

Exploring The Experiences of Indian Merchant Navy Cadets Who Dropped Out After Their First Year at Sea: A Qualitative Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

Background: Various researches have been carried out in the past and it is now an established fact that Merchant Navy seafarers indeed experience stress and fatigue due to the unique demands of the profession which takes a toll in their mental and physical health. However, there is a dearth of literature available with regard to Indian seafarers-particularly the Merchant Navy cadets. Since cadets are the most vulnerable and many even drop out after their first experience at sea, this study aims to investigate and understand the experiences of a few drop-out Indian seafarer cadets, through their own voices.

Materials and Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 drop-out Indian seafarer cadets from March 2024 to June 2024. This study has a qualitative and reflexive orientation. The narratives focused on their experiences at sea and what compelled them to drop out. These narratives were analysed with the help of a six-step thematic content analysis approach.

Results: 5 important themes were found. However, there were many subthemes which were inter-related but mutually exclusive. The main themes are: loneliness and isolation, physical and work environment, lack of support, other employment opportunities and a sense of ambivalence.

Conclusion: All cadets displayed initial distress and adjustment issues which triggered them to resign and change profession. Therefore, this highlights the gap in the training process and the actual experience at sea. Thus, future studies can aim to investigate methods to rally the training process so that protective factors and strengths like resilience, emotion regulation etc. can be inculcated amongst the seafarers right from their training days.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 INDIAN MERCHANT NAVY: - CONTEXTUALISING AN OCCUPATION

In merchant navy, deep sea shipping refers specifically to the international routes, crossing oceans. Here, the focal point of our study is deep sea shipping. This sector can be divided into two departments- engine and deck. Deck officers are involved in carrying out activities like cargo handling and stowage, navigation, bridge equipment and watch keeping, ship maintenance and operations etc. On the other hand, engine officers are responsible for the vessel engines and machineries, electrical maintenance and repair etc.

Professional merchant mariners all around the world face unique challenges like, piracy and security, criminalization of nautical officers, weather conditions, heavy workload, lack of recreational activities, unhealthy diets, strict hierarchy, loneliness, fatigue, sleep deprivation etc. (Sampson,2013 and Carotenuto A et al.,2012). Because of these specific work challenges, seafarers experience stress which often leads to health and psychological issues (Beşlikçi et al.2015). A review of seafarer's depression and suicide rates was conducted and although there seems to be some improvement, cases still persist (Mellbye and Carter, 2017).

Our target population for this study is deck cadets. A deck cadet is the first entry level for the seafarers and they are the most vulnerable. This is their first experience with sea, away from home and are given various responsibilities like maintenance work - chipping, painting, port watches, maintenance of all the life saving and the firefighting appliances, assisting the chief officers in maintaining all records like the log books and other paper work. They are also taught to do cargo maintenance, calculations, recording of the cargo etc. Along with these activities and many more, they also have to study and do project work. An only cadets conference

was organized by the Sailors Society and cadets across the Philippines made a unanimous call – “Mental health and well-being should be the mandatory element of maritime training”.

The main objective of this paper is to understand the experiences of a few drop-outs Indian deck cadets, after their first experience at sea, through their own voices. The objective of this research is to shed light on their life at sea, their attractions and expectations from this profession, adaptability with the environment, and reasons for leaving and so on. In totality, the aim is to investigate the total character of the shipboard experience, through qualitative research.

