

S Thavaratnam 1940 - 2013

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S Thavaratnam was an outstanding leader of the fishermen of northern Sri Lanka

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For over four decades, S Thavaratnam, who passed away on 2 July 2013, provided outstanding leadership to the fishermen of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, leading them through a turbulent period including a 26-year civil war and the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004.

Thavaratnam was born in 1940 in Mylitti, a fishing village in Jaffna District famous for its skilled fishermen and thriving fishery. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Thavaratnam did not enter fishing as a youngster. Encouraged by his father, an active fisherman, Thavaratnam completed his schooling with flying colours. However, after he got married, Thavaratnam found it difficult to make ends meet and soon gave up his government job to start a fish business in the early 1960s.

some pioneers from the community in the 1950s. Thavaratnam began to engage in its activities. This was also when he developed close contact with Indian fishermen leaders and organizations across the Palk Bay. There were the odd conflicts with Indian fishermen but these were exceptions in a context of close cultural links and co-operation. Thavaratnam also got involved in organizing the exchange of nets lost by fishermen on both sides. Periodical exchanges of nets were organised in Katchativu, the island in the middle of the Palk Bay, where both groups met routinely as part of their fishing operations.

By the start of the civil war in 1983, Thavaratnam was one of the leading lights of the co-operative movement in the Northern Province, having risen through the ranks to become an office bearer at the level of the union and, subsequently, in the Northern Province Co-operative Federation. The protracted war saw the breakdown of communications between the districts of the Northern Province, making it difficult to sustain a single co-operative federation for the entire area. A separate federation was formed for Jaffna district and Thavaratnam was elected its chairman in 1995, a position he held till about a year before his death.

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That was a period of growth in Sri Lankan fisheries, with major State investments in new technologies—fibre glass boats, nylon nets and outboard motors. The Northern Province, with the shallow Palk Bay on the west and the rich Pedro banks in the north, was the powerhouse of Sri Lankan fisheries, contributing over a third of the country's total fish production. Thavaratnam's business also prospered. Gurunagar, the village his wife came from, to which he had moved after marriage, had a strong fisheries co-operative established by

Co-operative

The war period saw the co-operatives having to play a sensitive balancing act between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in order to ensure that the fishermen could pursue their livelihoods against great odds, including fishing permits, fuel rationing, time-and-distance

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restrictions and high-security no fishing zones whenever active warfare was not directly taking place in their respective areas. The co-operatives also had to deal with the aid and relief agencies which came forward to help in rehabilitation, especially after the 2004 tsunami.

While fisheries co-operatives were established all over the Sri Lankan coast during the 1960s and became vehicles of State-sponsored fisheries, it was in the Tamil areas of the north and the east that co-operatives continued to thrive even after that growth phase. While the reasons for this phenomenon have not been properly researched or fully explained, there can be no doubt that leaders like Thavaratnam contributed to the co-operatives becoming more than mere economic collectives and functioning as representative bodies of the entire fishing community in their areas of operation, often cutting across religious divisions. The co-operatives play a crucial role in local fisheries governance and the social life of the village.

Thavaratnam's educational background helped him communicate effectively with different levels of governance and deal with all kinds of outsiders and represent fishing-community interests effectively. Soft-spoken and courteous to a fault, he was also tough and firm with his own fishermen. He did not believe in populism and always insisted on a principled approach to all matters and discipline in day-to-day functioning. His leadership in business was conservative—safety and prudence being the watchwords—but forward-looking. The Jaffna federation managed to develop its own funds and acquire property in the heart of the town, which gave it considerable financial autonomy and strength. Thavaratnam dealt with fisheries conflicts—whether they be between groups in Jaffna or between Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen—in a balanced and non-partisan manner.

Post-war, Thavaratnam was keen on re-uniting the fishermen of the Northern Province under one umbrella. He achieved some success

through the Northern Province Fisher Alliance which brought together the co-operatives of three districts—Mannar, Jaffna and Killinochi. However, post-war political dynamics and State policies created internal differences within the co-operative's leadership, and Thavaratnam found it difficult to keep the entire flock together, given his unwillingness to make concessions and compromises. The small fleet of trawlers, a pre-war legacy, which was based in Gurunagar had been kept non-operational due to Thavaratnam's strong stand against trawling. He was always concerned about sustainability of fish resources and would not agree to the use of any gear that would affect that. While Thavaratnam was pre-occupied with larger issues, the local trawler owners of Gurunagar ganged up and managed to unseat him from the presidency of the Gurunagar co-operative, making his continuation as head of the Jaffna Co-operative Federation untenable, forcing him to step down. Not disheartened, Thavaratnam decided that this gave him the time and opportunity to strengthen the northern alliance. Unfortunately, ill health intervened and the last few months saw him in and out of hospitals. Yet when death came, it was sudden and unexpected.

Thavaratnam will always be remembered as an exceptional leader who stood by his people during difficult times and never compromised on his principles and integrity. Remarkably, despite the new trends in the last few years, he did manage to get the large co-operative membership to live up to the standards he set for them, putting a premium on honesty, decency and decorum. ❧

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Sri Lanka's Most War Affected Community