

# Matanhy Saldanha 1948 - 2012

**Matanhy Saldanha, who died on 21 March 2012, was a genuine, charismatic leader and a true crusader for the cause of fishworkers**

Over three decades ago, in 1978, fishworkers in the Indian State of Goa hit the headlines when they took over the streets of the capital city, Panjim, in a campaign to “Save Goa, Save Our Fish”. Contrary to the stereotypical image of fun-loving Goans, the 1978 protest was no carnival, but an impassioned crusade for a ban on the destructive fishing technique of trawling, which was depleting the catches of the traditional *rampons*, the large shore-seines owned by *ramponkars*.

The person at the forefront of that show of strength, which paralyzed life in Goa's capital city, was a fiery school teacher in no mood to give up, backed as he was by a large group of advocates and environmentalists who had just succeeded in closing down the polluting Zuari Agro Chemicals plant.

Matanhy Saldanha—the charismatic leader of that landmark protest—knew little about fisheries and fishworkers when he joined the fight against pollution of the coast by the Zuari plant. But the instinctive activist in him realized the imperative of gaining the support of fisherfolk, who were the ones most affected by the factory's operations. Once the anti-Zuari campaign succeeded, the fishworkers approached Matanhy to solicit his support for their proposed agitation against the introduction of purse-seiners and trawlers, which were depleting catches in their fishing zones.

Matanhy, who had a background of activism in the student movement, responded positively, realizing that the traditional fishing communities were the ones who brought home the

fish that was such an integral part of the Goan diet. He also realized that with no other source of livelihood, the traditional fishers had to keep at bay the purse-seiners and trawlers owned by corporate interests.

As a result of that initial engagement with Goan fishworkers, Matanhy began to mobilize the traditional coastal communities, travelling along the coast with Xavier Pinto to get a first-hand understanding of the problems confronting fishers. He then organized a meeting in

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Chennai that resulted in the formation of the National Forum of Country Boat and Kattumaran Fishermen, which later grew into the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF). It was with the formation of NFF in 1978 that the coastal fishing communities began to get a distinct identity in India.

NFF's main demand was for marine regulation to demarcate fishing zones to keep purse-seiners and trawlers away from the coastal waters. NFF gradually transformed itself from a movement against trawlers and purse-seiners into a trade union that represented the broad interests of India's fishing communities.

Matanhy also led the Indian fishworkers' delegation to the first International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters in Rome in 1984, held in parallel

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## Crusader Extraordinary

Way back in 1980, when I was a Master of Business Administration (MBA) student, one of the first studies given us was "The case of the dying fish". It was about the fertilizer factory of Zuari Agrochemicals in Goa, which became, in the mid-1970s, the first factory to be closed down in India due to the harm it was causing the environment. A strong local movement led to that drastic action and it was the relentless struggle of the fishermen that tilted the scales. That was not only a landmark event in the history of modern India's environmental movement but it also signalled the start of a movement among marine fishermen that would eventually embrace the entire Indian coast. Little did I realize that I would be privileged to meet, and eventually become a friend of, the main architect of the struggle against Zuari Agro: Matanhy Saldanha.

Matanhy, a young school teacher, had rallied the local fishermen, all users of giant shore-seines called *rampons*, to form the Goencha Ramponkar Ekvott (GRE), the first truly modern fishermen's association in India. Formed to fight Zuari Agro, GRE went on to take up the issue of trawlers that were making life miserable for the traditional fishermen. As it was not a purely local problem, mobilization on a national scale was required. Thus was born the National Forum of Country Boat and Kattumaram Fishermen (later, the National Fishworkers' Forum or NFF), with Matanhy as its founder chairman.

I first met Matanhy at the NFF General Body meeting at Bangalore in December 1983. We met again in November 1986 when John Kurien organized an international workshop in Trivandrum that led to the formation of ICSF. Matanhy was one of the founder Members of ICSF, but his innings at ICSF was short as he was more comfortable leading fishermen in struggles against the establishment rather than write reports or attend workshops.

Subsequent sightings of Matanhy were rare. After NFF's initial success in getting the Indian government to circulate a model bill on marine fishing regulation, the struggles shifted to the State level, and NFF became a national platform for sharing ideas and providing inspiration. Matanhy soon withdrew from the national scene to focus on local issues in Goa.