1.2 SEAFARER'S MENTAL HEALTH

It is true that seafarer's mental health has gained a lot of importance today and many studies have been conducted in this area. A study was conducted by the researchers of Chung- Ang University, South Korea (2018) on 320 seafarers who have lived and worked on a ship for more than six months. This self-administered questionnaire included questions on organizational culture and support, self-efficacy, perceived fatigue, as well as the quality of work life. The study found that indeed seafarers working on the sea are under tremendous stress and fatigue and low quality of life. Another study conducted by Department of Psychology, University of Zadar, Croatia in 2016 on 298 Croatian seafarers, all officers, employed on cargo ships, implicated that the seafarers undergo tremendous pressure and job stress when the on-job duration is extended coupled with serious gastrointestinal and cardiovascular issues. An Italian marine tele-medical center that offers remote assistance to seafarers conducted a survey and they reported that in a span of 25 years, 383 deaths were reported and the causes of death included cardiovascular diseases, accidents, contagious diseases, psychoactive factors, and respiratory diseases. The average age at death was 44.89 years, with a standard deviation of 10.53 years (Grappasonni et al., 2012).

However, there is a dearth of literature available with regard to the Indian seafarers (particularly cadets) despite the fact that Indian seafarers account for 9.35 % of total world seafarers' population (Directorate General of Shipping). Also as stated by Alex Mellbye and Tim Carter (2017), there is a conflicting body of research literature available – one that believes that suicide mortality and morbidity is continuing significantly and the other paints an optimistic picture showing recent trends and developments. And unfortunately, research on mental and psychological health of the Indian deck cadets is quite scarce and fragmented. Speaking of literature on cadets specifically, only a few studies, quite dated, however relevant, have been found. On such study was done by Hopwood (1973) on problems associated with the selection and training of British deck and engineer cadets. Cadets of a British Nautical School were administered a survey and it was found contentment with career choice; and, development of favorable impressions of a sea career were some of the main reasons that attracted them to pursue a sea career. However, this study did not go in depth to understand drop outs. A research study that is worth mentioning here is that of Elizabeth Alison Gould's doctoral thesis (2010) which was on UK Merchant Navy Officer Cadetship, in the light of declining UK shipping fleet. This extensive work is an in-depth study of UK cadet's experiences which is a treasure to the knowledge world. However, such a study is missing in the Indian context.

There are multiple stories highlighting the plight of Indian deck cadets. A news article published in the Indian newspaper 'The Hindu' in 2016, wrote about a young 22-year-old Umashankar Mahto who jumped into the sea off Greece and died because he was mentally tortured by the Chief Officer, about which he wrote extensively in his diary. On April 2024, another young Indian cadet 22-year-old Pranav Karad went missing while on duty between Singapore and Indonesia and the search and investigation is still on (published in Indian Express news column). Despite such heart wrenching stories, the gap in this literature is the negligible research studies available with regard to cadets drop out in India in general and, in particular, to our knowledge.

The concern regarding the attrition rates of cadets is not a new topic of interest. In 1935, Millington wrote: **“The more serious feature ... is the great wastage of personnel that occurs, not only in deck cadets but in deck ratings. Of those cadets who had passed out from training schools there were 79% serving at the end of the first year, 74% at the end of the second year and 68% at the end of the third year. This wastage is bad for the Service and for the boy, and is a weeding-out process that could be better carried out in school.”**

(Millington, 1935:166)

In conclusion there is no definitive evidence on cadet attrition rates although anecdotal evidence suggests that attrition rates are in excess of those appearing in different reports. Thus, this necessitates a deeper understanding of the issue and investigation of the reasons behind cadet attrition rates.

1.3 NOTION OF RESILIENCE

The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress. Although there are different definitions of resilience, all the definitions have one thing in common and that is – the presence of substantial adversity and risk.

A study conducted by McVeigh et al (2019) explored well-being, resilience and stress amongst a sample of merchant seafarers and superintendents through semi-structured interviews and focus group. A low score on all three variables were found due to recent changes like reduced shore leave and socialization and perceived organizational injustice.

S. Kobasa (1979) talks about the most important facets within resilience which is hardiness. Hardy individuals have the three most important characteristics – control, commitment and challenge through which they see stressors as challenges for personal growth and improvement. As stated by many researchers, positive outcome or adaptation is often the resultant of being resilient. It is important to understand if the attrition rates of cadets are a resultant of a low level of resilience. This is important to examine because there has been evidence to suggest that hardy traits can be developed through training (Maddi 2009). And if the attrition of cadets can be lowered by instilling resilience training during their pre-sea courses, the cadets will be benefitted a lot.

