

ICSF OCCASIONAL PAPER

Eyes On Their Fingertips

Some Aspects of the Arts, Science, Technology and Culture of the Fisherfolk of Thiruvananthapuram, India

Robert Panipilla

Translated by Sindhu V. Nair



International Collective in Support of Fishworkers
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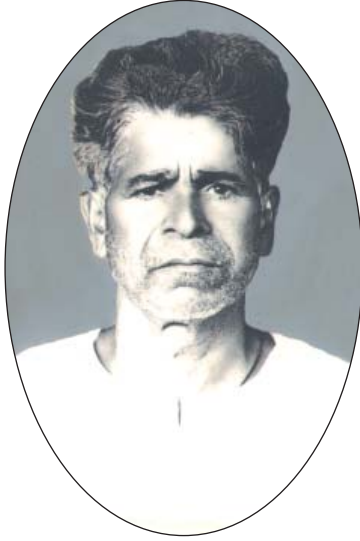
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DEDICATION

To the memory of my father
Panipilla Kurishadima, who was a rare
presence among the fishermen of
Thiruvananthapuram

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the beginning I only intended to collect information about the traditional knowledge, adventurous lives and skilled labour of hook-and-line fishermen. The significance of such an initiative became clear to me when I was working with the Programme for Community Organization (PCO). This book is a natural culmination of all my efforts spread over a period of more than a decade.

Several fishermen from the districts of Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala and Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu participated with me in this initiative. Some of them feature in this book, some do not. The founder-members of PCO—Nalini Nayak, John Kurien and A J Vijayan—have encouraged and assisted me in my work from the beginning.

ICSF gave me the hope that whatever I had scribbled down across the years could finally be published as a book. It was ICSF who contracted Sindhu Nair to translate my writing. Professor Vareethiah (of Thuthoor Christian College) and Maria John have encouraged and guided me right from the start.

Raju, Ammu, Helen and Aneesha helped me in gathering information from the fishermen. Rosamma Velappan, who proof-read my writing in Malayalam, encouraged me from the beginning. I acknowledge my sincere gratitude to all of them.

PREFACE

Eyes on their fingertips?

Seems impossible. But it's true.

Unlike hunters on land, marine fishers cannot see the fish which they wish to harvest for their livelihood. Fish is a fugitive resource in an invisible and fluid milieu. As a consequence, fishers must resort to greater dependence on other sensations such as touch, smell and hearing to fish. This profound ability is complemented greatly by their astute understanding of sea-surface conditions and colour, behaviour of birds, nature of clouds and the position of the sun during the day or the stars at night. The whole environment which envelopes them is a source of wonder that instils a principle of rational curiosity in them. This is the foundation of their knowledge and discovery.

This is why traditional fishing is also called 'artisanal' fishing. It is an art in which all human sensations synchronize with the varied constituents of nature, creating knowledge and allowing skillful fishers to harvest fish for a livelihood.

This, in turn, gives rise to stories of valour, songs to douche drudgery, proverbs to encapsulate knowledge and cultural practices to ward off bad omens—all outcomes of convivial labour in nature.

Robert Panipilla's enthralling accounts, gripping stories and rhythmic songs deal with the life of his father, mother, brother, neighbours and other fishers of his village. Through these episodes from the lives of these loved ones, Robert informs and educates us 'land-people' about the joys and travails of small-scale, artisanal fishing as it was practised in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala, until the late 1980s.

In Robert's own words:

"If the ability of a person to turn around his circumstances in favour of the survival and betterment of himself and his fellow men can be called 'knowledge' and his smartness to survive adverse conditions can be called 'skill', the fishing community can definitely claim the foremost position among all the communities on earth that survive on the basis of a combination of knowledge and skill".

On the face of it, this may seem a tall claim. I would have thought so too. But four decades ago, much to my surprise, I also learnt all about artisanal fishing and its fascinating techniques from the traditional fishers of a village in southern Kerala—most of whom were illiterate. Their unfathomable wealth of knowledge and skills has been accumulated across generations of interaction with the ocean, which is their realm of labour. It is composed of a whole discourse of terminologies and concepts which ‘land-people’ will find difficult to understand and appreciate. The solid proof of this ‘science of the fishers’ is not in its axioms but in the concrete fact that we relish the fish they catch. My respect for their knowledge prompted me several decades ago to write in admiration about their knowledge systems and their proverbs.

I have the greatest admiration for Robert’s determination and courage in taking the huge efforts to document the wisdom of the small-scale fishers of Thiruvananthapuram. By doing this, he firmly establishes their identity as being one of the bravest occupational groups in our country who are truly one with Mother Nature.

Through these numerous chapters, Robert takes us into the seas of the fishers. It is a voyage which we cannot make in reality. But through the heroic deeds of his father, the riddles of old man Sebesti, the shark story of brother Kamalappan, and the rituals of his mother, we get a fascinating peep into the wisdom of the watery world of the small-scale fishers of Thiruvananthapuram, India.

I fervently hope that his efforts will also make his community realize what they are losing by making full-scale transitions to technologies of fishing which enslave them, resulting in an unretrievable loss of skills and knowledge, and, along with that, a loss of identity and culture.

John Kurien
July 2015

PROLOGUE

More than three decades ago, I accompanied about 20 fishermen from the coastal villages of Valiathurai and Kochuthoppu to the Indian Overseas Bank (IOB) branch that functioned in the Housing Board building in Thiruvananthapuram. They were seeking a bank loan for the first time in their lives to buy their own fishing craft and gear. The Valiathurai Fishermen's Society, of which they were members, had helped them in the effort. The Federation of Societies had already contacted the bank officials and made the arrangements.

I went in and met the officials while the fishermen waited in a corner. An officer named Rao asked me to bring them to him and form a queue. I did, and then retired to another corner. After getting one or two persons to sign on the forms for the loan, Rao called me. He asked me to get the names and signatures of the other applicants on the forms. Almost all of them were illiterate. It was a hard task trying to get them to curl their fingers around the pen and make cross signs. As per Rao's special instructions, I got their thumb impressions on the forms. Soon after, they received the loan and left happily.

Recently I happened to visit the IOB branch at General Hospital Junction in Thiruvananthapuram. While waiting near the cash counter, an official called me. "Do you remember coming to the bank with some fishermen?", he asked. I recognized him. It was Rao. "Sir, all of them have paid off their loans," I said. But Rao wasn't concerned about the loan. "Do they go to the sea still?", he asked. What a good man, I told myself. He had not forgotten those poor fishermen. I felt he was looking at me with wonder in his eyes.

"I am impressed with you. I remember what happened that day. I was really incredulous as I tried to get their thumb impressions on the loan forms. That was why I asked you for help. How thick were their fingers! How masculine were their bodies! Frankly, I was a little scared as I looked at them," he went on.

Rao is not an exception in thinking along these lines about the fishing community. The world has so many misconceptions about those who work at sea: that they are prone to quarrels, personify ignorance ("only salt water inside heads"),

are highly superstitious, and so on. Coastal people are indeed impulsive by nature. It is a trait ingrained in them by centuries of work experiences. If a huge wave surges in unexpectedly as they push their *kattumarams* into the sea, when fish take their baits, they are conditioned to react swiftly, like an arrow released from the bow speeding to its target. This characteristic of fishermen has roots in their culture. But “civilized” society looks upon it as coarse or uncouth, as is evident from my experience narrated above. Society is not inclined to look upon them as a labour force and perceive their singular identities. It would rather believe in preconceived notions about them that are far from reality.

Recently, Dr. Oommen V Oommen, Chairperson of the Kerala State Biodiversity Board, and a well-known natural scientist in Kerala, travelled in a boat with us out to sea to watch for himself the process of fishing. Alex and James, two fishermen from Valiathurai, were with us in the boat. They kept talking about the state of the sea that day. Suddenly, Dr. Oommen turned to me and asked, “What language are they talking in?”. Our boat dropped anchor at a particular point in the sea and Alex and James prepared to begin fishing. Though they dropped eight or 10 hooks into the sea simultaneously, they caught just one or two fish from time to time. Soon Dr. Oommen grew impatient and said, “Is this how you catch fish? I thought as soon as you throw in the nets and hooks into the sea, you reel in a big haul”.

No one can be blamed for this reaction. There are significant factors that set fishing apart from other traditional jobs. Other than their own selves no one else get to watch fishermen at work in the vast expanse of the sea. We see them only when they return to the shore with the catch, braving the vagaries of the sea. Several times I have noticed people waiting on the Shankhumukham beach for the *kattumarams* to reach shore. They are happy if the rafts are loaded with fish; if the catch is scanty, they leave soon. They are interested only in the fish. They don't want to know what the fishermen faced at sea that day. Most probably, they don't ask because they believe they won't be able to understand what they are told.

