

Did you know that there is a small fishing village called Marianad, in Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India, which owes a lot of its history to a public health nurse from Bergamo – the epicentre of the novel coronavirus outbreak in Italy?

This nurse, Laretta Farina, 86, passed away on 12 March 2020, in a retirement home in Bergamo.

History of Marianad

Bishop Peter Bernard Pereira, head of the Latin Catholic church in Trivandrum was a great visionary of socio-economic development practice. In 1960, he started the Trivandrum Social Service Society (TSSS) with the wish to run it on professional lines. The bishop sought advice from an American economist, a Brazilian architect and a Kerala government official familiar with cooperatives. He visited Europe to scout for funds and volunteers who could undertake planned activities which would help to uplift the economic and social

Hence, much time was spent in trying to make the people understand what was going on in their midst, encourage their involvement and help them to shoulder responsibility. During this time the men, who were highly skilled in fishing, and their women, with a good sense of market opportunities, slowly constituted their fishing and fish selling activities.

'Chechi' of Marianad

In Marianad, Laretta was known as Chechi (elder sister) by old and young. She picked up Malayalam quickly, though she spoke it with the slang of the fishing community. She adopted the saree and wore it elegantly. Her influence on the community was proverbial. In the dead of night, she would go to stop drunken brawls between fishermen and their families. In the dark, she would shine the torch onto her face and call out the man by name. The sound and sight of Chechi was enough to turn the violent man into an apologetic timid child!. She commanded respect by her very presence. The next morning, she would go back to the family and talk to them with love and concern and admonish the man for his actions. But she always left with a smile and a loving touch.

A skilled organiser

In the early 1970s the fishers organised into a cooperative, which was formed after considerable struggles between them and the village merchant-money lender. They wanted the freedom to sell their fish and not be bonded to him. Laretta, along with her colleagues – who were by then all Indians – stood by the demands of the fishers and helped them to organise the Marianad Malsya Ulpadaka Cooperative Society (Marianad MUCS) under the aegis of the Kerala government. Laretta was a good organiser. She was very methodical and systematic. She realised that methods are not universal, but can vary according to a person's experiential knowledge and was open to the great knowledge of the fishers, who were illiterate. Working in a community, which had a low self-esteem and was also shunned by the larger society, Laretta asserted that a person's dignity resulted from both the person's own assertions and actions, as well as the perception of others. Many fishermen would come to the cooperative office straight from the seashore – often bare-bodied with their chests exposed. She used to insist that no fishermen should enter their cooperative office without being properly dressed. Initially there was resistance. But soon there was realisation among the fishermen how such behaviour was important both for their own collective pride and dignity and the way others in society thought about and valued them.

Laretta had a caring professionalism in her dealings with the men and women of the fishing community. She emphasised the need to be understanding and kind, but yet firm

PROFILE

Tribute: A fishing village in Kerala mourns Italian nurse Laretta Farina of Bergamo

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Source: Manorama Online | April 08, 2020



Laretta Farina

development conditions of the thousands of fisherfolk in his diocese. Responding to the bishop's call, a team of three women, from three countries, belonging to an international professional women's volunteer group arrived in Trivandrum in 1962. Laretta Farina, then 28, was one of them.

Marianad (the land of Mary) was a created village. TSSS bought land at a coastal tract called Allilathura (the coast with no people) and built 56 well-designed, low-cost houses as part of a housing cooperative. Fishers from the coastal villages in Trivandrum were requested to come and stay there. Only the really poorest, who had nothing to lose, ventured to take the challenge. The bishop, based on his learning from past failures to help his community, gave the organisers three radical principles to follow. Do not provide anything free. Try to assess the real needs of the people, not their wants. Always involve the people in the decision making about interventions that affect their lives.

Initial years

Laretta and her colleagues facilitated the starting of a crèche, a nursery school, a small health clinic, a group savings scheme, a club of young girls learning crafts, an arts and sports club, a mahila samajam (women's collective), and finally a fishermen's cooperative – all evolving organically. The basic aim behind the activities was to initiate an informal educational process to encourage changes, to build awareness and inspire self-confidence.

and fair in dealing with all people, irrespective of their position in society. Such values and the full participation of the fishers in the management of their cooperative made it one of the best functioning in Kerala. The strong resolve of the fishers to resist all opposition to their organisational efforts and their excellent cooperation led to the Marianad MUCS being recognised in the official Economic Review 1977 of the Government of Kerala as “an eye-opener to the fishermen cooperatives in Kerala. Dedicated leadership and the felt need of the fishermen for united action against the exploitation by the middlemen could be reckoned as the contributory factors for the dynamic outlook of Marianad”. In 1985, the Kerala government woundup all MUCS cooperatives and created the Matsyafed which was modelled along the basic lines of the Marianad MUCS. Marianad, with over 1,500 families now, has two well-functioning Matsyafed cooperatives.

Lauretta leaves Marianad

Lauretta left Marianad in 1977 after playing a lead role in creating the new village of Marianad from the land with no people. She went back to take care of her invalid father. She also nursed her ailing mother and Alzheimer-stricken sister in her home town of Caravaggio in Bergamo Province. Later, when some of her earlier colleagues took the initiative to organise the first international conference of fishers and their supporters in Rome, they visited her in Bergamo. She put them in touch with some members of the Communist-led municipality of Rome who could probably

help with the arrangements. It was through these contacts that the conference, held in 1984, was ‘sponsored’ by the municipality and permission was granted to have an international cultural event by the fishers at the world famous Piazza Navona. During the conference, which she attended, Lauretta got the satisfaction to see how the Marianad experiment became an important basis for the creation of a big international network of fishers and their supporters. Lauretta visited Marianad again once, 25 years later, in 1992 to the great joy of the community. Marianad is now one of the biggest, prosperous and well organised fishing villages of Kerala. The Matsyafed Cooperatives now functioning in the village received the President’s award for the best primary fishery cooperative in India on two occasions. In 2015, Lauretta was taken to a retirement home in the town of Treviglio in Bergamo in an advanced state of dementia.

On 12 March 2020, some of us who worked closely with Lauretta were together for dinner. It was 9.30 pm. Listening to the news about the rapid spread of COVID-19 virus in Bergamo, we wondered whether there was any news of Lauretta. At about the same time, in that retirement home, Lauretta left us and joined her creator. The epitaph on her coffin read: *Vi ho amati tutti – uno ad uno*. Yes, she loved us all – each one of us in a very special way.

Source: <https://english.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2020/04/07/marianad-fishing-village-italian-nurse-lauretta-farina-bergamo.html> 📄