1.4 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The theory that was quite useful in interpreting the cadet data is Erving Goffman’s concept of “Total Institutions”. A total institution can be defined as a place of work and also residence where many people who are similarly situated, out of touch and cut off from the wider community for a considerable amount of time. These people live a formal life where they are under bureaucratic control. The four common characteristics of total institutions are:

- a) Totalistic features: tightly scheduled and administered by an authority
- b) Inmate world: every member goes through a ‘mortification process’ where they shed off their previous identities and take up the inmate world identities.
- c) Privilege system: These institutions provide rewards and privileges along with strict rules, if exhibited good behaviour.
- d) Adaptation alignments: Inmates adapt to their new world and accept it.

2. METHOD

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

Homogenous purposive sampling was used for this study. A sample comprising of 15 Indian deck cadets, aged between 18-25 years residing in Delhi, India were selected for this study. All the cadets have dropped out from merchant navy after their first contract. The inclusion criteria for the participants was cadets with at least 6-8 months of experience at sea. The study excluded all cadets who dropped out before completing their first year at sea, cadets who left the program due to pre-existing medical conditions or personal/family issues unrelated to their experience at sea or those who were dismissed due to disciplinary actions unrelated to the challenges of the sea. Also, those cadets whose drop out reasons or status could not be verified through self-reported accounts were also excluded. Cadets who had extensive prior experience at sea before joining the program, were also excluded as their adaptation process may differ. An initial screening process was carried out keeping the inclusion and exclusion criteria in consideration to verify participants' qualifications or experiences related to the study. 10 out of 25 participants cleared the screening process and were finally selected for the study. Out of the 10, 7 are already studying different courses and 3 are still contemplating on a right choice of career.

2.2 TOOLS

The key methodological approach of this study is that it is qualitative in its orientation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and cadets themselves shared their accounts of cadetship and the reasons behind dropping out. The main aim of the interviews was to collect the stories of the cadets in the form of narrative enquiry. Narratives are a rich source of personal experiences that are built over time. According to Philosopher Andy Clark, narratives are not only about sharing personal experiences but is also an operative and potent method of 'knowledge transfer'.

2.3 PROCEDURE

Participants were contacted at places convenient to them, like cafes, library, home etc. in Delhi, India. Firstly, the purpose of the research was explained to them and informed consent was taken. It was explained to them that the research was done purely for educational purposes and that their answers will be kept strictly confidential. The first few visits were used to establish rapport with the participants. Then gradually, semi-structured interviews were conducted and narratives were obtained regarding their experiences at sea and then their reasons for dropping out. Since the content was mostly sensational and upsetting, all the participants were informed that they have the option of discontinuing the interview if they felt uncomfortable at any point. To analyze the narratives, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic content analysis approach was used. Along with it, the open coding method was used. While the process of analysis was being carried out, various codes were identified and also being reviewed. Investigator triangulation was carried out by having experts and researchers analyze the data so as to control for biases like participant self-selection. Also, the researchers of this study engaged in critical self-reflection and have also maintained a reflexivity journal so as to prevent biases arising from self-perspectives.

3. RESULTS

After analyzing the interview responses (thematic content analysis), different reasons for dropping out from the profession can be identified and the themes are loneliness and isolation, physical and work environment, lack of support, other employment opportunities and a sense of ambivalence. These different themes and sub-themes are depicted in table 1.

3.1 Loneliness and isolation

Loneliness and isolation emerged as one of the most prominent reason behind cadet drop outs.

