

## WOMEN DIVERS of Rameswaram

**SEAWEED COLLECTION** began only a few decades ago in the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Bay and is almost exclusively undertaken by women. It demands quick but careful work. A deft and experienced worker like Nambeeswari (in picture) can make nearly Rs.250 a day, nearly twice as much as a slower worker. A collector's equipment includes the diver's mask and cloth bands that are tied to the fingers of both hands to prevent injury. A plastic bag is tied to the back to store the seaweed. In 2006, at a meeting of the Gulf of Mannar Marine Biosphere Reserve Trust, the association of seaweed collectors banned the use of metal scrapppers to collect seaweed.

Attired in sarees and oversized sweatshirts, these women gather seaweed as a means of existence, unlike their Victorian counterparts who did it for centuries as recreation.

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Photographs by UMEED MISTRY

INCONGRUITY can evoke laughter and sometimes derision; it can also signal admiration or alarm. In all human history, clothes have perhaps best signalled prevailing social norms and codes. Clothes on the human body can also become a great provocateur through their ability to create the sensation of incongruity and oddness.

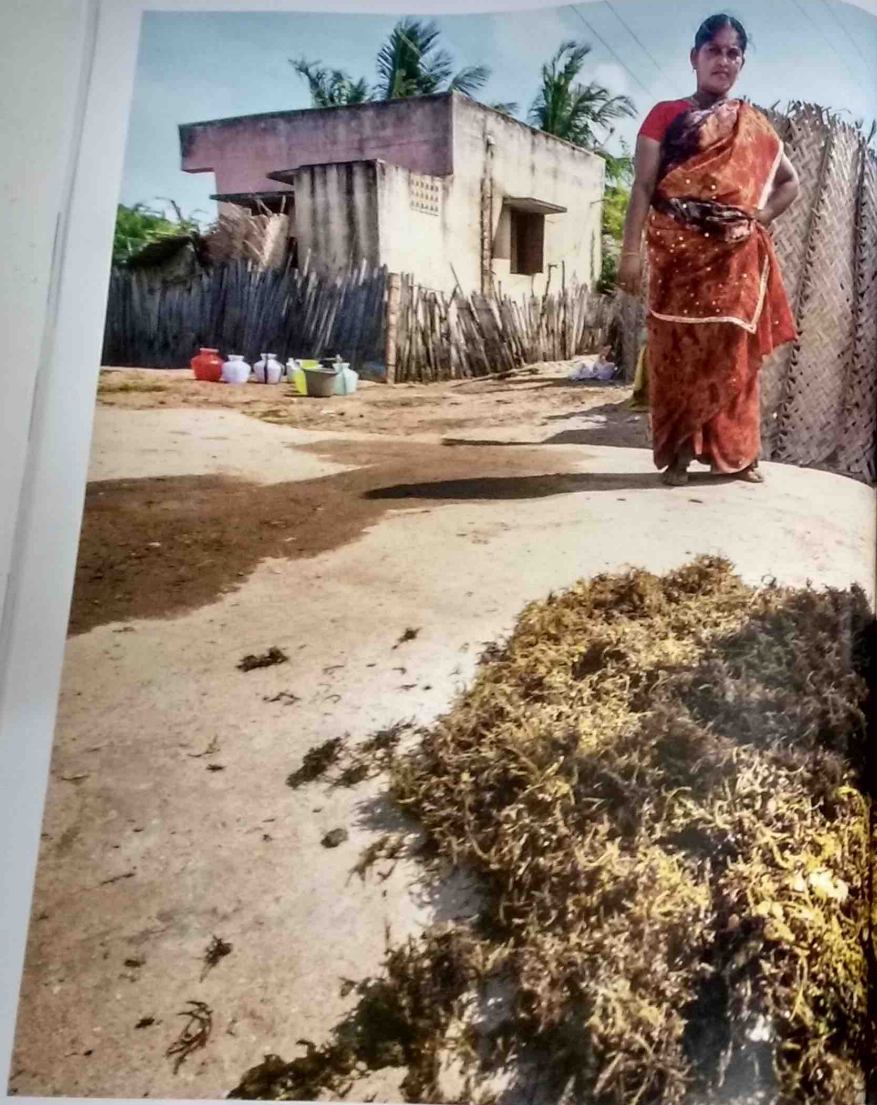
When the human body comes in contact with water, clothing mediates how normative elements of this experience are created, recreated or destroyed. For years, watching fully clothed people fall or jump into water has been associated with slapstick comedy, bordering on tragedy. YouTube offers a spectrum of instances to choose from. On the darker end are films like *Fall 2*, in which the Dutch conceptual artist Bas Van Ader rides his cycle into an Amsterdam canal fully dressed, indicating loss of control and mysterious intentionality. Then there are "drunk-people videos"—showing them falling into water fully clothed, often fully drunk.

