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A REAL CATCH

Ear to ear! For a Vizhinjam women's group, the sea holds more 'treasures'

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AT first glance, they resemble tiny pieces of polished stone. But few realise that otolith, commonly known as an ear stone, begin their journey in the inner ear of fish, which is otherwise discarded, before lending themselves to delicate jewellery — thanks to their varying shapes and patterns.

A group of fishermenwomen in Vizhinjam is turning this little-known marine byproduct into a source of income. Otoliths are now used to craft earrings, necklaces, rings and bracelets.

With training provided by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research's Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (ICAR-CMFRI), 20 women from the Vizhinjam coast have learned to extract, clean, preserve and craft the tiny calcium carbonate structures into jewellery. Their self-help group, Sea Gems Mahila Brahmin Group, now sells the ornaments under the brand name Sea Gems.



The idea behind Sea Gems was hatched nearly a decade ago, when CMFRI scientists collecting otoliths from fish found along the coast for species identification saw beyond their scientific value.

"Scientists at CMFRI used the otoliths to estimate the age of fish and understand its growth, life history and environmental conditions. After the studies, they go to waste. That is when E M Abdussamad and his team identified their potential in crafting ornaments. The team explored the possibility of making it beneficial for fisherfolk. They then landed on the idea of providing training to fisherwomen," said Surya S, a senior scientist at CMFRI.

Some of the otoliths have attractive shapes, distinctive textures and appealing colours. Their hardness also make them suitable for crafting ornaments. "Among the species used are Otolithes ruber and Otolithes cuvieri, which belong to the family Sciaenidae, along with marine catfish such as Arius maculatus and other Ariius species, and sharpnose belonging to the genus Unionoxynus. Otoliths from sharpnose and scianids are particularly beautiful," Surya pointed out.



Otolith jewellery crafted by fishermenwomen from Vizhinjam

The concept is not entirely new. Otolith jewellery has been associated with Egypt, where they are considered natural amulets.

For the Vizhinjam women, Sea Gems is about working together and building a livelihood from a resource that has long gone unnoticed. "We gather at one of our houses to make the jewellery. We all live nearby, so it is convenient to work together. Our products are priced from ₹200 to ₹1,000. We have also made jewellery in silver, which costs around ₹4,000 to ₹5,000," said Fathima Syedali, one of the artisans.

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Through 20 women took part in the training, around 15 are currently engaged in making the ornaments.

They source fish from the Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari coasts, including fish obtained from mixed catches commonly referred to as trash fish. The team focuses on species available locally, although scientists are also found in big numbers along the Maharashtra and Gujarat coasts.

"Different species yield otoliths of different sizes. Those from some fish can be large enough to be used in earrings, rings and pendants, while smaller ones can be incorporated into other designs. The structures can also be set in different metal," added Fathima, who also serves as secretary of the group.

Following the training, the women continued refining their products at CMFRI's Vizhinjam centre with the help of scientists to develop the craft for sale. "The journey from ear stone to finished jewellery is still ongoing.

For a product made from material that many people might never consider, visibility is crucial. The women hope to reach more buyers through exhibitions, retail outlets and bulk orders," Surya said.