essay is a vignette of the economic, cultural and cognitive world of breath-hold divers from the Palk Bay in India; amphibious lives often hidden and forgotten in the excitement and privilege emblematic of recreational diving or the growing techno-capital dependency of com-

paratively disembodied fishing. The Palk Bay, abutting south coastal Tamil Nadu in India, is a shallow region where the depth exceeds 15 metres only in some areas. This geomorphologic feature of shallow water, along with oceanographic qualities such as seabed features, salinity, sedimentation, water currents and temperature, makes for a rich marine biodiversity dominated by seagrass ecosystems. While breath-hold diving for pearl oysters (*Pinctada fucata*) and the sacred chank (*Turbinella pyrum*) has been practised for hundreds of years along the coasts of present-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu, today this practice is restricted to the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay in Tamil Nadu.

In the Palk Bay, all the action is largely in the coastal belt of Ramanathapuram district, where fishing by diving is practised mainly by men belonging to the Kadaiyar and Paravar castes. It is most actively seen today in the villages of Karangad, Devipattinam and Olaikuda, where fishers dive to collect molluscs such as the sacred chank and ornamental molluscs, but also to spear fish, lay traps and opportunistically collect other marine creatures. The active and open fisheries for sea cucumbers was curtailed by a ban imposed in 2002 by the then Union Ministry of Environment and Forests on the basis of concerns about their depletion. This ban continues to be opposed by a number of fishers who are unconvinced by the depletion argument. They took out a protest in early 2017 at Devipattinam, arguing that the ban was unjustified and that it had driven the business underground.

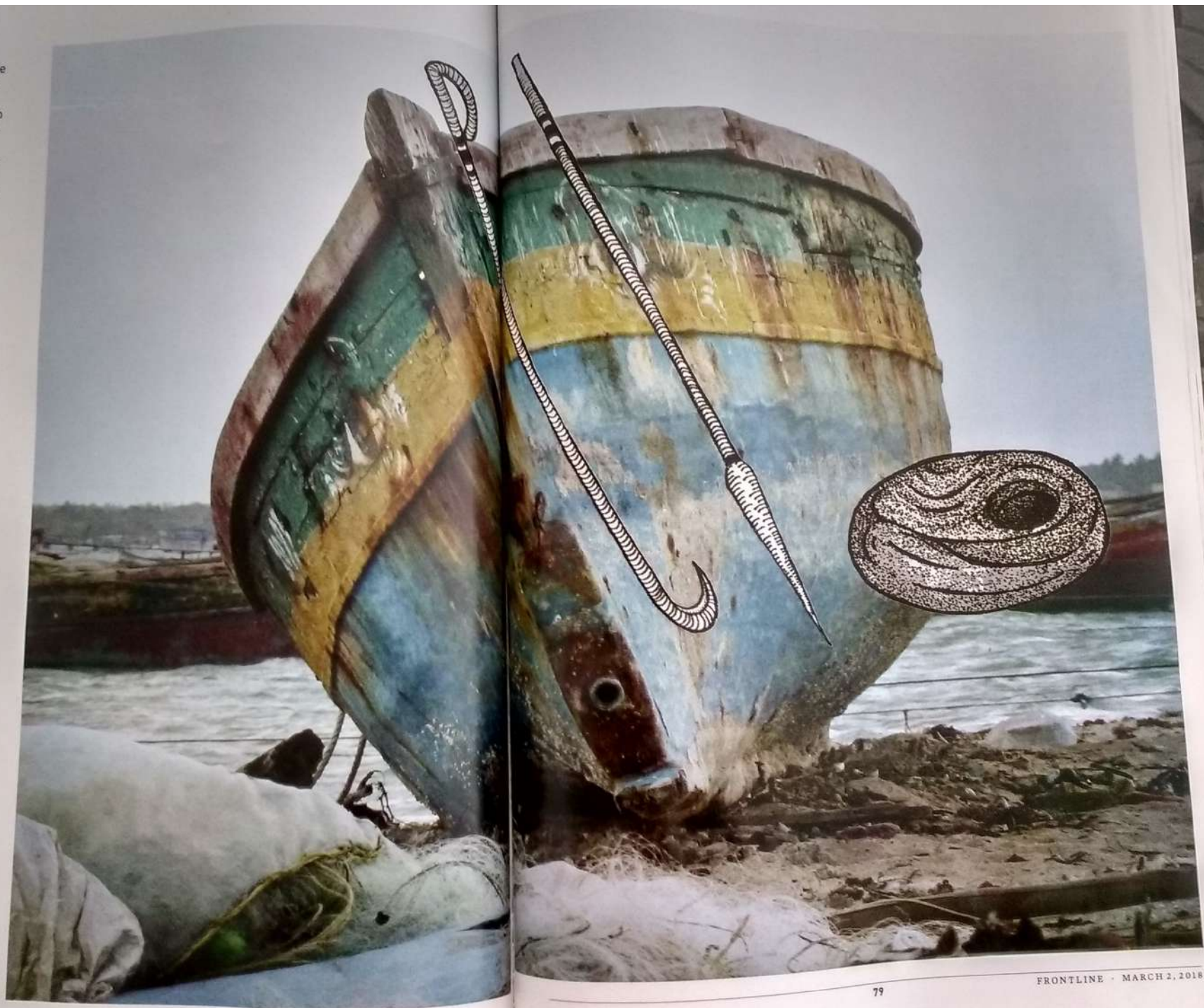
Few scientific studies have been done on the social world of fishers along this coast and fewer still have focussed on the relations between the people of this coastline and the marine creatures and environments they engage with. Travelling along