3.1.1 Inescapability

Inescapability refers to a situation, circumstance or condition which is almost impossible to avoid or evade. In such situations, circumstances are usually inevitable. The hard truth regarding life on a ship i.e. the fact that you cannot escape the sea or the ship was a prominent theme in the cadets' accounts of their experiences, with several of them independently drawing comparisons to prison during three different interviews. It is interesting to note that none of the cadets have actually experienced a real prison.

"The only thing I could do after finishing my duties was retreat to my cabin. I had saved a few series and movies in my laptop and some books to study, and apart from that and sleeping; there wasn't much else to occupy my time. I felt really depressed."

Participant 5

"Deep - sea? Well no less than a prison. I mean we humans are social beings. But when you are sailing, you can't escape the ship or the sea. It is in fact a prison".

Participant 1

3.1.2 Separation from partner and family

2 cadets specifically mentioned staying away from family and partner to be the main reason for dropping out of the profession (Fig.1).

“I look at my friends and their pictures on social media. Everyone is enjoying life and I used to feel I am trapped in a different world. I also used to miss my girlfriend a lot and somewhere there was a little bit of insecurity and I was scared to lose her”.

Participant 1

“I have realized family and connections are everything. No money, no job, nothing is as important as your family.”

Participant 8

3.1.3 Boredom

Participant 3 showed his resignation letter where he mentioned about the various difficulties: ‘We had limited opportunities to engage in any activity. The gym was very basic, internet facilities were not adequate and even interacting with the same colleagues day and night actually strained our relationships and everything made me feel really bored. Even shore leaves used to get cancelled which was really frustrating.’ Along with him, 3 more cadets specifically mentioned about lack of stimulation and the boring nature.

Participant 3

3.2 Environment

3.2.1. Physical environment

According to Zurcher (1965), narratives related to life at sea, are described as a pervasive element of communication among sailors. “Rough sea”, “huge daunting ship” “unpredictable weather” were some of the terms repeatedly used by the participants in their interviews. Bad weather has been particularly mentioned 7 times by 4 participants in the interviews.

“High waves caused our ship to pitch in up and down motion and roll from side to side; making it difficult to navigate and I had terrible sea-sickness. I don’t think I will ever be comfortable with that feeling”.
“Also, once ice formed on the ship’s superstructure. Ice clogged ventilation and cooling systems”.

Participant 10

Participant 5 compared himself to a Chief Mate who had been in ship for 25 years and yet every time he joins the ship he experiences sea sickness and takes two weeks to settle down.

3.2.2. Work environment

Out of the 10, 9 participants complained about long working hours (fig 1). One participant stated he worked for 36 hours at stretch without sleep. Other issues mostly faced were toxicity between crew, constant criticisms and so on. Participant 6 narrated about a particularly traumatic incident with the ship cook.

“I remember it was just 1 month after I joined. I just wanted to discuss with the cook that the food was way too salty. He was a Philipino cook. I don’t know what triggered him, but yes! Wait, he was also very drunk. He shoved a knife at me and said he is not my personal cook. He screamed ‘go to hell.”

Participant 6

Participants 1, 8 and 9 also talked about the blurred lines between personal space and work space.

“You are never really free. After a long day of working tirelessly, when you go to your cabin, someone will come and knock at your door. So 2 minutes back, they were your colleagues and now they are your friends”.

Participant 1

“I used to feel, I am always at work. It felt like we used to sleep in our offices. I mean, I can’t explain but it felt weird”.

Participant 8

3.2 Lack of support

2 out of 10 cadets specifically talked about the lack of support from senior officers (Fig 1.).

“My Chief Officer was always grumpy, sad and was very rude to the cadets. He used to compare his cadetship all the time. I mean just because you had it rough, doesn’t mean you should make things difficult and rough for others. Once I was in the watch with him and for no particular reason he shouted at me and told me a lot of awful things like, I am not good enough, I am weak and so on. This is mentally so frustrating. The worst part is you just can’t escape.”

Participant 2

As can be seen from the above excerpt, inescapability is a persistent issue that can be observed throughout the interviews (fig 1).