In the city of Thiruvananthapuram, most people visit Shankhumukham beach to watch the sea. During the day, they get to watch fishermen drawing the nets cast in the sea and *kattumarams* returning home after fishing in the deep sea. But what the visitors get to see at night is magical. As if a National Highway has sprung up in the sea in just a day, small boats line up in the dark of the sea and fish in the bright light of lamps. Even this sight doesn't provoke in the onlookers any thought other than just a passing curiosity. No one has ever wondered why the fishermen work impervious to the hour. Even today, this is the only community in the world that doesn't have a fixed routine to their work. Sometimes they work

through the day or the night, or else, for days at a stretch, staying at sea under the vast expanse of the sky, enduring the sun, rain, wind, thunder and lightning and the heat and the cold.

But an artisanal fisherman would never agree that his labour has no fixed routine. For him, to sail to the deep waters in his *kattumaram*, the land breeze from the Western Ghats should waft in. Even a small boy from the coast would know that the land breeze begins to blow when *vidiavelli* rises in the sky. The best way to know about the patterns and timings of our winds and the changes that have occurred over the years is to approach the sea-faring fishermen. If they have to fish in the reefs, they must reach there before it is dawn in the sea. They know well the specific time. The nets that are cast in the sea at night can be retrieved only when the light from *kavarukal* die out early in the morning. *Kavarukal* are the fireflies in the sea. At night they stick to the nets and shine bright, keeping the fish away. But early in the morning, when the sunrays begin to spread in the waters, the *kavarukal* are unable to emit light. The window of time between the shining of *kavarukal* and their dying out is called *kavarachil*. This is the time the fish begin to forage and get caught in the nets. That's why fishing during *kavarachil* is popular.

There are plenty of other examples that make it clear that it is nature itself that fixes the routine of a fisherman: That to fish in the reefs where the squid have laid eggs, one has to wait till the moonlight spreads in the sea, that with the rise of certain stars in the sky, certain species of fish begin to forage and certain winds begin to blow... all these are only a few precious arrows in the quiver of knowledge of a traditional fisherman.

We know that about 10,000 sq km of the 38,828 sq km land in Kerala falls in an ecologically fragile region. But we are ignorant of the extent and location of the ecologically fragile areas in the 13,000 sq km sea that is under the State's jurisdiction. We are aware of the creatures and plants endemic to the Western Ghats. But what do we know about the most ecologically fragile platform reefs in the sea that are the breeding grounds of marine creatures? Therein lies the significance of gaining information about a small group of fishermen in the coastal community who have been travelling to such depths of the sea for their livelihood for generations. They mostly live in the geographical boundaries of Kerala and Tamil Nadu on the coast of Thiruvananthapuram. As their ancestors had migrated here from Kanyakumari in the beginning of the 20th century on account of fishing jobs and marital relations, they were nicknamed *kizhakkamaanmaar* (the easterners). They were the descendants of a traditional community that earned their livelihood fishing with hooks-and-line in the rich platform reefs that are found aplenty under the sea near Kanyakumari. Today,

the most important fishing villages in the district of Thiruvananthapuram are those that are populated with these hook-and-line fishermen who have migrated here from the east over the years.

They search for diverse ecosystems on the sea bed and engage in their traditional methods of fishing. Their skills are tested and polished not just where our eyes can reach but also in every nook and corner of the sea floor. When we say they have a good grasp of the peculiarities of the sea bed, we should keep in mind that the sea—the storehouse of amazing secrets—and its floor are subject to strong ecological dynamics. From behavioural changes induced in marine creatures by sea currents, turbidity of the water, other climatic influences and the influence of external ecological factors over the fishes to the kind of prey that each species of fish prefer, and when and how it forages, the fishermen learn it all through meticulous and constant observation. And they choose the method of fishing best suited to catch each type of fish, small and big. After the day's hard work, they sit together and share their experiences. These conversations, held in their dialect, in fact, ensure an intense flow and exchange of their traditional marine wisdom in the community.

Fortunately, I was born and brought up in one of the largest storehouses of experience and knowledge. As I describe and explain the things I have heard, experienced and observed from my childhood, I am filled with the satisfaction of being the spokesperson for the community. If I have somehow projected my own personality anywhere in this book, pardon me.

If the ability of a person to turn around his circumstances in favour of the survival and betterment of himself and his fellow men can be called “knowledge”, and his smartness to survive adverse conditions can be called “skill”, the fishing community can definitely claim the foremost position among all the communities on earth that survive on the basis of a combination of knowledge and skill.

This book deals with the traditional marine wisdom of a set of people and the rarest of rare experiences that they have had at sea. It is simple coincidence that my father, my brother and my fellow villagers are all part of this story.

INTRODUCTION: LITERACY OR KNOWLEDGE

It was on one of those days, many years ago, when the coast resounded with processions declaring the advent of the State Literacy Mission that I first got acquainted with Sebesti *appooppa*n (grandfather). Armed with weapons like songs, *kolkali* and street theatre, the literacy mission activists were working overtime to make it a success. They tried to set up classrooms in every corner to introduce the world of letters to the illiterate people of the coast. The class under the Valiathura pier was mostly made of students whose limbs trembled with old age.

That day, I went to the class ready with songs, pictures and old sayings, determined to entertain my students. Usually, the literacy classes don't follow the normal school routine of question-answer sessions between the teacher and the students. At the beginning of the class, I announced, "You ask me questions. And I will try to answer them". I could see their faces, lifeless and wrinkled, slowly blooming. I knew that many of those facing me had ended formal education long ago, frightened by the classroom questions flung at them and stumped for answers. But now the eyes before me grew bold, shedding the look of fear. These changes, I felt, bode well for the literacy mission that, for the first time, sought to light a thousand lamps to dissolve the darkness in the illiterate minds in Kerala.

I looked at the eldest person in the classroom and asked him, "*Appooppaa*, do you have anything to ask me?". All eyes turned towards that man who sat as if he was ready for yet another battle, even after a lifetime spent in fighting for survival. He appeared to be about 80 years old. Racking his memory, he asked,

*"Vilayo vellavila /
vittho karutha vitthu /
kai kondu vithaikkum/
vaaya kondarukkum...?"*

Then he remained gravely still, waiting for me to solve his riddle.

What could be the answer to Sebesti *appooppa*n's question? I was baffled. He was a fisherman with about 65 years of experience of fishing and navigating in the sea,

but his question was about cultivation, seeds and harvest. I had not expected this. I had expected questions about the marine world. Hiding my mortification, I told him, “I have some friends who are engaged in literacy mission activities in agricultural regions. I’ll find the answer from them by tomorrow”.

Appooppan did not want to humiliate me further. He said, “About 75 years ago, when schools were started for the first time on the coast, the teachers tried their utmost to make the illiterate people attend them. They had taught us this riddle. There is neither farming nor fishing in it”. *Vilayo vellavila* means white paper. *Karutha vitthu* means black ink. *Kai kondu vithaykkuka* means to write. *Vaaya kondarukkuka* means to read.

An old man who had lived a life full of hard work worth more than formal literacy was now putting forth a mantra for the new generation that boasts of being able to read and write but is ashamed of manual work. In the eyes of others, Sebesti *appooppan* was illiterate, but he had enough knowledge to teach a literacy mission activist some basic lessons. Surely, the “literates” are duty-bound to safeguard the great ocean of knowledge that is repositied in such Sebesti *appooppan*s of the coast, who had unearthed the secrets of nature for their livelihood, and passed them on, by word of mouth.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SEAS OF THE FISHERMEN

I heard about the different seas for the first time in my childhood from my social science teacher, Sreedharan *maash* (master). I liked his classes better than those of other teachers, probably because his subject included the seas. One day, as he was talking about the sea, *maash* said, “The Bengal Sea lies on the east of India, the Arabian sea on the west, and the Indian ocean on the south”. I wanted to ask him why he was not teaching us about the seas my father used to talk about. But what if he didn’t like my question? So I kept silent.

The everyday chit-chat my father and elder brothers engaged in after returning home from the sea would be peppered with names of several seas—*melakadal*, *keelakadal*, *nerukadal*, *onakadal*, *kallakadal*. After Sreedharan *maash* talked about the sea at school, I would not miss any opportunity to listen to them. Every snatch of their conversations became dearer to me than *maash*’s classes.

In the tongue of those working in the sea, wave means the sea; the crashing of a wave is the crashing of the sea. No one ever says a wave crashed. Instead, the *kattumaram* capsized because the sea crashed against it. The sea gets a different name when the crashing changes direction. The wave returns in the direction the sea flows. If the wave crashes in from the south, it is *keelakadal*; if it is from the north, it is *melakadal*. If it surges in straight from the deep sea, it is *nerukadal*. The sea during the season of Onam is *onakadal*.

Idavam, Midhunam and Karkkidakam are the months (of the Malayalam calendar) when the sea becomes turbulent. The strong winds that blow in the darkened atmosphere, the deep undercurrents and the strong flow of rivers into the sea occur simultaneously so as to make the different seas—*melakadal*, *keelakadal* and *nerukadal*—show their effects alternatively. During the festive Onam the special season of *keelakadal* it is also called *onakadal*.

