

## Festively fishy

**The first-ever South India Fisherfolk Festival threw up an interesting mix of song, dance, drama, culture and technology**

**T**hat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is responsible for the preservation of traditional technology and culture may come as a surprise to many, including the LTTE itself. However, this is entirely an unintended consequence of the long drawn civil war in Sri Lanka. Due to the civil war and the consequent security concerns, the government of the State of Tamil Nadu, India is not keen on providing outboard motors (OBMs) to the artisanal fishermen of the Palk Bay. This means that the fishermen have to continue operating their traditional craft, the *vathai*, a large sailing boat operated with two or three large lug sails.

The *vathai* is one of the few traditional craft that remains in use and seems threatened with obsolescence once peace returns to Sri Lanka. The *vathai* is unique in that it is the only craft in South Asia that uses a balance beam rather than an outrigger to balance itself. Given a choice, though, the fishermen, in all probability, will dump it and shift to a fibreglass boat equipped with a diesel longtail.

This is one among the many interesting insights thrown up by the South India Fisherfolk Festival organized by the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) at Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, from 14 to 16 September 2002. The festival was sponsored by Ford Foundation India as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations.

The festival, held at the city beach, was a colourful event that attracted large crowds. The event showcased the fishing technology of the artisanal fishermen of south India as well as some aspects of their culture. Perhaps the first of its kind in India, the festival helped to enhance the image of fishing communities, and focus

public attention on the rich heritage of the coast.

The festival comprised three components—a fishing technology exhibition, a fisherfolk cultural programme, and a public function. The outdoor exhibition of boats and fishing gear was complemented by a number of stalls displaying fishing-related products and information.

The exhibition of boats, though, was the most attractive part of the festival. Twenty-six types of boats from the four south Indian States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were assembled for the exhibition. These included both the traditional craft as well as those introduced in recent times.

The traditional fishing craft of south India are basically of three types. The dugout canoes dominate the coasts of Karnataka and north Kerala, while plank canoes dominate central Kerala, and the calm waters of the Krishna-Godavari delta and the Palk Bay. The rest of the coast is home to different types of *kattumarams*, which are nothing but finely shaped logs of wood lashed together with rope to form a craft that is ideal for surf-beaten coasts. The exhibition displayed both the original craft and their recently introduced alternatives in plywood and fibreglass.

### Fascinating craft

The boats that captured the public imagination, however, were the large *vathai* from the Palk Bay with its double sail and balance beam, and the 65-foot plank canoe, with multiple OBMs, used for ring-seine operations in central and northern Kerala. Equally fascinating was the 'shoe' *dhoni* from the Godavari delta, which is a 24-foot canoe shaped like a slip-on shoe and which can accommodate an entire family that travels for months on

end in the Godavari delta waterways in search of fish, crabs and bivalves.

**T**he large *kattumaram* from Uvay in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu was another attraction. Of the various SIFFS boat designs on display, the 36-foot offshore or 'stay-fishing' boat was impressive. It is gaining popularity in Trivandrum district of Kerala, where the fishermen of Vizhinjam have started going for five-day voyages. The various plywood and fibreglass *kattumaram* lookalikes generated a lot of interest too.

The exhibition of fishing gear was also perhaps unique in that real, life-size nets, rather than scale models, were put on display. The nets displayed ranged from the huge ring-seine net to the small anchovy net. While the original cotton nets are still used for certain types of gear, nylon multifilament nets currently dominate the scene.

However, the rapid spread of nylon monofilament nets at the lower end of the scale (small nets with small meshes) is a recent phenomenon. The coast of Tamil Nadu has plenty of these nets, especially bottom-set gill-nets that use small pieces of lead as weights. Also at the festival on display was the monofilament bottom-set net for catching soles, which, when introduced a few months ago in the Kollam district of Kerala, led to riots and burning of 70 plywood boats. Various

types of hooks-and-line and traps were on display as well.

The other exhibits included OBMs, fishing accessories and sea-safety equipment. The stall put up by the Kerala Fisheries Department to demonstrate the newly introduced wireless communication system for small boats was of special interest to the fishermen. The stall of the Central Institute of Fishing Technology also displayed many models of fishing gear, both mechanized and artisanal. A surprise stall was that of a visiting delegation of Sri Lankan fishermen who put up pictures, models and posters of their fisheries and fishing techniques.