Participant 7 narrated an incident with the Captain which made him take the final call i.e. resignation.

“One day my drunken captain called me and screamed at me asking ‘why the hell did you choose to be here, in this profession?’ The thing is, earlier that day; I made a minor mistake, I think, the Captain just lost it. So I answered that I am at sea because, you know, I want to make some money and see the world etc. etc. He shouted and said I should get the hell out of the ship and not think of the profession ever again. So, I told him on his face, that yes, you are right, I should. And 2 months later, I resigned. Maybe I always had in my mind that this is not my cup of tea but if the Captain would have supported me, I could have stuck around, who knows!”

Participant 7

3.3 Other employment opportunities

Participants 10 and 9 mentioned about alternative employment opportunities on shore both within the field of merchant navy and also outside the field.

“I can become a professor in one of the training institutes. Or I can even become a marine surveyor, port manager etc. I have done a lot of research and there are many other jobs which pay equally good”.

Participant 10

3.4 A sense of ambivalence

8 cadets stated that after their first-hand experience at sea and after coming in terms with the realities of life on board, the cinematographic image of adventure, excitement and thrill all shattered down. This observation aligns with existing literature, which highlights the integration of so-called 'reality elements' into the process of entering a profession (Becker and Geer, 1958; Psathas, 1968; Geer, 1972). At some point during the interview, all the participants expressed a sense of uncertainty where they felt torn between two options. It was like wanting and resisting life at sea- at the same time. At the end of this conflict, however, all the participants took the call, i.e. to drop out.

Table 1 Depicting reasons for dropping out associated with merchant navy cadets and their description.

S. No.	Reasons	Sub-themes	Description
1	Loneliness and isolation	Inescapability	Committed to being in the enclosed world of the ship for a length of time
		Separation from partner and family	Inability to contact significant others
		Boredom	Limited opportunities for mental, physical and social stimulation, lack of recreation, less shore leaves etc. which leads to boredom.
2	Environment	Physical	Nature of sea and the unfamiliarity
		Work	Various factors associated with the nature of work
3	Lack of support		All kinds of support provided by crew, staff and peers onboard
4	Other employment opportunities		Alternative and attractive employment opportunities available on shore
5	A sense of ambivalence		Uncertainty and mixed feelings experienced by the cadets