The phrase “*kadalkurincharayedukkuka*” is standard among the coastal people. The *kachan* winds that blow in from the northwest in the darkened atmosphere of the Karkkidakam month and the strong flow in the sea bottom make the waters choppy. If you gaze out into the sea from the coast at this time, the massive waves that lash the shore, the crashing swells in the distance that roar and surge onwards above the water surface, and the whirring of the winds all create the murky atmosphere that is denoted by the phrase ‘*kadal kurincharayedukkuka*’.



Sea surging in straight from deep sea

This is when many changes happen in the sea and on the land. The sea rises and the waves become massive. In coastal parlance, this is called *kadal koledukkuka* (the sea becomes turbulent). It is the time when the sea stretches her tongue. The surging wave crashes with force and rolls and rolls till it reaches the shore. The distance between the point where it crashes and the shore is considered the 'tongue-stretching' of the sea. That is why when someone gets caught in the waves and vanishes, the fishermen say the sea has swallowed him. The waves at the time of *kurinchara* swallow the shore too. Each incoming wave takes back a handful of sand as it returns to the sea. As this process of sand-grabbing continues, the shore becomes a large pit all along its length. The bank at the end of the pit will probably be about the height of a man in depth. In my childhood, I had always wondered about what happened to sand crabs when the whole shore was destroyed. It took the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 to teach me the answer. On the third day of the tsunami, I had to visit the coastal village of Kottilpadu near Colachel in Kanyakumari district. The tsunami had ravaged Kottilpadu the most. The sight of all that the villagers had built lying damaged and wrecked, and the loss of several human lives, was horrifying. But when I reached the shore, what greeted my eyes was another sight. The sand crabs were scurrying all about the shore, oblivious to everything else. If this is all a tsunami can do to the crabs, I realized, the *kurinchara* would never be able to affect them.

Though the *kurinchara* does not affect the sand crabs, that is not the case with coastal children. The children—in those days, every fisher household would have 10 to 16 of them—found themselves without a place to sleep, having lost the shore to the sea. Playing was also put on hold. All games like the *kalpanthu*, *kiliyumthattum* and *kuttiyumkolum* are usually played on the shore. Above all, bathing in the sea too is affected during a natural calamity like the tsunami. Even the elders are reluctant to go into the water at this time. What everyone is scared of most is the *iranamedu*—the two hillocks of waves that come in simultaneously.

Caught in this double wave that surges forth, dancing the frenetic dance of destruction, many lives have slipped down the cold throat of death. During this time the fishermen fear something else as much as they fear the swelling waves—the *parithakkams* that appear suddenly near the point where the waves crash. They occur when the sea stretches her tongue. After the wave surges onto the shore and collapses, the returning waters form whirlpools at some places. Consequently, the sea exerts a tremendous pull at these whirlpools. This is the phenomenon of *parithakkam*. Whatever gets caught in the *parithakkam* will be drawn towards the sea with great force. Fishermen fear that more than the swells during *kurinchara*. There have been several experiences when the *kattumarams* and their occupants who had reached ashore were pulled back into the sea. And yet these *parithakkams* help the fishermen ride past the waves when they go out to sea.



It is tough to face a single wave; what if two waves come in simultaneously?

The *kurinchara's* intense dance of destruction lasts only for a short period but it takes one or two months for its echoes to die. All this time, the sea can be seen with her tongue stretched out. To put it differently, this is the time when the coast becomes shore-less. Although by September the sea begins to withdraw, in the beginning of October the *keelakadal* of breaking waves from the west brings in large amounts of sand to the shore. It is this *keelakadal* that is responsible for bringing the coast back to its original state year after year. As new sands are deposited on the shore, the sea will form small pools (*muttakulam*) here and there. They are a common sight on the shore during the *keelakadal* in October. Bathing in these pools is much safer than doing so in the sea. In the past, they were deep enough to reach one's knees. Sometimes fish get trapped in them, or else fish is caught and thrown into them live just as an amusing diversion. Such pools on the shore are a rare sight now, probably because of the decreasing water levels on the earth's surface. November is the season of *kallakadal*. It is during the Tamil month of *Karthika* when, the coastal people say, *kallakadal* comes in. Tamil has a great influence on the fishing community living in the western coast of Thiruvananthapuram.

The *kallakadal* (rogue sea)

Even before I could start to fathom the sea, it was *kallakadal* that gave me an experience I never wish to remember. I was about 14 then. Though I was studying



Whirlpool on the shore created by returning waves



Sea stretches her tongue

in high school, my circumstances were not conducive for learning. The only person at home who would remind me to open my textbooks at least once in a while was Luciyechi (Lucy, my elder sister). As I remember, in those days the evening prayer would be conducted at home without fail. It would last for about 45 minutes. As the prayers reached midway, I would nod off till the vocals of the last song startled me awake. I would then gobble up whatever was served to me hot and rush outside armed with a blanket.

The beach would be dotted here and there with structures resembling gypsy tents. Fishing gear was kept in such tents, where I would retreat to sleep in the rainy season. At other times, I would stretch myself out anywhere on the beach. Those nights my companions and I lay on the sands looking up at the skies and playing the "star-game" which taught me to recognize *arrameen*, *kappalvelli*, *uli-uli-kol*, etc. among the stars. Those beautiful fishes in the sky play a substantial part in the fishing life of fishermen. As soon as we children went off to sleep, my father would come to check out the spot on the beach where we had sprawled out. At midnight, when he prepared to set out to sea, he would wake me up to help him.

It was on such a night that the frightful event occurred. My heart still hurts when I remember that rogue wave that stunned me. It was probably a day in the month of Karthika, the season of the *kallakadal* when rogue waves would break upon the shore unexpectedly on full-moon and new-moon nights. It would be impossible

to see the waves coming in the darkness of the night. I was too young then to understand this feature of the sea.

On that particular night, when my father woke me, I got up reluctantly. He didn't like my slow response and gave me a mouthful of a dressing down. I got up quickly and went towards the spot where the *kattumaram* was beached. It was only recently that my father had bought the 14-*muzham* long wooden craft. My elder brother, Stephen, was waiting there. He had completed class 10 and it wasn't long since he had taken the oars into his hands to share the familial responsibilities. Both of us carried the logs and the two middle planks to a spot a little further from where the waves touched the shore. We lashed the logs to the stem with rope.

Meanwhile, my father brought the fishing gear, placed them all inside the coir basket and set it on the *kattumaram*. Usually, the coir basket is secured to the raft with one or two ties of the rope. But this time, following our father's specific instruction, we secured the coir basket with seven or eight ties. That was when he gave us a valuable lesson: "This is the season when *kallakadal* breaks upon the shore. During the season of *keelakadal* or *melakadal*, we can judge if the sea is calm or not as we navigate our *kattumaram* into the sea in total darkness away from the sound of the breaking of waves. The direction of the wave crashing depends on the direction the sea flows in. If the wave comes crashing in from north to south, it is the *melakadal*. Otherwise, it is the *keelakadal*". That was new information for me. Until then the only sea I knew was the *Arabi kadal* (Arabian Sea).

"Now it is *nerukadal*. This is the time when there is a strong flow from the deep sea straight to the shore. Also, tonight is the new moon", my father continued. "On nights like this, the usually calm sea will rise in a huge swell and crash on the land. As it is night, for a person standing on the shore, it is impossible to see such waves". A lightning thought flashed in my mind and suddenly I felt scared for my elder brother. He wasn't yet familiar with the rough faces of the sea.

My father kept talking, trying to boost his confidence. He also instructed him what to do in case such a rogue wave hits. I was not in a calm enough state of mind to listen keenly to him. I was only hoping they would ride past the breaking waves and get to sea safe and sound. We pushed the *kattumaram* closer to the sea. I looked around. The whole coast was asleep; only the three of us were near the sea, alone. That night, I looked at the sea with an uncommon fear in my mind.

Yes, it was impossible to see the incoming waves. The only signs of them were the sound of the retreating waves and the white froth they left on the sands. My father and my brother removed their clothes and gave them to me. They

had on the long underwear and 'santo' vests that fishermen normally wear. The white towels that they usually wound round their heads when the sea was calm were now tied around their waists. Both of them touched the seawater and made the sign of the cross. We pushed the *kattumaram* out into the sea. My father stood at the stern and my brother at the prow of the raft. The sea was very calm.

There was no sound of huge waves crashing. Small swells came in and the *kattumaram* wobbled slightly. Suddenly, my father shouted out something and gave the *kattumaram* a hard shove. I could only see both of them jumping onto it and putting out the oars. I stood alone on the beach and shouted, "Thuzhayo, thuzhayo!". They would usually shout to me to go back as soon as they rode past the breaking waves. As I stood there waiting to hear that familiar command, a huge rogue wave surged in with a deafening sound and crashed in the darkness at a distance. My mind froze for a second. Not knowing what could have happened to my father and my brother, I just stood there, staring at the sea. Again, another huge wave crashed loudly. I moved closer to the sea and surveyed the waters closely. The *kattumaram* on which my father and brother had set out to sea just a few seconds ago floated in front of me, broken and shattered. The waves that followed –small and large –kept bringing ashore the remaining pieces of wood and gear that my father had taken to the sea.