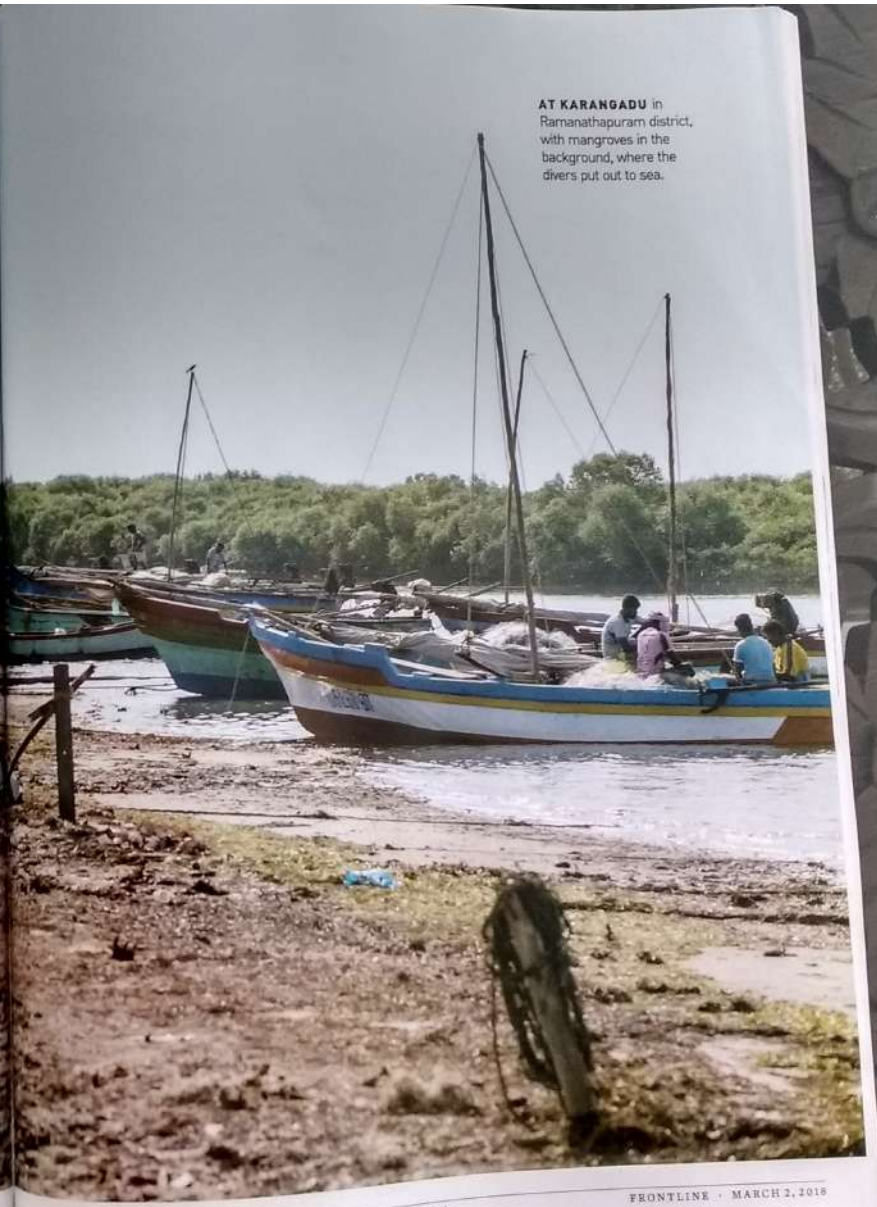
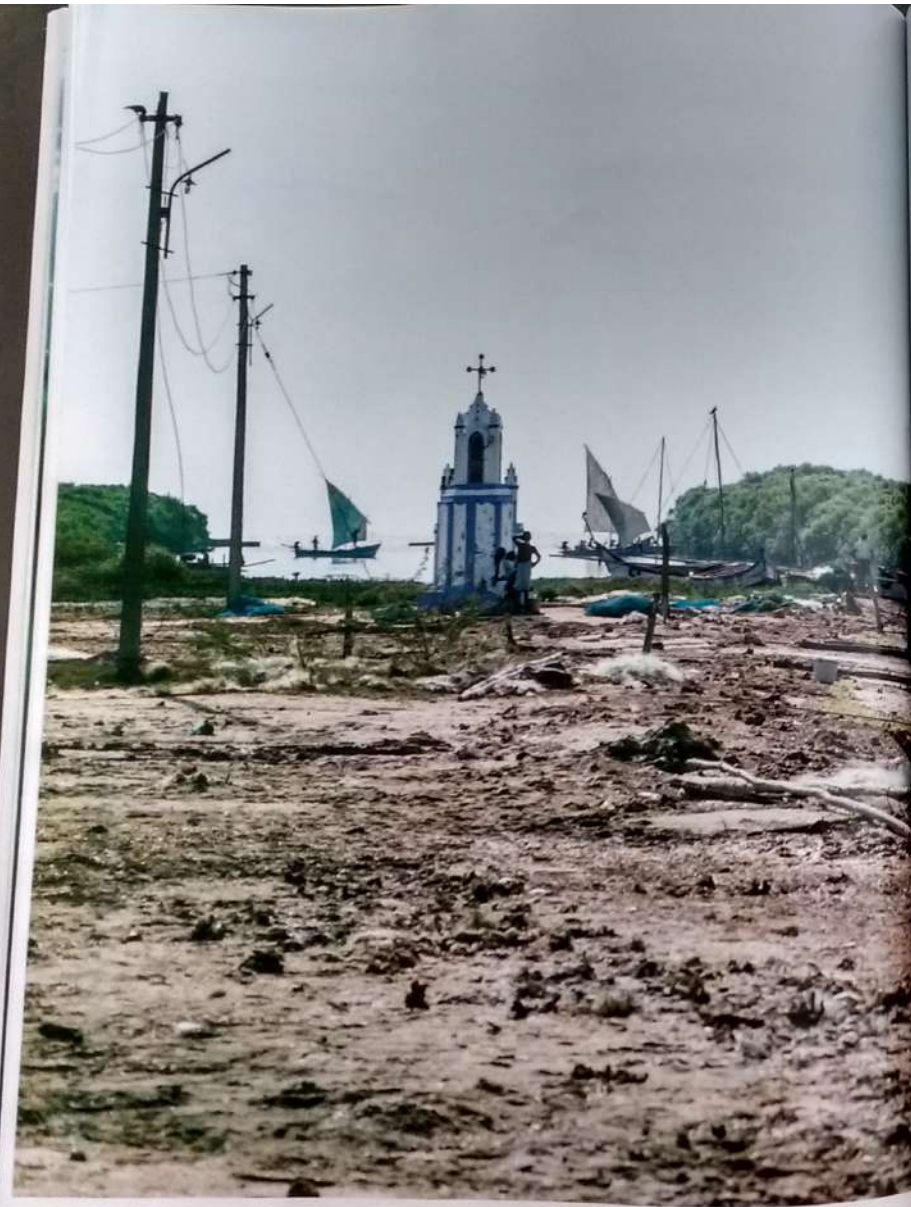
THE PALK BAY is a shallow region where the depth exceeds 15 metres only in some areas. The shallow water, along with oceanographic qualities such as seabed features, salinity, sedimentation, water currents and temperature, makes for a rich marine biodiversity dominated by seagrass ecosystems.