Alongside images of iconoclastic or carefree liberties that people take with clothing and water, this photo-essay dwells on one set of women in southern Tamil Nadu. In Ramanathapuram district, women from the coastal villages of Chinnapalam, Bharathinagar and Kilakarai leave each morning to enter the sea, fully clothed in their sarees and undershirts, the "petticoat". Some of them take boats to head out to shallow waters where they jump in, and others walk into the waters from the seashore. This image of saree-clad

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WOMEN WHO ARE NEW to the task learn by observing experienced collectors. The seaweed grows on hard surfaces such as rock, stones and dead coral. The species collected belong to several genera but prominently *Sargassum*, *Gelidiella* and *Gracilaria*. What makes the activity special in the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Bay is the vocal struggle of the women whose labour in other realms remains largely invisible.





SEaweeds ARE of several species and are scientifically categorised on the basis of pigmentation and other external features. They are also roughly categorised as brown, green, red and blue-green algae, each of which is known for the production of specific phytochemicals used in various industries. Seaweed is dried before sale, and rates are set by traders on behalf of their establishments located in cities in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. With the entry of companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsico into the business, demand for seaweed has increased. Given the restrictions on collection, seaweed production depends on the successful regeneration of accessible stocks. In 2006, as part of the conservation measures the women adopted, they demanded reasonable prices from traders. Collection involved multiple social and ecological costs, besides heavy risks, they said.