My father and my brother were nowhere to be seen. My heart swelled up and I was close to breaking down. "Achaa...Stephen annaa...!", I cried aloud, running back and forth on the sands at that midnight hour. After a little while, the sea calmed and I saw a small, black form in the sea at a distance. I tried to wade towards it, crying aloud, water lapping at my knees. My father answered my call. "Is Stephen safe?" he asked me with concern. He stood there, stunned at my silence. Then, looking out to the sea, we both continued to shout into the night.

CHAPTER TWO

MY FATHER THE STAR OF OUR SEAS

My father, Panipilla Kurishadima enjoyed a special status in our village for two reasons. First, and most importantly, no one was as skilled as my father in matters of fishing. Second –for which we, his children, shared a bit of his fame –ours was the family with the most number of offspring in our village. There were times when our parents were unable to recall the number of children they had. Once, my friend, Fr. James Culas, visited our home, a thatched hut on the shore. It must have been about 40 years then since my parents had got married. They welcomed him cordially into the house. Fr. Culas began to ask about family matters. My father answered him in Tamil, while my mother replied in Malayalam. We had neither heard our father speak Malayalam nor had we ever heard our mother speak Tamil, not even once in their entire married life, which lasted for about half a century. Fr. Culas was probably so amused by this peculiarity that he continued to shower them with questions.

My siblings too arrived in the hut when they came to know of the priest's visit. My parents began to introduce them to Fr. Culas by stating my relationship with each of them. For example: "This is Robert's elder brother, this is Robert's younger brother, sister, etc." As the list became longer, Fr. Culas asked, "So what is Robert's ranking order among your children?". My parents looked baffled for a while. Finally, my father turned to my mother and repeated the question. My mother spread her palms in ignorance, and said, "Lucy is the one who knows such things. She has written down everything." Fr. Culas saved the situation by cracking a joke which helped downplay the helplessness of my parents who had never crossed the threshold of a school.

My second sister, Lucyechi, was the first one in the family to go to school. Amma, my mother, called her Lucina. After Lucyechi learned to read and write, she recorded the names and birthdays of everyone in the family in a register, which explains why my mother told Fr. Culas that Lucy knew everything. My parents had 16 children in all. Sometimes they would have to reel off four or five names before getting the name of the child they wanted to call. They also found it difficult to place the pecking order of their children.

In those days, when each coastal household had a large brood of children, a trick was employed to remember each child's position in the hierarchy. They would be nicknamed according to their chronological position –*Onnam* (first) *olakili*, *randam* (second) *njandurikki*, *moonam* (third) *muthukkudam*, *nalaam* (fourth)

nappatti, *ancham* (fifth) *panchavarnakili*, and so on. According to that coastal tradition, everyone called me *ettaam* (eight) *pottakkannan*. Armed with that knowledge, I answered Fr. Culas that I was the middle one in this family of 16 children. I have sometimes wondered what my situation would have been if my parents had decided not to bring more children into this dark world of poverty. As I look back now, I know my parents would certainly have been proud that we have all grown to become confident individuals, without causing them any disappointment.

My father's fishing skills were well-known in the village. Even in times when the coast faced famine, my father would go out to some corner of the sea and bring back at least a few fish. Every time he launched his *kattumaram* into the sea, he would have mentally fixed some goals which he definitely achieved before returning ashore. Most of the fishermen relied on a fixed routine in going to the sea. But my father did not. Sometimes he would start off about 2 a.m. in the morning and return by noon. Sometimes he would go at the crack of dawn and return by noon. If it was the season of *kalava*, he would go in the morning and return by evening.

During moonlit nights, the fishing was done according to the rising and setting of the moon. Sometimes, he would set out to sea in the evening with a lunch box filled with rice and copious amounts of betel leaves and nuts and flavourings, and return only the next day around noon. Such an overnight fishing trip is known



Adventurous launching of *kattumaram*



Mother Sea blesses

locally as 'to go to *padumbattu*' It enables the fisherman to utilize the time of sunset and the lunar movements. Sometimes, my father would return with a plentiful catch early morning since he was able to get a good haul during sunset. If the fish did not take the bait at sunset, it might do so when the moon or the stars rose. That was how my father planned his fishing trips. Generally, the moonlit nights were sleepless nights for him. On such nights, he would go on his *thangal* trips to the sea.

A fishing trip that lasted a day and two nights is called *thangal*. When the fishermen went on *thangal* trips, we, the children, had our share of work too. We had to fill a large palm-leaf pouch (*pitta*) with betel leaves, nuts and condiments. The chewing of betel leaves, nuts and condiments is something unavoidable for a fisherman as he spends sleepless nights on his *kattumaram* in the sea. Then we had to prepare lunch boxes full of rice for each of the fishermen. Apart from that, we had to fill a palm-leaf basket with cooked tapioca and slices of coconut. It was the job of the children to see that all these were safely on board. The food servings were rounded off by filling a plastic can with rice-gruel water in which were added crushed shallots and chilli.

The fishing gear was attended to with the same care that was given to arranging the food. Before embarking on a *thangal* trip, the most important task to be done was preparing the fishing implements. The fishing line and bait should be stronger

than usual. Until the 1970s, the fishing line used was a rope made of cotton twine. Sometimes a segment of the line, where it was tied to the hook, would be made of silver filament. This was intended to catch fish with sharp teeth. A stick about at least a metre long, with a hook tied at one end, called *koluthotti*, meant to catch bigger fish, would also be put into the *kattumaram*. Another fishing tool that the fishermen carried with them was the *odukanavaumal*. It was an umbrella-shaped container, about 1.5 m high and made of palm-leaf and cane. Small fishes used as baits for catching larger ones were kept alive in such umbrellas. The *umal*, with plenty of small fish swimming freely inside it, would be submerged in the sea with one of its ends tied to the rear of the *kattumaram*. These fishes would be taken out one by one and dangled from the hook as bait to catch big fish.

Countless times in my childhood have I helped in the preparations for the *thangal* trips and seen my father and others off as they set out to sea. Before climbing onto the *kattamaran*, they would remove their clothes and give them to me. After seeing them off, I would return home with the clothes. On my walk back across the sands, I would stop several times and gaze back at the sea and the fishermen riding the waves. They relied on the winds to decide on the trip's schedule. If the wind blew as per their calculations, they would ride the *kattumaram* past the waves, raise the sail and set off. If there was no wind, they would paddle into the sea.

Each time they would choose to go in different directions, sometimes towards the south or the north or else straight on. In the beginning, I didn't understand why each *thangal* trip started off in different directions. Gradually, as I listened to their talks after they reached home, I began to understand these nuances of a fishing trip. The fishermen fished in the platform reefs on the seabed, which would be the topic of conversation after each trip. They would recount their experiences there, how the wind stopped when they sailed half way to the reef, how they paddled the rest of the way to the reef, how the sky was clouded over when they reached there, how they marked the landmarks and dropped anchor when the sky cleared a bit close to sunset, how the fish didn't take the bait as the sea was turbulent, how the sea-elephant swam by at that moment and how, as a mark of respect, they removed the towels wound round their heads and placed them on their laps, how the moonlight rose after a long while, and how the fish then swarmed in to take the bait in the moonlight... During these lighthearted conversations, disagreements would crop up about the day's mistakes. Sometimes, the arguments heated up and voices would rise. But those arguments petered out in a short while –like the sea, like the mother sea. One moment it would surge, and the next moment it would die.

I regard myself very fortunate to be a part of this culture.

CHAPTER THREE

FATHER'S STRUGGLE TO FIND A REEF

In the beginning of 1940's Valiyathura is the fishing village that lies closest to the heart of the city of Thiruvananthapuram. In 1825 the British built a beautiful pier with iron pillars and wood in the village, thus transforming the then capital of Travancore to a port city. That pier stood for about one and a quarter of a century till S.S. Pandit, a cargo ship crashed against it, destroying it, on November 23rd 1947. My mother was born and brought up next to the walls of the godowns of the port. But, her father, Michael Pirusanthathi was not interested in port jobs. Instead, he took to fishing. When his daughter grew up, he found a groom for her from Inayam, an important fishing village, about 60 km to the south of Valiyathura, now in Kanyakumari.

The cold war

In the beginning of the 1940s, when my father settled down in the coastal village of Valiathurai with his new bride, Arogyam Pirusanthi was the uncrowned king among the fishermen there. It was the time when he ruled over all the fishing reefs at sea. He was the most important man among the very few in the village who knew about the location of offshore reefs. Whatever little the others knew about the reefs, they had learned from Arogyam Pirusanthi himself.