THERE HAVE not been any detailed studies on nutrition, health or medicinal practices of fishers for relief from common problems associated with diving, such as ear injuries or inflamed sinuses. A number of divers in the Palk Bay speak of traditional home cures and remedies to address ear barotraumas. To bring relief to pain in the inner ear, coconut or neem oil is first poured into a heated red chilli. After cooling the oil slightly, it is poured from the chilli directly into the ears of the diver and is said to bring about relief within a day. Other practices include the application of pastes of specific plants onto the forehead of divers to relieve inflammation of the sinuses. In the early decades of the 20th century, Japanese colonial research interests led to several studies on the techniques, social life and the physiology of breath-hold divers from South Korea and Japan. However, it is not known if scientists in British India studied the physiology of breath-hold divers either in the Palk Bay, the Gulf of Mannar or even in the Persian Gulf. There have been no systematic studies of fishing communities of the Palk Bay on the physiological adaptations or the pathophysiology associated with breath-hold diving.

DIVERS in the Palk Bay, unlike their counterparts in the waters off Thoothukudi in the Gulf of Mannar, do not use ropes and stones or weights to help them descend because it is never too deep. However, they do carry on board spears and hooks, which they use to catch fish, lobsters, octopuses, and so on. The boats used in both waters also differ substantially, with those in Thoothukudi now using large in-board-engine-powered vallams, while in the Palk Bay the boats are smaller and with outboard engines. Clearly, contemporary practices of freediving in the Palk Bay have been shaped by regional histories of pearl and chank fisheries, including changes in ownership and organisation of these fisheries. Besides, of course, transnational changes in fisheries technologies, technological innovations in diving practices and mechanised fishing technologies such as bottom trawling. Ironically, while these social and technological changes brought relative ease for the diver both underwater and on land in some ways, they also introduced greater hardship and uncertainty with the overall changes in the ecosystem. By the 1960s pearl fisheries disappeared altogether, and today chank and many large fish from this region are less visible to these traditional hunters of the sea.





AT KARANGADU in Ramanathapuram district, with mangroves in the background, where the divers put out to sea.



BREATH-HOLD DIVERS in the Palk Bay live modest lives, often hidden and forgotten in the excitement and privilege emblematic of recreational diving. Freediving also attracts individuals to use diving as a form of self-awareness and improvement since it forces divers to confront and attempt to transcend their physical and mental limitations.

this coastline in 2015 and 2016 while researching for a documentary film on the diversity of fishing practices among small-scale fishers in the Palk Bay, my colleagues and I had the opportunity to encounter the world of divers in this region. Focussing on the historical village of Karangad, we followed the Pattangatti Kadaiyar families who continue to dive seasonally for the sacred chank. We filmed on a tight schedule and a tighter budget but witnessed the ingenuity of small-scale fishers. The documentary, *Fishing Palk Bay*, is available on YouTube. Some historical accounts trace the historicity of the parish of Karangad to the early 1600s, but these church-related records provide few accounts of its members' amphibious world. For

this, one must not just be in Karangad and follow its village life, but also find the means to follow the divers in the water.

