

# A diver-researcher's account of the deep blue sea

MANOJ VISWANATHAN @ Kochi

"DIVING into the depths of the Arabian Sea for the first time, my only concern was my two-year-old daughter. My first thought was how will my daughter survive without me. But once I descended to the sea bed I was filled with excitement. There was a huge difference between what I imagined and what I was witnessing. As I returned to the vessel, my buddy partner said I behaved like a toddler with a toy," says Divya Viswambharan, senior scientist and research diver of the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute.

Divya, the woman deep sea diver-researcher of the CMFRI, has completed 50 scientific dives across coastal, offshore, reef, and island ecosystems of Karnataka, Kerala, and Lakshadweep, reaching depths up to 38–40 m. She says diving has helped her study the marine ecosystem in direct contact which has significantly helped marine biodiversity documentation.

Divya began scientific diving at the age of 32, while raising her daughter, who was only two years when she took the first plunge.

"At the coral reef off Bhatkal I had the opportunity to wit-



**At Netrani, the depth was only 20 m, but later I completed an advanced course and started going to 40 m depth — Divya Viswambharan, senior scientist & research diver of CMFRI**

ness a 75-year-old ship wreck. The vessel had broken into two parts. It had turned into a fish breeding ground. I was shocked to witness the menace of ghost nets. The nets had got entangled in the shipwreck which had turned a death trap for marine life. There were skeletons of fish entangled in the nets. This experience prompted me to conduct a study on the dangers of ghost nets and I published the research paper in 2025," says Divya.

Divya, a native of in Thiruvananthapuram, had joined

the CMFRI in 2014 after completing her post graduation in fisheries science. Posted at the



Divya Viswambharan

Marine Diversity division of the CMFRI at Mangaluru, she was sent to Lakshadweep to study Coral resilience in 2017. The men used to dive and the women were collecting and analysing the data brought by them. Divya felt a disconnect as she was analysing the underwater data after viewing the video footage provided by other divers. After returning to Mangaluru she decided to get trained in deep-sea diving.

"Rinu, my husband encouraged me to join the training session. He said it is my profession and I should pursue my passion," she said.

In 2018, Divya joined a diving institution at Kappu near Udupi. It was at Netrani Reef located off Bhatkal in Karnataka where she had the first experience. Divya didn't seek funds from the office to attend the training as she was not sure whether she will complete the course. After visiting the Netrani reef, Divya realised the difference between real reef and what she imagined analysing data collected by others.

"Once the sea was turbulent and it was pitch dark under water. There was a lot of churning. I held close to my buddy and was able to manage. This open ocean diving made me bold, helped to gain confidence and equipped me to face challenges. At Netrani, the depth was only 20 m, but later I completed an advanced course and started going to 40 m depth," she said.

Divya had undertaken a project to study the menace of ghost nets at Vizhinjam also recently. She had conducted the dive related study for a project taken up by Kerala State Biodiversity Board.