Soon after my father set foot in the village, Arogyam Pirusanthi sensed that his arrival didn't augur well. The foremost reason was that, unlike the other fishermen who had fixed time patterns for fishing, my father had unusual and irregular fishing practices. Secondly, if he reached a fishing reef once, he was able to locate it on subsequent trips without anyone's help. Until then the only fisherman in the village who could do that was Arogyam Pirusanthi himself. Belonging to an influential family, Arogyam Pirusanthi had five or six sons, all grown up and going to sea on their own. Arogyam Pirusanthi and his companions would go for hook-and-line fishing as well as driftnet fishing. My father depended only on hook-and-line fishing. Within a dozen years of his arrival in the village of Valiathurai, he could establish a reputation for his own unique style of fishing.

Until the 1950s, *kattumarams* were built with the wood of trees like *panjiyilavu*, *aazbatha*, *murikku*, etc. It was strenuous work paddling them against the current. Moreover, once ashore, more hands were needed to beach the heavy rafts on the sand hills. My father used to go to sea in such a *kattumaram*. Arogyam Pirusanthi

and others used canoes carved out of a single wood. People still recall the image of a proud Arogyam Pirusanthi setting out to sea wearing a woolen jacket.

Then one day my father bought a new *kattumaram*, about 10 to 15 m long and made of the wood of *albizzia*, and launched it into the sea. The raft was called *chillamaram* locally.

Buoyant like a float, it soon became the cynosure of all eyes on the shore. It could outrace the single-log raft if two people paddled it ardently, and also when it relied on the wind and a sail. It was also easier to upright when it was capsized by strong waves. My father also made a significant change to the sail. Until then everyone used the four-cornered sail which was very effective in landing when coming in a straight line from the sea. But it had some drawbacks. If the fishermen were coming to the shore from different directions in the sea, the sail was of no use to help them return to their villages. To solve this problem, my father began to use the three-cornered sail on his *chillamaram*. With that, he could sail back to his village no matter in which direction he ended up in the sea. It is easy to imagine the degree of confidence that such an innovation must have infused in my father. At the same time, his growing confidence must have made a dent in the self-assurance of Arogyam Pirusanthi.

My elder brother, Kamalappan, has told me much about the most significant success in the fishing life of our father. The story begins when Kamalappan was 10 years old. He had left school and had started going to sea with our father. Fishermen who were totally committed to hook-and-line fishing were very rare in the village at the time. That was because that kind of fishing depended on the availability of suitable baits.

My father had grown up in the coastal village of Inayam Puthenthara in



Kamalappan

Kanyakumari district. If you look out into the sea from the shore there, you can see rocks rising up from the water not very far off. There are rocky heaps on the seabed too. My father's relatives lived in well-known fishing villages in Kanyakumari district, including Kadiyapattanam, Colachel and Muttam. They came to stay with us each year when the fishing season in Valiathurai began, and returned only after the season ended. My father and my elder brother went to their villages too during their fishing seasons. Such constant swapping of visits were occasions to share new developments and changes in hook-and-line fishing techniques.

As it happened, on one such trip, my father came to know that the Inayam Puthenthara fishermen were using a new technique that allowed them to catch fish without using bait. The new technique consisted of dipping the fibre of *maral* (snake plant) in ink and using it as the bait. Mistaking it to be food, the fish would dart in and take the bait. That was the technique of using artificial bait. But there was a hitch. It required great expertise to tie the *maral* fibre to the hook. If the tie was big, the fish would recognize it to be a trap. If it was weak, the fish would break it as it poked at it.

My father soon mastered the technique and became the first fisherman to apply it in Valiathurai. Soon it became routine for him to go to sea even when there was a shortage of natural bait, and return with a good catch. Several other fishermen pleaded with him to teach them this new technique; eventually, some of them too mastered it and went on successful fishing trips.

Simultaneously, opposition to the new fishing practice of using artificial bait arose from different corners of the village. The argument was that such kind of fishing amounted to fooling the fish and so was against Christian beliefs. Arogyam Pirusanthi and others jumped on this chance to tarnish my father's image. Soon there were skirmishes at sea and also on land. There were even attempts to endanger those who used artificial bait at sea, which led to more fights on shore. The situation began to settle after four or five cases were filed at the local police station and with the church. On one side of the divide were Arogyam Pirusanthi and his men, and on the other, those who used artificial bait. But as more and more fishermen of the locality began to use an increasingly vast assortment of artificial baits, the technique became an integral part of hook-and-line fishing, and the rest, as they say, is history.

My brother, Kamalappan, told me of another event that led to the cessation of the cold war between Arogyam Pirusanthi and our father. Arogyam Pirusanthi had a weapon in his arsenal that could potentially defeat my father—the *cherumankkara* reef, a huge rocky mass on the seabed about 24 fathom deep and 10-15 km north of Valiathurai, around which colonies of fish would grow.

Among all the reefs known to Arogyam Pirusanthi, that was the most important one. It was also called *draviyakallu*, a name indicating *dravyam* or treasure.

The reef was a treasure house of fishes like *karimpara*, *vattapara*, *kozhuvapara*, *velapara*, *chakanipara*, etc. Over 20 varieties of *para* (*caranx*) could be found there. There were plenty of other fishes too like *ooli* (barracuda) and *neduwa* (giant barracuda). The *cherumankkara* reef was like a forest under the sea where fish, ranging from *kakkalathi* to *neduwa*, ruled and roamed free. On many occasions, Arogyam Pirusanthi and his companions would return from the fish-abundant *cherumankkara* reef empty-handed only because they did not have the suitable bait.

My father did not know the location of this particular reef. Only Arogyam Pirusanthi and a few of his favourites knew of it. By that time the issue of artificial baits had placed Arogyam Pirusanthi and my father on two opposing sides. Arogyam Pirusanthi was provoked to resolve strongly that my father should never get to know the location of that particular reef. If he could get to the creek, my father would fish with artificial bait even during seasons when the coast faced shortage of bait. If that happened, all the fish would swim away from the reef. That must have been Arogyam Pirusanthi's simplistic fear. He told all his companions that whatever happened, Panipilla should never be allowed to locate the reef.

Kamalappan remembers that, for a long time, Arogyam Pirusanthi and others took great precautions to avoid my father's attention when they set off to the reef. When they launched their *kattumarams* from the shores of Valiathurai, there was always the possibility of my father tracking them to the reef. So, when the fishing season in *cherumankkara* reef began, they would move to the village of St. Andrews or Puthenthoppu, about 15 km north of Valiathurai, from where they would set out to fish in the reef. They would stay in these villages until the season got over. For the villagers in Valiathurai, Puthenthoppu was as distant as a foreign country. That was a time when the coastal region had neither roads nor transportation.

Thankamma, a little girl who was the daughter of one of the crew members of Arogyam Pirusanthi, narrated to me details of the 15-km journey along the coast: "Many days before each full moon, my father and my brothers, who had taken to fishing too, would set off in their *kattumaram* in the evening, paddling along the coast until they reached Puthenthoppu. Mother would follow them, walking along the coast, carrying mud pots and clothes in a cane basket. Mother went there to cook food for them and to sell the fish they brought in from the sea. The unsold fish would be dried in salt and brought back home when they returned as the new moon drew near. They would stay in the big shelters of

local shore-seine owners, just like gypsies. They would leave me and the other young children who were studying in school with our relatives. When the holidays came, Mother would come to take us too to Puthenthoppu.

Around 10 in the morning, we would begin our walk along the shore. *Kachan* winds would have begun to blow from the sea by then. Mother would give each of us a top made of coconut leaf and spine, and tell us to run against the wind. When we did so, the top would rotate at great speed. By running against the wind and watching the tops rotate, we never realized the strain of covering the long distance of 15 km. The return trip after the holidays would always begin in the afternoon. This time around, the *kachan* winds would be very strong. We would then be given a toy vehicle made of coconut leaves. We would race the vehicles with the sand-blowing wind and reach the village, oblivious of the distance.”

There was thus no end to the extent of sufferings that Arogyam Pirusanthi and his companions would go to just to make sure that my father didn't get to know the location of the *cherumankkara* reef.

CHAPTER FOUR

KAMALAPPAN'S STORY OF FATHER'S ENDEAVOUR

Finally, at the end of an adventurous endeavour, my father did indeed locate the *cherumankkara* reef. It was only after he died that I learnt the details of how he got to the reef that was till then the undisputed kingdom of Arogyam Pirusanthi. I drew up a list of the names of the skilled fishermen of the period, met each of them and talked to them. What surprised me was that they all remembered the incident that happened half a century ago so well as if it had occurred only yesterday. What Carlos, Johnson, David, Marisiliyan and others narrated was more or less the same story. Each of them also indicated something else to me –that my elder brother, Kamalappan, was an important character in the story and that he could tell me more about it. I had heard that before but I wanted to hear the story from others first. When I finally caught up with Kamalappan, he corroborated the same story.

In Kamalappan's own words:

"I was about 12 years old then. It was only one or two years since I had started going to sea with Father. In those days, though we visited several fishing reefs like thoduvu, oolakallu, tharaparau, kandupidichaan paarau, etc., we had to return empty-handed many times. We got to know that Arogyam Pirusanthi and others, on the other hand, were coming back with good catch every day from the cherumankkara reef.

