

OFF TO SEA

**A job in the merchant navy allows you to earn big bucks and travel the world
Veena Gomes-Patwardhan tells you more**

Unlike the navy, which is involved in defence activities, the merchant navy comprises civilians engaged in transporting cargo and passengers in commercial ships. The merchant navy fleet includes different types of vessels, such as passenger liners, cargo ships, bulk carriers for cargo like food grains and ores, refrigerator ships for transporting perishable food items, tankers for carrying oil and other petroleum products and other special types of ships.

Today, over 90 per cent of cargo is transported across the world through ships. In a globalised world, the merchant navy forms a crucial component of international trade and contributes significantly to

the economy of a country. And as commercial activities expand globally, the demand for ships and trained manpower to manage them will also keep increasing.

The merchant navy needs deck

officers for the navigation department, marine engineers and radio officers for the engineering department and staff for managing kitchen, medical, laundry, and other services for the service department. Shipping companies employ trained people for such positions on a contract basis, usually for a duration of four to nine months. Nowadays, women too are joining the merchant navy though in small numbers, with most of them opting to work as radio officers and ship doctors.

Employment opportunities in India are offered by government shipping companies like the Shipping Corporation of India as well as by privately run Indian and international shipping companies, such as Great



Eastern Shipping, Essar, Mediterranean Shipping Company, Dockendale, Wallem and Chevron.

LIFE AT SEA

First the pros. Merchant navy jobs are certainly not dull, nine-to-five, desk jobs. As Capt S. V. Subhedar, director, Indian National Shipowners' Association (INSA) puts it; a career in shipping is "fulfilling, challenging, and non-boring".

Gladwyn Gomes, formerly a chief engineer at Chellaram Shipping, and now technical manager at Strait Shipping, New Zealand, says, "There's the opportunity to learn new stuff and apply it directly on the job. And besides good food and good accommodation (may differ from ship to ship), there's enough free time to read and study other subjects or pursue your passions and hobbies." Capt Norbert Rebello, in command of tankers for Teekay, says, "I mostly read or write during my free time." In fact, he's already a published author, his second book 'Pirates! Beware!' about the present Somalian piracy situation is due for release.

Other benefits include financial independence when you're barely in your twenties. There is a good opportunity for senior officers to take their wives along on voyages. Availability of duty-free imported liquor and other foreign goods on board and earning well without having to pay income tax are the other prime benefits. Seafarers also enjoy long leave periods between voyages to make up for the long time spent at sea away from their families.

On the down side, though you get to travel the world, port stays have been reduced to just a few hours due to modern loading and unloading equipment, unlike in the past when ships used to be in port for days, even weeks.

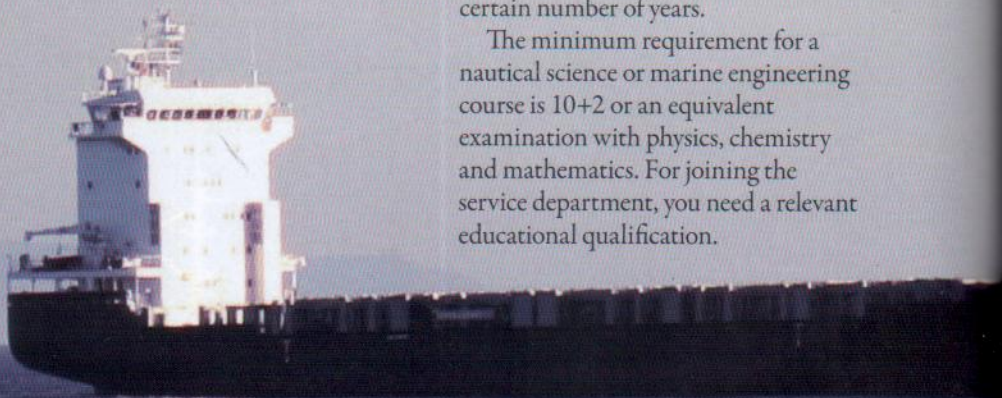
Raunek Kantharia, founder of Marine Insight (a leading maritime website in Asia), asserts, "Just because mariners wear smart uniforms that doesn't mean their life is glamorous. There's a lot of hard work involved." Capt Maxim Saldanha, HR manager, Dockendale Ship Management (India) says, "Money shouldn't be the sole criterion for joining the merchant navy. You need a liking for life at sea and the aptitude to face the challenges involved." Gomes adds, "You may not always like the people you're sailing with; medical emergencies can be a problem as also piracy in certain parts of the world; and senior officers can be personally liable for any environmental damage."