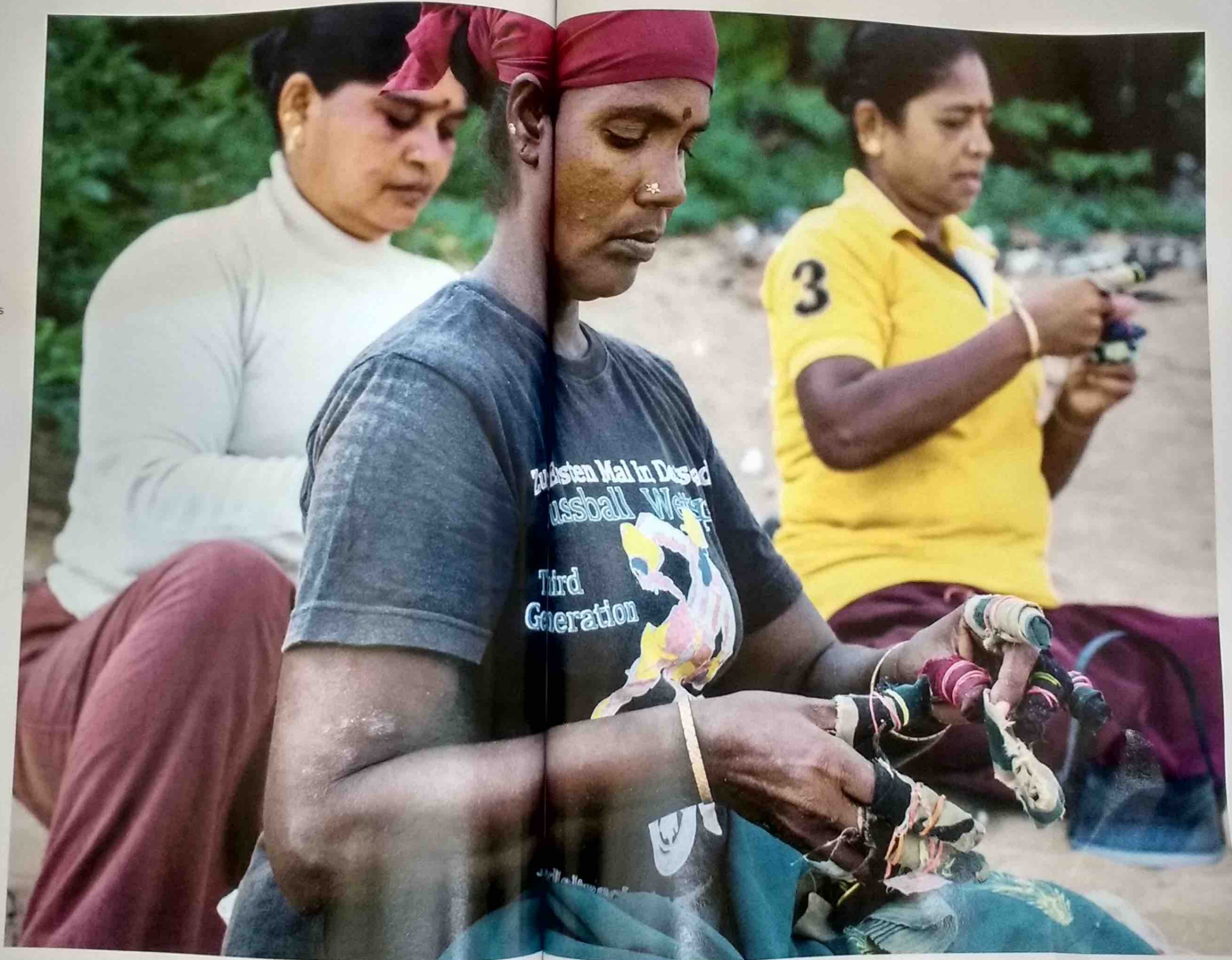
**LAKSHMI MURTHY** of Chinnapalam village in Rameswaram at work. In 2014, she was elected head of the Gulf of Mannar Seaweed Collectors' Association, the women's collective of the Ramnad Fishworkers' Trade Union. The following year, in recognition of her efforts to organise women in the struggle for right to livelihood and for their inclusion in conservation planning, she was awarded the Seacology Prize for Leadership, which she received in Berkeley, California, United States.





**SUCCESSFUL WOMEN LEADERS** from poor communities face formidable challenges. They must not only earn their living but also earn the respect of the people they represent, besides negotiating the politics in a predominantly patriarchal society. For women like Lakshmi, life above water is no less rocky and unpredictable than the seabed they encounter daily.