One day Father said, "We should find that reef somehow. Are you coming with me?" Till then, father had never asked my opinion in matters of fishing. He would instruct me and I would obey. As it was, I wasn't experienced enough to proffer any advice. He waited for my answer, and then said, "I have decided something. This time, once I set off from the shore I will not return until I find that reef". That was when I understood the real implication of his question to me. When Mother came to know about it, she vehemently protested. But Father was determined, and I too was gripped by excitement. Father was about to do something great and I wanted to play my part. Father must have been glad to see the change in me.

The next day, we pushed our kattumaram into the sea and set off to the village of Puthenthoppu by dusk. Apart from the lunch box filled with rice, Mother had also given us a basket full of dried and cooked tapioca that would remain good for a long time. And we also had two plastic cans full of rice-gruel water. By the time we paddled to Puthenthoppu, it was almost midnight. In those days, the weight normally used to anchor the kattumaram was a large rock of granite. We dropped anchor at a point in

the sea and waited. From that spot, we would be able to see the kattumarams moving to cherumankkara reef with their sails raised. Our plan was to follow those rafts to the reef. Though we kept awake all through the night, we didn't see anyone. We hauled anchor in the morning and throughout the day, we drifted around, fishing continuously, trying to locate the reef by ourselves. If we happened to drift to the spot where the reef was, the reef fish would bite our bait and thus we would be able to identify its location. But all our attempts were futile that day. Though we caught some fish, Father returned them live to the sea as they were not reef fish. Only after locating the REEF would Father return. If we kept those fish with us, most probably they would perish by the time we got back.

By night, the food and water that we had brought with us were almost over. Asking me to go to sleep, Father kept awake. I was dead tired and slept well that night. When I woke up in the morning, I realized that Father had sat up the whole night and had not slept a wink. He kept talking, trying to keep my spirits up. That morning too we coasted around, fishing painstakingly. All our efforts were fruitless. It was noon, and there was not a drop of water with us. Then we saw someone coming in from the north, paddling to the shore, some distance away from us. We moved towards him. It was Denni, the son of Gabrielannan, who was nicknamed Chammanthi. Father talked to him. Denniannan told us that everyone on the shore had come to know of Father's attempt to find the reef and so no one had gone there for the last two days. Denniannan's father, Gabriel, was Mother's close relative. Father told me to return to the shore with Denniannan. I was to go back with him, have a bath, sleep and return the next morning with some food, water and betel-nut with condiments. Father told us the exact spot we would find him at sea in the morning. He was determined that he would return to the shore only when he found out the location of the reef. I could only imagine the precarious situation that we would find ourselves in unless we managed to get some food by next day. So I climbed onto Denniannan's kattumaram and returned to the shore.

When we reached land, Denniannan took me to his house. I bathed, ate and slept. That evening, his father asked me how things were. I told him Father had been at sea for the last three days. He said that Cherumutti John and Carlos knew the location of the cherumankkara reef as accurately as Arogyam Pirusanthi, and both were now camped in Puthenthoppu. They were not going to the reef as they were afraid of Arogyam Pirusanthi. Gabriel promised to find some solution. I thought he was just trying to console me. That night Father was alone at sea. I didn't fear for him as I knew the sea was dearer to him than the land. And yet, as I stretched myself out on the loose sand, I kept remembering that lone figure at sea. What made him different from others was his inclination to work hard regardless of time and also his meticulous fishing. He hadn't had a drop of water that day and it was his third consecutive sleepless night. I prayed to St. Anthony, the mediator of impossible things, and slipped into sleep.

Early next morning, Denniannan woke me up. As I came to the sands near the sea, I saw annan and his father ready and about to push off. I brushed my teeth with the rough sand at the sea's edge. Then I dug a hole with my leg some distance away and defecated. I could see Denniannan taking out the fishing gear one by one from the shelter and placing them on the kattumaram. When the next wave came, I washed myself and went towards them. Denniannan had not forgotten to pack in the coir-net basket the things I had bought the day before —plantains, lots of snacks and betel leaves and nuts with condiments. Denniannan pointed to a big lunch box and said that his mother had sent it with him for my father and me. In addition, there was a plastic can full of rice-gruel water. I felt an urgent need to rush to my famished father with the food immediately.

We pushed the kattumaram into the sea and jumped on. We unfurled the sail and raced to the spot where my father said he would be waiting. It would have taken about half an hour to reach him. As soon as we reached him, taking the food and water with me, I climbed onto our kattumaram. My father washed his mouth with sea water. Meanwhile, I unpacked the lunch box and served him rice. While he was eating, Denniannan's father, Gabriel, tried to talk him out of his obstinacy. But Father remained adamant. They talked for some time, and then Denniannan and others sailed away. Denniannan's father wasn't sure about the exact location of the cherumankkara reef. Father told me that he had promised to help us in some way or the other if he met with Cherumutti John or Carlos who were sure of the location of the reef. But both of us had little hope that either John or Carlos would be ready to defy the orders of Arogyam Pirusanthi.

My father and I did not sit idle. We kept cruising and angling. We caught lots of fish even though we couldn't locate the reef. We didn't return them to the sea as we had done for the last three days. In the afternoon, Denniannan and others approached us again. Though they had gone much farther out into the offshore sea, they hadn't caught much fish. We packed the fish we had caught into a pouch and handed it over to them, together with the empty lunch box. Before they left, Denniannan gave me their plastic can half-full with rice-gruel water.

After they left, Father and I paddled our kattumaram further into the sea. Till dusk, we kept up our efforts to locate the reef.

There was only a little time left for night to fall. We could see the western horizon darkening. The kachan wind that was blowing was very cold. I thought it would rain and we would get wet that night. I had no experience of working at sea in the rains till then. Father gazed at the darkening western horizon, sensed the movement of the dark clouds and the direction of the wind, and then declared, "Don't fear. It will not rain". He was right. The strong kachan winds blowing in the dark only made the sea shift

mightily. Our kattumaram went up and down the undulating waves, and the spray through the gaps between the prow planks wet me. As my eyes started drooping, Father realized that the wetness and the cold breeze were making me uncomfortable.

He placed the plank used to tie the sail across the kattumaram. Then he spread the sail on top of it and told me to lie down. Though I did so, I couldn't sleep. Father sat at the rear end of the kattumaram, gazing around. Occasionally, he would take betel leaves and nuts from the basket and chew. When he finished chewing, he would sing poru. Father knew and sang poru and chinthu very well. It would take about 30 minutes to finish singing one song. When Father finished singing a song, he would go back to chewing betel leaves and nuts. That was how he used to spend his nights at sea. It doesn't take much effort to imagine the state of mind of someone who spends sleepless nights in absolute darkness in the middle of the sea, especially in those times when the coast abounded with stories of ghosts and evil spirits. That night, the courage that Father's loud singing gave me was immense.

A little later, the wind and the turbulence settled down and the sea became calm. Stars began to shine bright in the sky. When I asked my father what time it was, he pointed to the four stars in the southwestern sky and said that it would be about 2 a.m. when those stars would (kurishuvelli) fade. I had only started to learn about the sea and the night sky from my father then. Anyway, Father sang poru and chewed betel-nut and leaves alternatively and somehow managed to pass time till kurishuvelli faded out. Subsequently, Father pointed out to me the aarameenu and kappalvelli fading out one by one.

As we sat watching the sea and the sky, it was Father who sighted it first. Three sails had appeared near the shore some distance away from where we had anchored.

I was lying on the plank with my eyes open when Father shook me and said, "That may be Aroygam Pirusanthi and sons". They must have launched their kattumarams, thinking that we had returned to land. Those three kattumarams were sailing into the offshore sea. When they vanished from our sight, Father told me to pull up the anchor rock. Then we both paddled ardently in the direction in which those kattumarams went. We too could have raised our sail and run on wind. But what if they spotted us...! We must have paddled for almost 30 minutes. Vidiavelli was rising in the sky. Father said, "Now there is nothing to fear. Dawn is nearing. Those kattumarams cannot vanish from our sight now. If they are going to the cherumankkara reef, no matter whatever happens, I too will drop anchor there today. The sea belongs to everyone". Father grew more and more excited. And I too was growing enthusiastic. When it dawned, Father changed the direction in which he was propelling the kattumaram. That was because now they could see us as clearly as we could see them. Father pretended as if we were moving in some other direction and kept an eye on them simultaneously.

After a while, those three kattumarams dropped sail. As they dropped sail together, we decided that that was the location of the reef. Then we paddled straight towards them.

Now both the parties could see each other. My excitement mounted as we drew closer to them. I used my oar on both sides of the kattumaram with as much force as I could muster. Probably knowing that such fervour could only invite danger, Father asked me to stop paddling. He made me lie down on the middle plank and covered me with the sail, and began to paddle alone. Initially, I didn't understand what he had in mind. Lying on my back, I could see him paddling. Then it struck me. In a very astute move, he was paddling like an old man now.