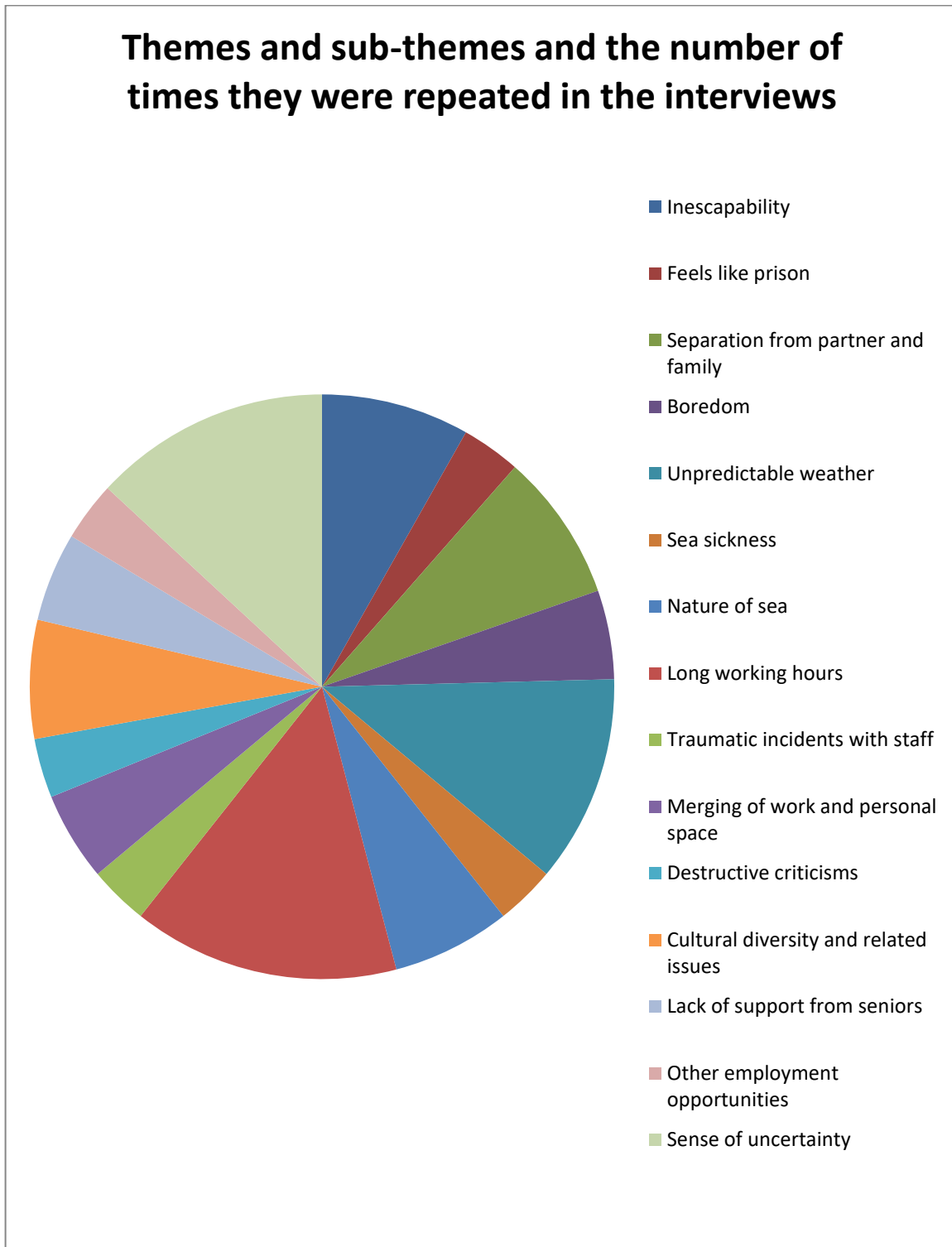


Figure 1: Prominent themes and sub-themes and the number of times they were repeated during the interviews.

4. DISCUSSION

According to Sawir et al. (2007), a seafarer lives a dual life, balancing the demands of their job at sea with their personal life and family responsibilities back home. This separation can create a gap between their personal relationships and their social environment, often resulting in increased feelings of loneliness. Loneliness and isolation emerged as one of the most prominent themes. The subthemes are: inescapability, separation from partner and family and boredom.

Loneliness is a feeling of emotional emptiness or a sense of being disconnected from others.

Isolation, on the other hand, is more about the physical or social separation from others. It can be self-imposed or a result of external circumstances. Both can impact mental and physical health tremendously and this was the most protuberant reason stated by majority of the cadets.

The nature of this profession comes under the category of 'isolated confined environments' (ICE). As stated by Juozulynas (2007), seafaring which earlier used to be a profession of adventure and worldwide exploration, has now become a tough and challenging job. An Ji et. al (2020), stated that once at sea, seafarers face the issue of inescapability and are often intimidated by the hull superstructures-the big ships. During the interviews, the participants stated that although they knew already what is expected of them and the particular demands of the profession, a practical exposure to the real situation took them by shock. While many could adjust, the participants of this study could not acclimatize. They also specifically talked about the routine and repetitive work along with limited recreation and lack of stimulation which led to feelings of boredom.

