

# Meet India's first and only licensed fisherwoman, KC Rekha

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*KC Rekha broke taboo and picked up the trade after her husband could no longer afford a deckhand. Today, she's considered a hero. (Vivek R Nair.HT Photo)*

KC Rekha, a 45-year-old mother of four sits alone on an isolated beach of a Kerala fishing village at the crack of dawn, untangling a mess of nylon fishing nets on which her family's livelihood depends.

[Rekha's seawater-creased, sun-baked fingers finish the task before husband P Karthikeyan arrives for the couple's voyage into the deep blue Arabian Sea on a small and old single-engine boat. They are late. The couple usually moves out before sunrise. The Arabian Sea is unusually rough this rainy season and darks clouds are hovering over their heads. But India's lone licenced deep sea fisherwoman is not bothered. She has survived rougher times — in land as in the sea — surviving monstrous tides that toss around her flimsy 20-year-old vessel. The couple goes 20-30 nautical miles into the sea in search of fish, without a compass, GPS device, life jackets or any modern navigation equipment. "We rely on traditional knowledge," says the unflappable Rekha, who believes Kadalamma the sea goddess who is worshipped by many fisherfolk in this part of Kerala, will save them. Her faith stems from the struggle that began more than 10 years ago when she decided to be the deckhand for her husband after his two workers quit; the couple just couldn't afford them. People in the fishing hamlets of Chettuva in Thrissur, 300km north of the state capital, frowned upon her decision. The community said it was taboo for women to venture into the sea for a living. Women should be on the shore, praying for their husbands and brothers till they returned, the belief went. Rekha would have none of it. Karthikeyan supported her. Now,](#)



[a decade ago, the two are heroes of Chettuva.](#)

Rekha's husband says she's more proficient than he is at fishing, and understands the waters better. (Vivek H Nair/HT Photo)

[The Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute \(CMFRI\), the country's premier marine research agency, felicitated Rekha at a function attended by Union minister of state for agriculture Sudarshan Bhagat this April. It also helped her get a fisherwoman licence, a first in the country. It wasn't easy for the marine institute to locate Rekha among the millions of fisherfolk dotting the coastal landscape. "It was a tedious search. There are many women engaged in fishing in backwaters and rivers but no record on a woman's presence in fishing along our coastline was available. We have done an extensive search and finally spotted her and recognised her feat," CMFRI director A Gopalakrishnan said. Apart from everything else, Rekha is really good at her work.](#)

She can sniff the presence of a shoal of fish, swim against the current and lay her net quickly, Karthikeyan said. "She is better than me in doing that. She can give you lessons on the habits and paths of fish such as sardine, tuna, mackerel and sea bass."

[The 52-year-old seasoned fisherman's praise speaks volumes for a woman who took to fishing not out of choice, but compulsion. Rekha and Karthikeyan met while she was doing a Hindi course. They fell in love. "There were stiff protests from both families; we were forced to flee and start life afresh," she says. Rekha's foray into the sea wasn't easy. She suffered sea sickness at first. But she wasn't ready to give up. "I started learning everything from my husband and turned into a suitable help for him slowly," the mother of four girls says. The couple respects the fickleness of the sea. They had a close shave a couple of months ago. "After](#)

[laying the net my husband fell asleep for some time. In the pitch dark I suddenly came awake. I noticed a big vessel coming towards us and I shouted at them and steered my boat away from its path. We were seconds away from disaster," she says. On another occasion, their engine died and they drifted for around six hours in the deep sea till help came. As she reels out her tales, she notices a quick movement in the nets, but there's nothing. "It is a game of luck ... like lottery. At times you hit the jackpot and sometimes you fish only despair," adds Karthikeyan, pointing to the day's catch, a lowly 5kg of sardines. They had a good haul of seer fish worth Rs 25,000 last week.](#)

[CMFRI offered financial and technical support to the couple to launch cage farming in the periphery of the breakwater. It provided cage and fish seedlings. The agency also gave her eldest daughter, Maya Karthikeyan, a Class 12 student, a scholarship of Rs 1 lakh. "What we need is a new boat with a double outboard engine and a new set of nets. I am sure I can steer my family out of the financial mess and provide good education to my children," Rekha says. The country's lone deep sea fisherwoman loves her profession, despite the odds and uncertainty. Her life is as complex as the tangled net in her small vessel, but she believes time and tide wait for no one and is happy to make the most of the moment.](#)

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