COURSES & TRAINING

You need a BSc in nautical science to become a deck officer, or one in Marine Engineering to become a

marine engineer. Some of the training institutes offering these degree courses are: Marine Engineering and Research Institute (MERI), Mumbai and Kolkata; Lal Bahadur Shastri College of Nautical Sciences, Mumbai; T S Chanakya, Mumbai; Tolani Maritime Institute, Pune; Seacom Marine College, Kolkata and National Maritime Academy, Chennai, run by the Indian Maritime University (IMU). To be selected, you need to appear for an entrance exam, followed by a medical fitness test for sea service (eyesight 6/6 and no colour blindness) and counselling. To enroll for the MERI or T S Chanakya courses, you need to clear the IIT-JEE entrance exam. Shipping companies often pick up degree students for jobs through campus recruitment. Alternatively, you could join as a direct entry cadet by having a shipping company sponsor your training. On being selected, you will have to clear the IMU-CET exam, complete a short pre-sea training course and then undergo onboard training for around 18 months. You will have to pay for the pre-sea training, but during the onboard training you'll receive a stipend of around ₹15000 per month. This route to the merchant navy usually involves a contractual obligation to work for the recruiting company for a certain number of years.

The minimum requirement for a nautical science or marine engineering course is 10+2 or an equivalent examination with physics, chemistry and mathematics. For joining the service department, you need a relevant educational qualification.



CAREER PROSPECTS

Once you become a seafarer, you need to upgrade your skills at regular intervals through special courses offered by maritime institutes and clear the government conducted exams to become eligible for promotions. The career graph for those in the navigation division is deck cadet > third officer > second officer > chief officer > captain, while that for engineers would be fifth engineer > fourth engineer > third engineer > second engineer > chief engineer.

Entry level salaries are around ₹20,000 a month, whereas a Captain or chief engineer earns ₹4 lakhs or more each month. Those working for foreign companies have the added advantage of earning in dollars.

Since the last few years, the job market is slack and freshers often need to find employment through agents. But there is a danger of being fleeced by fraudulent ones. Kantharia says, "Students sometimes have to struggle to find jobs because there's a surge of trained candidates, but the number of shipping companies has remained the same. However, those completing degree courses from reputed colleges mostly get selected from the campus itself." Capt Saldanha says employment prospects are somewhat on the lower side because "many shipping companies have to deal with their own existing backlog of candidates". Capt Subhedar expresses a more optimistic outlook. He says, "Prospects for young entrants are still



bright provided they choose the correct mode of shore and onboard training."

SOUND ADVICE

Capt Rebello recommends applying to ownership companies for a job as management companies only act as agents and some could just wash their hands off in an unfortunate situation. Capt Subhedar's advice is short and sweet: "Work hard, play hard." Meaning sweat it out when on duty, then enjoy the rewards. Gomes suggests planning for the future by exploiting the internet to do the ground work or for studying while you're sailing, and quitting while you're still young, after reaching the highest position. He adds, "The merchant navy offers excellent opportunities for developing people management skills while on the job. So you could consider taking up a management position in a shore job later on."

To sum up, if you plan well, there'll be a sea of options even after your sailing days are over. ✓

USEFUL WEBSITES

- For a list of training institutes approved by the Directorate General of Shipping: www.dgshipping.com
- For more information about the dangers of piracy on the high seas: www.norbertrebello.com
- For information on different aspects of life in the merchant navy: www.marineinsight.com
- For details of the Indian Maritime University www.imu.tn.nic.in

