

Crusader, Leader, Comrade

Thomas Kocherry (1940 – 2014)

Father Thomas Kocherry, a rather unpriestly priest, was a man of the people and a crusader for the livelihood rights of small-scale fishing communities

Summer showers, thunder and lightning ... On 5 May 2014, at the Muttada Holy Cross Catholic Church in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of the south Indian State of Kerala, these elements seemed to have come together as nature's fitting tribute to a man who was, to borrow from Shakespeare, “a tempestuous noise”, a thorn in the side of authority, a voice for the voiceless, a challenger of convention, a courtier of controversy.

Thomas Kocherry, born in Changanacherry in central Kerala, gravitated towards the lesser-known Redemptorist order of Catholic priests and was soon influenced by

garnered deep insights into small-scale fisheries and the psyche of fishermen. At a time when parish priests were looked up on as indefatigably virtuous authorities, Tom was the eccentric priest who went out to sea, fishing alongside his parishioners. His work in the fishing village of Marianad exposed him to the co-operative model of fish marketing.

So radical was Tom's praxis that it put the traditional Church establishment in a quandary. The Redemptorist Provincial 'transferred' Tom out of Kerala, under pressure from the Thiruvananthapuram Bishop. Tom, however, managed to convince his order to grant him 'study leave' to pursue a course in law. Ultimately, he became a qualified lawyer.

The problems associated with trawling, Tom soon realized, were uppermost in the minds of the small-scale fishermen of many Indian States, like Kerala, Goa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Main agenda

In 1978, groups of fishers and their representatives from many coastal States met in Madras (now Chennai) to form the National Forum of Kattumaram and Country Boat Fishermen (NFF, later the National Fishworkers' Forum) whose main agenda was to fight against trawling. Though Tom was not part of that founding meeting, he soon realized the significance of the move, which would ultimately transform into an organization of small-scale fishermen bent on battling trawling.

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the radical “liberation theology” movement that was sweeping through Latin America in the 1960s. During his seminary days, he sought permission to work with the refugees who came to India after the conflict in East Pakistan (later, Bangladesh). Soon after his ordination as a priest, Tom—as he was universally and lovingly called—opted to work with the fishing community in Kerala, one of the 'outliers' of a society that was otherwise revered for its superior human development indicators.

In the 1970s, working in a small, poor parish in the northern part of Thiruvananthapuram district, Tom

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In 1980, when the Kerala government reneged on its pledge for a three-month fishing ban during the southwest monsoon, Tom led the Trivandrum District Independent Fishermen's Union (which included women) in a string of protests and street demonstrations that forced the government to impose a monsoon fishing holiday. Tom was especially outstanding in managing to forge some semblance of unity among the somewhat unruly and disorganized fishermen.

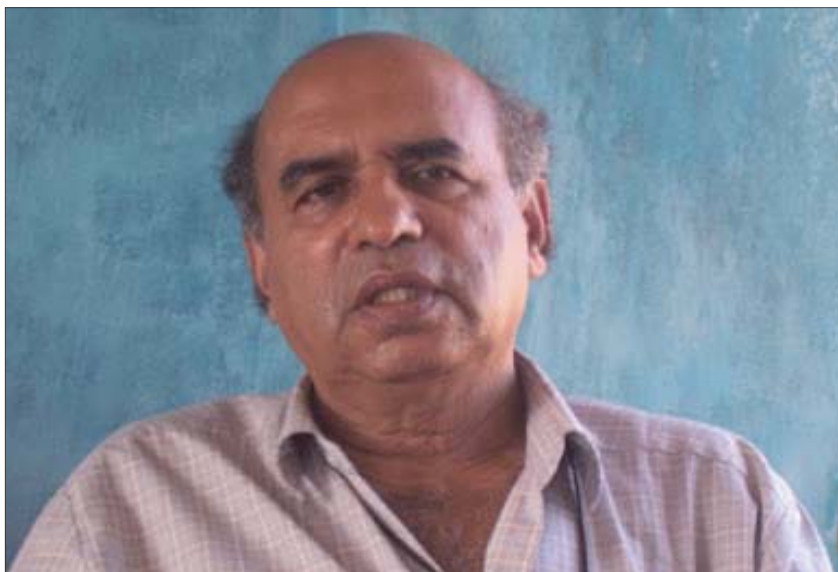
Tom's role in shaping a strong fishworker trade union, in the form of the Kerala Swatantra Malsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF, the Kerala Independent Fishworkers' Federation), cannot be over-emphasized. He soon moved on to the national stage when his leadership was sought to revamp the NFF.

Tom took over as the chairperson of NFF in 1987 and embarked on a long-term journey to transform the organization into the voice of the fishing communities of India.

The 'Protect Waters, Protect Life' campaign organized by NFF in 1989—a march by fishers and their supporters from Maharashtra on the west coast and West Bengal on the east coast, culminating in Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of continental India—was a pioneering attempt to reach out to all fishing communities in India, to highlight the new threats to the coastal regions and to forge alliances with environmental groups that were striving to protect the coastal environment.

It was on the issue of licences for foreign vessels fishing in the Indian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that Tom managed to lead the NFF, in 1994, in a national struggle against the new policy, with the support of associations of mechanized boatowners, merchants and seafood exporters.

At an international level, Tom was involved with the formation of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF) and, subsequently, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP). As an ardent anti-globalization warrior, Tom was



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in the thick of protests in Seattle and Doha. He tended to relate fisheries issues to larger issues like food security/sovereignty, the wider global financial architecture and the new rules of trade that undermine national and local development strategies. Until he was forced to cut down on travel due to ill health, Tom remained a globe-trotting crusader for a just world order.

As a person of many endearing qualities, Tom had an appeal that was global and went beyond the needs of the task at hand. Simple as a hermit, he had few personal needs—apart from a simple meal and a mat to sleep on. He loved songs and was ever ready for a laugh.

Once I invited Tom and the then WFFP office-in-charge, Fr. Santiago, for dinner at my home. When Tom called to confirm the engagement, my mother-in-law picked up the phone, and struggled to understand the message. When I returned, she told me that some “Tom and Jerry” had called! When I shared this with Tom over dinner, he burst out in a roar of laughter.

In the passing of Tom Kocherry, we have been robbed of a truly great personality who brought national attention to the plight of fishing communities in India and gave them the confidence to fight for their rights. We will all miss him. †

For more

www.nffindia.org

National Fishworkers' Forum

www.keralafishworkers.in/Fr.Thomas_Kocherry.pdf

Kerala Independent Fish Workers Federation