In conjunction with the exhibition, SIFFS brought out a reprint of the classic report of James Hornell entitled *The Origins and Ethnological Significance of Indian Boat Designs*, written way back in 1920, but still relevant. The reprint edition of the book, along with an interactive CD-ROM on fishing craft and gear of south India, was released by G. Karthikeyan, Kerala's Minister for Culture.

#### **Cultural programmes**

During the evenings of the festival, cultural programmes were staged on a giant stage put up for the purpose. This was another unique concept meant to bring on stage songs, dances, drama and other cultural items that are performed by fisherfolk from different parts of south

India. The inspiration came from a programme organized by the National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai, where a couple of the items staged in a week-long folklore festival were from the fishing community.

**T**he fact that the fisherfolk have some unique programmes of their own is not recognized, even by the fishing community itself. Why not try to put together an event that would exclusively project the culture of the fisherfolk? That was the question that prompted SIFFS to include a cultural component to the festival. That, of course, necessitated a wide-ranging search, as SIFFS had no prior information or experience in that area. Based on information and contacts provided by various sources, SIFFS managed to put together nearly 15 items from the four south Indian States.

Though uneven in quality and somewhat amateurish, the programmes turned out to be far more entertaining and attention-grabbing than anticipated. The crowds kept streaming into the exhibition venue and the ground was packed for most performances.

One set of items represented songs sung during different fishing operations, like rowing or pulling the net. These included the shore-seine songs from the west coast and the *amba pattu* from the east coast. These are now disappearing as the pace of life gets faster and motorization has changed the way fishermen operate. Interestingly enough, some of the song forms presented at the festival were related to the surf conditions and the natural environment.

Another set of items comprised performances during religious festivals and marriages. These largely represented performances belonging to different religious groups.

The *kol kali* (group dance with sticks), *oppana* (pre-wedding group song and dance by women) and *def muttu* (group dance with percussion instruments) are part of the Kerala Muslim fishermen's heritage but do not appear to have any special reference to fishing. Interestingly, except for *kol kali*, which is mainly

performed by the fishermen, the other items are common to all Muslim groups of Kerala.

The *paricha muttu*, a group dance with shields and swords, performed by the Catholic fishermen of central Kerala, has no direct reference to fishing. It has its origins in the conversion of fishermen to Christianity by Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century. The *kalial*, a group dance to the rhythm of sticks, also belongs to the Catholic fishermen from the Tirunelveli coast of Tamil Nadu and relates to marriage celebrations and religious festivals. This disappearing art form has been revived in recent years by a dedicated group, and the troupe at the festival gave a truly professional performance.

The remaining items defy classification. From the Hindu fishermen of Andhra Pradesh came the *kola sambharam*, a ritual dance conducted with fire to improve fishing fortunes. Held twice a year, it is also performed whenever the fishing season is poor. The Karnataka fishermen surprised everyone with very entertaining skits and songs. A skit based on the legend of a ghost of a woman who is said to emerge from the sea to terrorize fishermen in Mangalore, was done imaginatively and had the entire audience on their feet. Young girls from Trivandrum put up a meaningful folk dance projecting the harm done by trawlers to the traditional fishermen. *Gana*, a lament for the dead, came from Chennai, where this particular piece of folk art form has been picked up by movie music directors.

#### Portuguese influence

A major performance was the *chavittu natakam*, a costumed drama belonging to the Christian fishermen of central Kerala. An elaborate affair, this drama form is about the Crusades and is replete with references to European kings and nobles. Also introduced by the Portuguese, the *chavittu natakam* sought to impart a separate religious and cultural identity for the new converts. What was most unexpected was the revelation that the same drama form exists in Negombo in Sri Lanka, where the fishermen were converted by the same Portuguese. The Sri Lankan delegation displayed photographs that showed the similarities.

The cultural programme was thus a great voyage of discovery that threw up many interesting relationships between culture, technology, religion and the environment.

**T**he public meeting on the last day of the festival was essentially meant to reward achievements by fishermen of the SIFFS network. Awards were given to fishermen with the highest catch in each district, divided into motorized and non-motorized units. Awards were also given to the societies with the highest fish catch and best loan repayment performance. Special awards were distributed to the fishermen with the oldest SIFFS boats still in operation. Sushma Raman of Ford Foundation India was the chief guest at the public meeting. Disappointingly, the Chief Minister and Fisheries Minister of Kerala could not attend the public meeting due to other unexpected engagements.