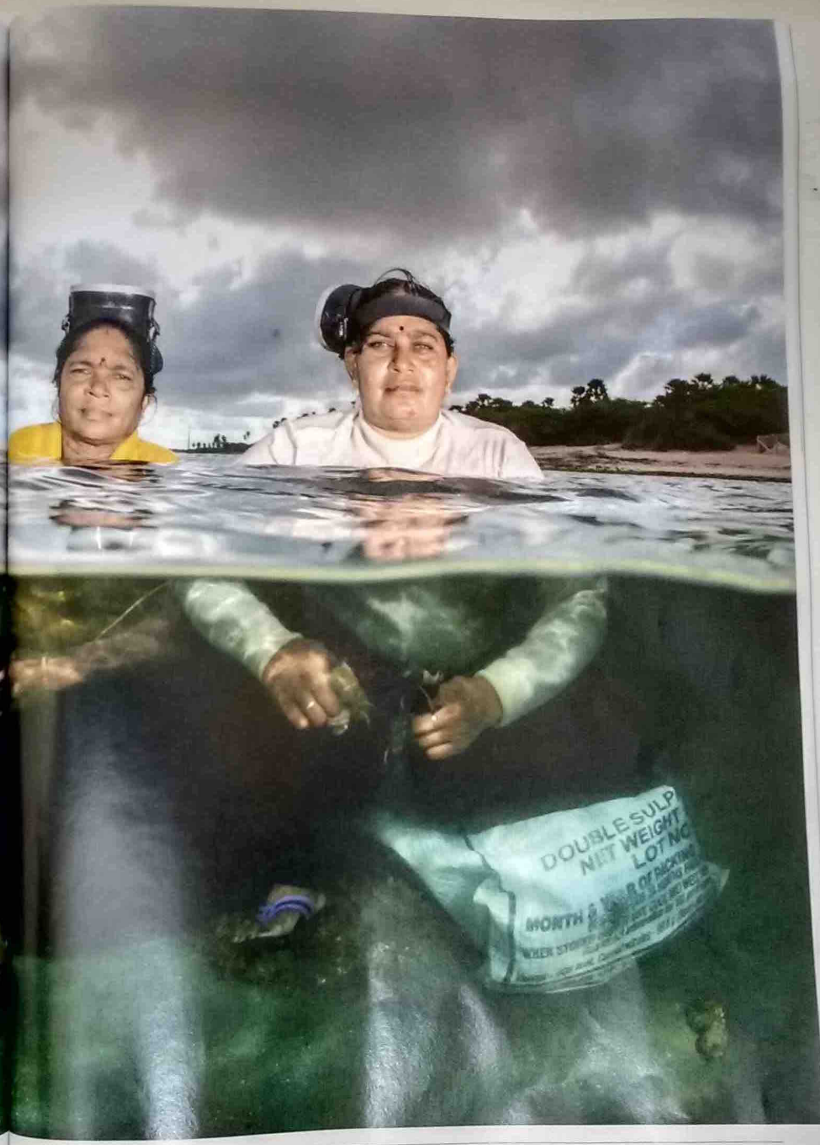
**LITTLE IS KNOWN**  
about how the practice of seaweed collection was introduced into this region. It is undertaken around the year in the Palk Bay in areas around Pamban Island. Seaweed used to be collected from the Mandapam and Kilakarai group of islands also until the area came within the Gulf of Mannar National Park when it was established in 1986 under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.





**THE WOMEN DIVERS** wear rubber chappals (sandals) to protect their feet and dive in areas which have coral and a rocky substrate on which seaweed grows. In deeper waters, they sometimes wear a single fin plate to allow for greater control underwater. Usually they do not dive to depths greater than five metres in the Palk Bay, although in some parts of the world seaweed is found at depths of up to even 150 metres. In 2014, the women's association of seaweed collectors declared that they would observe a closed season lasting 45 days to allow regeneration of seaweed. Such decisions are often hard to uphold given the demand for the product on the one hand and the worsening economic situation of coastal communities on the other.

**SCIENTIFIC PROJECTS** to explore ways to augment both production and the use of seaweed resources are ongoing in India. Seaweed is used as cattle fodder; in human food products; in the extraction of agar, carrageenan and phytochemicals; and as thickening and gelling agents for the food, pharmaceutical and paint industries. However, these uses and new products consumed at distant locations are deeply tied to fragile ecosystems and fragile livelihoods. The future of seaweed collection will depend on an integrated approach of spatio-temporal conservation supported by local communities. It will also rely on all actors (including collectors, park managers, traders and consumers) willing to make this activity ecologically and socially equitable.





women in water makes for much curiosity about the conditions that lead to such incongruous behaviour. After all, the saree is an attire associated with words like "homely", "traditional", "womanly" and is apparently designed to fix the movements of women on land. Worn underwater, it appears to be a transgression. Worn with a man's shirt, the contrasts within the image become stark.