Physical and work environment emerged as the other important theme. The participants narrated stories of extreme weather conditions which they had to endure and despite such conditions they had to work for extended hours. In high risk situations like maritime interdiction operations, seafarers are exposed to death-defying situations and yet they have to be productive and maintain quality output. As the interview material coded under the broad topic of 'environment' was analyzed, it was revealed that factors combining both the physical and work environment led to negative experiences. It was not only a single experience that triggered the decision to leave the profession but a multitude of factors which can be regarded as the concept of the 'total institution'.

Unsupportive staff and seniors made it even more difficult for them to adjust. Sampson (2004) stated that many junior officers felt that their seniors mostly prioritized getting the work done and mentoring the less experienced crew was the least of the concerns. The participants also stated that the strict hierarchical order and the inflexible structure never really allowed them to speak openly about their issues and challenges (Bhattacharya, 2012). According to Thomas (2003), junior seafarers are often bullied and harassed and especially in multicultural setups, the juniors often feel discriminated against. Thus it results in lack of trust and demoralization. Slišković (2015) also stated that senior staffs sometimes are not transparent about their decisions and they introduce changes suddenly thus leading to confusions and misunderstandings. According to Buscema (2023), other aspects of stress are food quality not being up to mark, doing overtime work, unnecessary criticisms and reprimands, animosity between crew, handling and dealing with people from different cultures, unavailability and lack of internet services etc are all responsible for stress onboard. A participant stated that the main reason to join merchant navy was the attractive salary package but today, the IT jobs are offering competitive salaries. Therefore many young cadets are considering the option of switching professions and contemplating about joining other jobs on the shore like port management, supply management, professors in the colleges and so on. One of the participants specifically stated that the pay might be a little less but nevertheless, there won't be other challenges which are specific to the merchant navy profession like isolation, high risk and demands, pressure etc.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ambivalence is defined as the state of having mixed feelings. It often refers to the push and pull factor. During the interviews, majority of the participants talked about this contradictory feeling. Human beings always strive towards homeostasis or congruency and such contradictions always require a solution. Hence, the participants of this study decided to end this state by dropping out. Although the participants initially felt a sense of pride in being a part of this profession which contributes to the global trade and logistics chain, they however were tempered by the sacrifices required.

Resilience- the ability to bounce back is a personality trait which according to evidence can be developed by apt training (Maddi et al. 2009). Therefore appropriate training modules aimed at developing resilience can be designed for the cadets which can be a part of the pre-sea training. This would help the seafarers to be more emotionally controlled and resilient. Outcome of the research will help in policy making in this regard by various stake holders and also enhance further research in this direction. E.g. ship owners, merchant navy training institutes can take various factors into consideration like how to provide a conducive and supportive environment to the new joiners. Studies done for the seafaring profession might also be applicable to other ICEs (Isolated confined environments) like professionals on a polar expedition, space mission, off-shore oil drilling platform etc.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Since all participants were male seafarers, and only a handful of them were interviewed, therefore the sample is limited by gender and the results cannot be generalized to the broader population of all seafarers (cadets) of India. Also the narratives provided may include elements and fragments of imagination and memories which might not be absolutely true because of the time gap between the study and their last voyages which were mostly not that recent.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, it is a fact that the peculiar nature of the job of seafaring makes the seafarers stressed and experience less than optimal levels of happiness. Through this study, we explored the various factors which triggered the cadets to drop out from this profession after their first experience at sea. Seafarers are valued professionals for entire communities, and in fact they are considered to be the fourth line of defense without whom the entire economic situation of a nation may crash down overnight. There is a ripe opportunity for using the resources available in academia for helping them to develop the resilience, so as to reduce the drop - out rates. This study aims to present a small venture into the wealth of possibilities and hints towards developing training modules and interventions for merchant nautical seafarers which is indeed a worthwhile task, for seafarers, concerned agencies, and nations at large.

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STATEMENTS AND DECLARATION **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

ETHICS APPROVAL

The research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Christ University, India. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

CONSENT TO PUBLISH

The participant has consented to the submission of the case report to the journal.

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