Though media coverage was generally weak before the start of the festival, all local television channels and newspapers subsequently gave excellent coverage to the event. This resulted in huge crowd turnouts on the second and third days. Some schools sent their students to see the exhibition as it had educational value. Local fishermen came in large numbers on all days. SIFFS members and clients had come in batches from all the four southern States and the Union Territory of

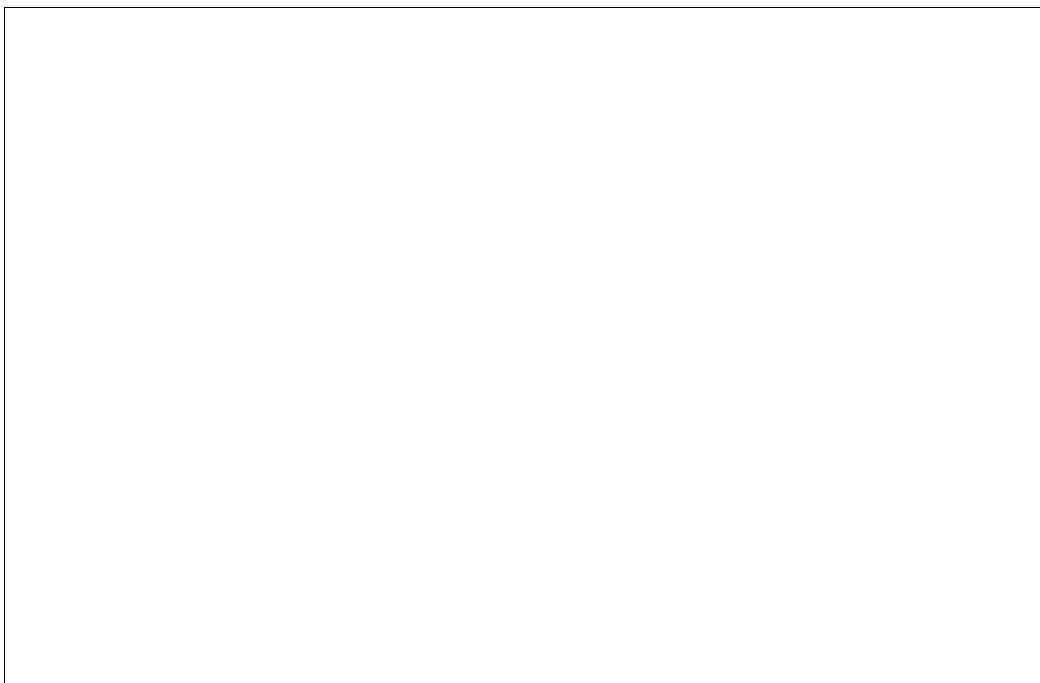
Pondicherry. The feedback from all quarters was positive, and most visitors were dazzled by the exhibits and the novelty of the whole event.

In addition to Ford Foundation representatives, present at the festival were ICSF members and staff, as well as friend and well-wisher Ery Damayanti from Indonesia. NGOs, including Dhan Foundation from Madurai, and Basix and Ankuram from Hyderabad, also turned up to give encouragement to SIFFS.

Being the first of its kind, the event obviously had many limitations. The exhibition of boats, while interesting, missed out on presenting in a systematic manner the stories behind the boats, the current trends and future prospects. The same could be said for the gear as well. Only a few of the visitors were privileged with such information, garnered when senior SIFFS staff were free to take them around.

#### **Technology exhibit**

The displays in the stalls were routine and lacked creativity; much more information and knowledge could have been passed on with some proper planning. A lot of the information was technical and needed to have been simplified for the lay person. For a technology exhibition, the issues relating to technology could not be highlighted well enough. As far as the cultural programme was concerned, SIFFS



lacked adequate prior information on the items to be presented on stage, and so could not provide much background material.

**M**ercifully, most visitors to the festival were unaware of these limitations, and there was enough of visually attractive material for them to go back satisfied. Hopefully, if there is another event like it, SIFFS will be able to make a bigger impact.

All in all, though, the South India Fisherfolk Festival was a satisfying event that provided interesting insights and threw up many surprises to everyone, including the organizers. The enormous potential of such events for entertaining and educating fishermen and the public was revealed, but more needs to be done to fulfil that potential. The festival also brought out the need to document the rich culture of the fisherfolk before it gets rapidly absorbed by mainstream culture.¶

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