My close association with Matanhy started with his 'second coming' in NFF. The large-scale mobilization by NFF against the proposed coastal management zone notification in 2008 drew him back into the fold as Goa was one of the States facing serious problems with coastal regulations. When the

NFF chairperson Harekrishna Debnath fell terminally ill soon after, senior leaders approached Matanhy to step in as acting chairperson. That he had retired from his job as a teacher and was in the political wilderness made it possible for him to accept, though reluctantly, the job of leading NFF once again.

In my capacity as an NFF 'resource person' I was able to interact closely with Matanhy during the period 2009-2011. Though he could resolve only some of the organizational problems facing NFF, Matanhy ensured that the issues facing fishing communities and the coast remained in focus, and NFF continued to play its historical role as the champion of the interests of the traditional fishing communities of India. The negotiation of a new Coastal Regulation Zone 2011 notification, which included several provisions to protect the interests of fishing communities, was the highlight of Matanhy's tenure as chairperson of NFF.

In early 2012, Matanhy won in the elections to the Goa legislative assembly. He was given charge of key portfolios, namely, tourism and environment and forests, which reflected his interests. These included ending the environmental destruction of Goa, arresting deforestation and uncontrolled mining, and making sure that tourism—the most important sector of the State's economy—developed in a manner that was compatible with both environmental concerns and economic goals.

In Matanhy's untimely death, Goa has lost a social activist-cum-political leader, while India's fishing communities have lost a great champion of their causes. Matanhy was a pioneer in the fishworkers' movement even if he was a mix of interesting contrasts. Though he founded GRE and NFF, which have remained relevant and active for over three decades, he was not really an institution builder. He was not the type to manage or administer organizations. Issues interested him. He sought political power merely to implement many of the demands that he had been making over the years in favour of communities and the environment.

Despite his aggressive stands on many issues, he was always courteous in all his interactions. As a crusader, Matanhy fought hard on issues that were mostly related to survival of communities, protection of natural resources, and the preservation of his beloved Goa's rich culture and heritage.

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to the World Fisheries Conference organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). As the fishworkers' struggles grew, and there appeared a need to monitor other developmental activities and their impacts, Matanhy, with the help of other

friends, set up the Goa Research Institute for Development (GRID). The documentation centre of this institute was the home for studies on controversial industrial and naval projects.

Matanhy's focus in public life went far beyond fisheries. He launched

the *Goan Weekly*, which campaigned for declaring Konkani as the official language of Goa and sought a ban on censorship. He was also involved in the formation of the All-Goa Trade Unions and Traditional Workers' Co-ordination Committee.

Matanhy embodied the mix-and-match approach of the intellectual-cum-activist, lending a visionary edge to campaigns and strategies. He quickly recognized that the issues confronting the country's poor and marginalized were essentially political, a realization that made him seek out an active role in State and national politics. As a politician, his career was chequered and he shifted between parties and even tried to create a regional Goan party. As Minister for Tourism for a brief period in 2002 he took radical positions on social and environmental issues.

Matanhy was clearly not cut out for the manoeuvres of power politics since he regarded issues on their individual merit, and took stands that often hurt the power elite. In a similar vein, Matanhy did not waste time on organizations that had preconceived, clear-cut agendas. Nonetheless, as a man of action and a leader with fresh ideas, Matanhy understood the need for organizations, and even helped create them. He would, however, choose to weave himself in and out of different roles. For instance, when Harekrishna Debnath, former Chairperson of NFF, who was battling cancer and realized he had a short time to live, requested Matanhy to return to the helm of NFF, he willingly accepted, although on the condition that it would be only until the next State elections as he intended to compete as a candidate.

When Matanhy did stand for State elections in 2011, he won and was sworn in as Minister for Environment and Forests, and for Tourism, shortly after which he passed away. In Matanhy's sudden death of a heart attack on 21 March 2012, we have lost a truly genuine leader and a good human being who put social issues and people before his personal needs and life. For those of us who knew him personally, we have lost a good



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friend and a decent human being. For the fishing communities of India and the population of Goa, they have lost an extraordinary crusader. 🙏

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#### Goa Minister Matanhy Saldanha Passes Away

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