Divers from these villages occupy two distinct realms at all times, one terrestrial and the other marine. This amphibiousness is visible not just from the embodied effects of being underwater such as in dietary practices or medicinal treatments derived from terrestrial plants and their use in combating barotrauma, but also in cultural artefacts that ease being underwater. The artefacts crafted and redesigned to suit breath-hold diving in this region reflect not just the demands of this shallow sea's influence but also the material transactions and economic opportunities and limitations of the

world on shore. The images presented with this article provide a peek into a complex and less-understood life. □

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(To see a fuller collection of photo essays on marine life in the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar, write to aarathi77@gmail.com for a copy of the book *Knowing the Palk Bay* produced with support from the Coastal and Marine Protected Areas (CMPA) project of GiZ India.)

The Jaina way of dying

The two volumes are about the unique Jaina tradition that sanctions self-killing for spiritual ends. BY SHONALEEKA KAUL

LIVING in violent times as we do, where the cavalier loss of hundreds of human lives the world over is daily news, reading a book on death can be at once discomfiting and strangely salutary. The sense of discomfiture and finding a perspective are amplified when the book is about a spiritual tradition that actively prescribes death, that too for spiritual ends. *Inviting Death* and *Pursuing Death* are two such books—twin volumes actually—by S. Settar, the veteran historian of Jainism and of the region in India where it flourished, Karnataka.

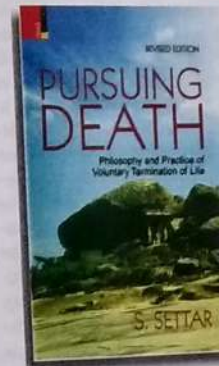
The volumes were first published in 1986 and 1990 respectively. The editions under review have been reprinted by a different publisher. Both the volumes deal with the theory and practice of the Jaina concept of self-termination in medieval times. *Sallekhana* (death by starvation) is the most well-known term for this but is only one of several ways that Jainism prescribes for putting an end to one's life to facilitate liberation of the soul (*atman*).

The difference between the two volumes, however, is that *Inviting Death* is based almost ex-



Inviting Death
Historical Experiments on Sepulchral Hill

By S. Settar
Primus Books
(Revised Edition), 2016
Pages: 280
Price: Rs.1,395



Pursuing Death
Philosophy and Practice of Voluntary Termination of Life

By S. Settar
Primus Books
(Revised Edition), 2017
Pages: 308
Price: Rs.1,395

clusively on the vast inscriptive record of actual self-killings or ritual deaths performed by believers and devotees between the sixth and 14th centuries at Sravana Belgola, "the only centre in the ancient world whose history was shaped by death-seekers" (p. 6). The famous

site, located 144 kilometres from Bengaluru, is home to the monumental monolith carved in the 10th century. The statue called Gomateshvara represents Bahubali, the foremost Jina. This book traces the early history of Sravana Belgola and its evolution from a single,

sacred hill (Katavapra) and pond (*belgola*, meaning white pond) to the greatest Jaina tirtha (pilgrimage centre) in India.

Along the way, it tells the story of how the changing nature and growing popularity of Jainism among a laity of elites (kings, feudal chiefs and big merchants) wrought a change in the character of the site. Sravana Belgola went from the preferred choice of monks and pious pilgrims wishing to quietly give up their lives in devotion and solitude to the busy hub of temple building, lavish patronage and celebratory festivals.

The author correlates this with the decline in the number of monks (now busy with running religious establishments), who opted for ritual death as compared to laypersons who predominate the epigraphical record from the 11th century onwards. Remarkable among such lay devotees was a family called Hire Avali. Multiple members of this family across generations religiously courted death at the feet of the Tirthankara, one after the other.

Pursuing Death, on the other hand, while its contents are anticipated to a considerable extent by the first volume, focusses more