There was a marked difference in the way he was throwing his oars to both sides. Normally, those who fish at sea can identify the kattumaram approaching them even from a distance from the way its occupant paddles, as each fisherman has his own distinct style. So Father didn't want them to guess who we were and, moreover, he wanted them to think that there was only one person in our kattumaram, which was why he made me lie down on the middle plank. When we reached about two kamba (1 kamba = 100 m) from the creek, Father asked me to get up and paddle. He then reverted to his natural style of rowing. Now I could see those kattumarams very clearly; they could see us too.

They were not Arogyam Pirusanthi and sons. They were Cherumutti John, Carlos, and Denniannan's father, Gabriel. By then, each of them had caught eight to ten fish. They didn't speak a word to us; instead, they sat looking very grave, as if something serious was about to happen. Father stood up from the stern and calculated the kanicham. That was absolutely essential if he wanted to locate the reef again the next day. He would have marked all the co-ordinates of the location in his mind within a few seconds. He told me to drop the stone and anchor there. He took out the fishing gear, prayed for a second and threw the hook-and-line into the sea. He gave me a line and asked me to do the same. I took it from him and pretended as if I was hastily trying to draw it in. Actually, I was waiting to carry out the promise that I had made to myself during the satyagraha at sea. Father should catch the first fish from this reef; only then would I want a fish to bite my bait. I prayed hard for some fish to get caught in Father's line. Soon enough, Father reeled in a fish, a big karimpara. I was glad. Quickly, I handed a stick to him. Father drew the fish in, smacked it with the stick and threw it into the kattumaram. And then he declared, Starting today I will catch most of the fish in this reef".

That was what the others had feared. No matter where he fished, Father always managed to get a better catch than everybody else. He knew a lot more techniques to make the fish bite his bait. That was why the others were jealous of him. It was

Denniannan's father who had urged the other two fishermen to go to the reef that day. He probably wanted to end Father's satyagraha at sea.

That day, we caught lots of fish. The fish from the cherumankkara reef were much bigger than those from other reefs. We packed the fish into coir-net baskets and started our return journey to Valiathurai. Sometimes we paddled, at other times we sailed. Carlos and Cherumutti John didn't return to Puthenthoppe, probably fearful of Arogyam Pirusanthi's reaction when he got the news.

During our return journey, Father told me many things. The most important was the location of the cherumankkara reef that he had marked in his mind. It had occupied his thoughts the whole time. I asked him why the fish from this reef were bigger than those from other reefs. He answered that this particular reef must be a great deal taller and must be a rocky mass. He also said that the karimpara fish were found mostly in such rocky reefs and to catch such fish, one needed good "skill of hand" (kaipatham). As he paddled, he continued to bombard me with such nuggets of information. He told me the kaipatham techniques to swiftly identify such fish when they bit your bait. In between teaching me the fishing techniques, Father would hint at what I needed to learn more in this line of work. Kaipatham is one of the most significant lessons that I learned from my father. It was this "skill of hand" that distinguished him from other fishermen.

Those five days of living at sea had exhausted us both, especially me. We had stayed put not in a motorized boat, as it happens today, but in a craft crudely built by tying together four planks of wood. When we reached the part of the sea opposite Veli, we stopped paddling, raised our sails and ran on wind till we reached Valiathurai. We paddled along the inclines of the waves, carefully avoiding their crests as our kattumaram was loaded with fish. It was a happy end to the five-day satyagraha.

That day, there was an unusual crowd surrounding our kattumaram. Everyone was looking at me sympathetically. Mother too was there among the people milling around. Normally, when we came ashore, Mother would come with her basket to take the fish to the market. That day, though our kattumaram was full of fish, Mother's eyes were not focused on it. She stood there, looking at me. It was as if her eyes were calling me to her. I threw the paddle to the sand and ran to her. Mother hugged me close. People crowded around us. Father shouted angrily at Mother. Then everyone got together to pull the kattumaram, the fishing gear and the fish onto the shore. Father gifted all those who came to the shore that day with plenty of fish.

Since that day, Father never had to return home empty-handed. Several other fishermen too learned the location of the cherumankkara reef from my father. The reef became everyone's property. Times changed. Many transformations happened to the fishermen's community. The most significant change was that Arogyam

Pirusanthi and others became expert users of artificial bait. Today's generation, especially those of the 21st century, may find it hard to believe the long number of years the coastal villages were consumed with the debate over artificial bait and the events related to the search for the location of a reef. Now global positioning system (GPS) is common among hook-and-line fishermen. Before the advent of GPS, if you went to a fishing village and asked for the expert fisherman, all fingers would point to the one who was the most skilled in calculating the *kanicham*.

CHAPTER FIVE

EYES ON YOUR FINGERTIPS

People wrongly assume that hook-and-line fishing is as simple as going out to the sea and returning with fish caught with luck in hooks. We know cats sniff at food before eating it, and crows pick and pull at the food the moment they set sight on it. Other animals chase down their prey. The fish in the sea too have such peculiarities. There are significant differences in the ways species feed. Some fish dart in and begin to feed the moment they see the bait. If we don't react instantly, they will eat the bait and leave. Some other kind will poke at the bait, and when we react, make good their escape. Yet another kind will tap at the bait more than once to make sure it is not a trap before feeding on it.

The fisherman on the *kattumaram* holding the other end of the fishing line, his index finger pressed tight to it, constantly watches the movement of the hook-and-line cast out into the sea. The response of the big fish to the bait translates into vibrations that travel up along the line and reach the index finger of the fisherman. Through years of acute observation, the fisherman has learned to recognize the minute variations in these vibrations. That is his most important traditional wisdom. Though fishing is one of the oldest occupations in human history, let me say here that there is no university in the world yet that teaches such technical knowledge.

Recently, (2014), Dr Oommen V Oommen, the Chairperson of the Kerala State Biodiversity Board, sailed with us to observe fishing off the reefs. We set out in motorized boats and dropped anchor at the reefs in the early morning hours. The two fishermen sitting at both ends of the boat cast their lines in the sea and waited. Dr Oommen watched their actions carefully. Each time they reeled in the line, he would eagerly ask if any fish had been caught. The replies from the fishermen hinted at the kind of fish that had taken the bait, and they were proved right each time the hook came above the water surface. Those illiterate fishermen astounded Dr. Oommen again and again. Once James *chettan*, who sat at the stern, hooked a small fish and threw it into the sea as live bait. Dr Oommen watched curiously and asked me why he had done that. I told him that it was to catch bigger fish. Very soon, James *chettan* swiftly drew in the line close, and then sat still for a while. I was watching Dr Oommen all this time. He wanted to know what fish had taken the bait and why James *chettan* had not reeled it in, in a single move. Carefully handling his line, James *chettan* answered thus: "Sir, it is *kalava* (Grouper) fish. It will be foolish to take it in a single move. Better to allow it to run for a while

and tire itself out. Then we can draw it up, and that is because my line is not strong enough to hold such a big fish.”

We had not caught a single *kalava* until then that day. As soon as he heard this, Alex, who was sitting at the prow, moved to the stern quickly, and together they drew the hook up to the water surface carefully. A big *kalava* had been hooked. I saw Dr Oommen’s eyes widening with awe and wonder. He thought for a moment, and then turned to me. “Robert, do these people have eyes on their fingertips? How accurately did they identify the fish as *kalava*!”

Dr Oommen, a visiting professor in several universities around the world, head of many organizations in India, and a holder of several official capacities in the State Biodiversity Board—Did such an important man feel for a moment that all the knowledge he had acquired was insignificant before the traditional wisdom of these illiterate fishermen?

The traditional knowledge of the fishermen working in fishing reefs encompasses a great deal of such information passed down from generation to generation, and gleaned from careful observations and experiences. However, in a fishing village with thousands of fishermen, there will only be a few who really possess the wealth of all such traditional knowledge.



Alex holding a fish caught from reef

CHAPTER SIX

THE SCIENCE OF TRIANGULATION

For generations the fishers followed 'kanicham' which is the traditional system of locating reefs in the sea using the triangulation technique, but the importance of *kanicham* was not just limited to determining the location of natural reefs at sea. Like the migratory birds that travel thousands of miles every year to reach their destinations, there are migratory fish that swim along fixed paths in the depths of the ocean to reach our seas. They include different types of ray fishes, sharks, *padutala*, *kannuluva* (guitar fish), *chanks* (conch), crabs, etc. They migrate probably to escape the extreme cold in the deep sea. Fishermen like Kamalappan possessed thorough knowledge of the paths that these migratory fish follow. When the fishing season arrived, they would lay their nets along such migratory paths. As the migratory fish move only along the seabed, the nets would be cast at the bottom. Such nets could not be seen above the water surface and were called *thaathu* or *pachu* nets. The technique of *kanicham* helped the fishermen retrieve those nets. When they positioned the nets, they would have calculated the *kanicham*. Within one or two days, they would return to the spot, confirm the *kanicham* and pull up the nets.