#### TRADITION OR TRANSGRESSION?

Is seaweed collection by women an act of tradition or transgression, or both? Women have been collecting seaweed in many parts of the world for hundreds of years. In Britain, several women broke with tradition to engage in natural history collection, often recording their finds in elaborate scrapbooks. In her 2016 article "The Forgotten Victorian Craze for Collecting Seaweed", published in *atlasobscura.com*, the writer Cara Giamo talks of women from this era contributing to important natural history collections by making crossovers into a male-dominated space. An important component of this crossover was attire. Cara Giamo speaks of Margaret Gatty, whose book *British Sea-Weeds* contains practical tips on how women donned the "necessary draperies" of petticoats and skirts but urged them to wear men's boots and "feel the luxury of not having to be afraid of your boots".

In Rameswaram, an anachronistic parallel to those Victorian times is visible in the actions of the women seaweed collectors. They are sometimes accompanied by men, but almost always go together to collect in a group. They wear over their sarees men's shirts, oversized men's sweatshirts or men's sports jerseys, "owning them", as Cara Giamo says of Margaret Gatty's advice to her women readers. This attire offers a modicum of control over the saree underwater. They do not trade the saree in altogether for a full set of men's clothing. Half-saree, half-shirt appears like a good way to meet gendered obligations while simultaneously tearing at its boundaries.

The collage of incongruity is complete with this mixing of deeply gendered styles of clothing. But unlike Victorian naturalist collectors, these women gather seaweeds not as recreational activity but as a means of existence.

There are some new "normals" even among the incongruent. When the Kerala-based underwater diver Nikhil Pawar and Slovakian Eunika Pogran decided to throw their scuba-diving gear over their wedding finery and take the plunge last year, they created a minor media splash. With this act, they symbolically transgressed cultural, social, physical and also aesthetic boundaries, despite doing something deeply tradition-bound—entering the institution of marriage. News reports quoted Nikhil as saying that it only felt "natural" for him to have an underwater wedding and he was supported by all their family and friends. The world has many couples who have had underwater marriages.

#### THE 'BURKINI'

In contrast to these "types" of incongruent fully clothed soaking, the "burkini" has met with a paradoxical reac-

tion. This full-body swimwear is intended to cover the entire female body, exposing just the feet, hands and face, akin to a full-body wetsuit. Designed by the Lebanese-Australian designer Aheda Zanetti some years ago, when the burkini hit sport stadia it was hailed by the English language media as a "lycra revolution" for Muslim women who were desperate to embrace modernity by creatively overcoming restrictions imposed by Islam.

But in the summer of 2016, the French police decided that the outfit was not in keeping with "good morals and secularism". The paradox was announced on the Internet through photographs of a woman resting in a burkini abruptly forced to disrobe by gendarmes; this was in Nice, whose beaches ostensibly lie littered with bikini-clad secularists.

Incongruity is as much a product of the beholder as those beheld, perhaps much more than those accused of some form of "wardrobe violence". The judgment of incongruity and the normative and moralistic reactions to these occur along multiple axes, as the excitement and hand-wringing over the burkini made somewhat explicit.

In the case of the seaweed collector in the Gulf of Mannar, the activity has been taking place since at least the 1960s, well before the declaration of the Gulf of Mannar as a national park in 1989. The scholars Marirajan T. and Robert Panipilla in their report in 2014 on the traditional knowledge of fishers of the Gulf of Mannar hint at the depth of women's knowledge of their waters, purely from having gathered seaweed over their lifetimes. Their report, published by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), also chronicles the number of restrictions that followed the declaration of the national park and women's attempts to cope with the unexpected "illegality" of their actions. Suddenly, just being present in these waters, whether in a saree, a shirt or anything else, was incongruent.

Reminiscent of their tryst with men's clothing, the women soon made another series of innovations, compromises and modifications to their collection practices. In collaboration with the ICSF, scientists and other allies, they made plans to ensure a sustainable harvest despite the losses to their incomes. Their pragmatic efforts attempted to surmount the Forest Department's unjustly built conservation fortress. Collecting seaweed from the national park is not an incongruity but an evolving norm. Rather like their hybrid attire, for these women it involves transgressing multiple boundaries and is "natural" and crucial to their very being. □

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(For a full collection of photo-essays on marine life in the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar, write to [aarathi77@gmail.com](mailto: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.)