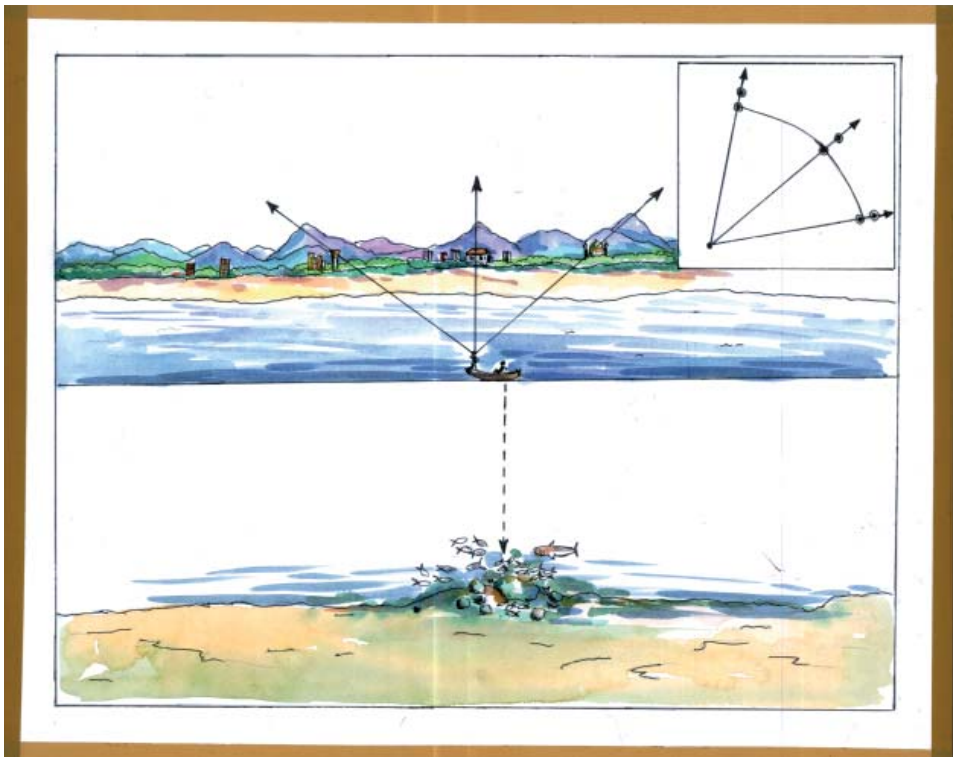
Apart from the natural reefs, damaged ships or boats that sink to the seabed in course of time also become reefs where the fish aggregate and settle down. When fishermen drift around, fishing continuously, sometimes they accidentally come upon such spots. One such reef that was discovered in this manner is the ship reef opposite Shankhumukham .

After my father's death, I nursed a dream for a long time to prepare a map of the sea reefs from where he had fished all those years to ensure our survival. If I could give GPS details too in the map, it would be useful for future students. I completed all the preparations in a short period. I zeroed in on the people who were to accompany me to the reefs. Our first trip was to the ship reef which was once as well-known as any natural reef.

We started on our trip to the sea at about 11 in the morning. Alex, who was a leading fisherman in the ship reef in the 1980s and 1990s, was our guide. We travelled in a plywood boat fitted with a 9 HP outboard engine. My other companions were Paul Calvert, the navigation expert from England, A J Vijayan, a researcher in the marine field, Rajan, my friend and fisherman, and Raju, the boat pilot. Following Alex's instructions, we climbed into the boat and began our journey.

A little while into the trip, we could see the long stretch of the seashore clearly from Veli in the north to Kovalam in the south. As we travelled further into the sea, we could see hills and mountains rising up one after the other. Farther out, the whole of the mountain range was visible, together with the towers, churches and buildings scattered here and there. As each hill came to our view, Alex pointed to it and reeled off its name – Veli *mala* (hill), Muttakkadu *mala*, Tiruvallam *mala*, Kovalam *mala*, Mukkooni *mala*....

We travelled further and further away from the shore. Only the mountain ranges were now visible. In the other parts, the vast expanse of the sea touching the horizon met our eyes. When the *kondal* wind that brewed up in the darkened western horizon began to blow harder, our boat started to rise and fall on the waves. The falling of the boat disturbed the *paravuchalas* (flying fish) resting close to it, and they took off from the water surface from time to time, leaping off into the distance. Until then I had been watching the land recede, but now my attention was drawn to these amazing sights of the sea. The *paravuchalas* would fly to a distance of 10 to 20 m before plunging down. Certain other fishes too leaped over the water some distance away from our boat. Alex pointed to one and said, “That



Determining *kanicham* (Triangulation)

is *mandal*. When fishes like *choora* (tuna), *para*, *chala* (sardine) and *netholi* (anchovy) move in shoals, the colour of the sea surface changes. This colour change is called *karuppu* (black). The movement of fishes leaping on the surface of the sea is called *mandal*. By looking at the *karuppu* and the *mandal*, Alex could say exactly what kind of fish was on the move.

About 50 minutes into our trip, Raju, the boat captain, said, “We are now nearing the ship reef.” I turned to look back at the land. No hills were visible now. The sea stretched endlessly all around us. The sky was clouded over. As if to console me, Alex said, “Only when the air becomes clear will the hills be visible now”. Alex waited to determine the *kanicham* and show us the ship reef.

“In the old days we used to sail in our *kattamarans* till we reached here, relying on wind. When there was no wind, we would paddle. On many occasions, we had to turn back as we couldn’t calculate the *kanicham* due to clouds. Today, anyway, it won’t be like that”, Alex said. Though Raju had brought along the GPS, we decided to wait for Alex to calculate the *kanicham* to locate the ship reef. We were the only ones there in that vast marine empire. There was not a single boat anywhere near. The world was just the sky above and the water below. At times, we could spot sea birds resting on objects floating in the water. Other birds were flying away to unknown destinations. There was no island anywhere near. I wondered where those birds would find a place to nest in the vast sea.



Movement of tuna shoals close to the sea surface



Natural rocky reef of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Around half past noon the hills on the land slowly started becoming visible. All eyes were on Alex. He stood looking at the distant hills. He told Raju to propel the boat in a southwest direction. Alex looked left and right, and pointing his finger, controlled the direction of the boat. Finally he said, “Drop anchor here, this is where the ship had sunk. We are now right above the spot”.

We couldn't believe it. Was there truly a ship beneath us? How could Alex be so sure? Paul, Vijayan and I looked at each other. Paul took the GPS from Raju and noted our distance from the land, the latitude and the longitude. Then he extracted from the bag a map of the Kanyakumari sea (No.1566 -Cape Comorin to Cochin) and spread it out. He marked our current position. Then, spotting certain signs marked on the map, he raised his head and looked at Alex in amazement. Paul had had the map with him for many years. The spot where the ship had sunk was marked on the map. It was at that moment Paul understood the special symbol that identified the spot on the map. Alex had brought us to the same spot without the help of any technology.

We felt a new surge of respect for Alex. He had not learned this skill from any school. He didn't know how to read a map or how to interpret its symbols and legends. His own life experiences and those of his ancestors had helped him guide us to the right spot.

The sea where we stood was about 50 m deep. If we looked towards the land carefully, we could spot some buildings resembling dots in the hills, rising here and there in the distance. Also seen were towers, water tanks, church steeples and mosque minarets, all looking like small straight lines.

Pointing towards one of those hills, Alex said, “That is Muttakkadu *mala*”. Like students in a classroom, we listened keenly to his words. “Till those hills vanish from sight, we can reach any spot in the sea again and again. To do so, we first mark three hills in our mind –one on the north, one on the south and the third in the middle. These are the first pointers of *kanicham*. Secondly, we take note of some marks that are visible straight below those hills. They are most likely to be buildings, water tanks or church towers. These are the second pointers. Those six pointers, marked in three directions, with each coupled in a straight line, are used to determine the *kanicham*. The technique of using landmarks like these to locate certain spots is called *kanicham*”.

Alex then showed us the *kanicham* of the ship reef. In the north, a small mound on top of the Veli *mala* and a building straight below formed the *melakanicham*. In the middle, a white building atop the Neru *mala* and the Titanium factory below was the *nerukanicham*. On the south, below the midpoint of Muttakkadu *mala* and the northern end of the Tiruvallam *mala*, was the *kilakanicham*.

Observing those landmarks carefully, a question arose in my mind. “Even if we hadn’t come this far out to the sea, won’t those pointers remain in the same position still? So how can you absolutely depend on the technique of *kanicham* to locate reefs?” Amused by my foolish question, Alex laughed aloud. Then he answered me. “As we go further into the sea, we find that the second pointers we had marked right below those hills remain so, while the first pointers that we had marked on hill peaks move northwards. This is the only spot in the sea where you can note the six pointers in three directions standing straight one above the other”.

Alex continued to dispense his knowledge without any trace of conceit. Even though I was living amongst them, I had never realized till then that the work of the fishermen involved such careful observations. Their knowledge may not have the authenticity of modern science. But there is no doubt that they have earned their abilities by incessantly observing and analyzing nature from the stances of imagination, intelligence, emotion and logic.

Alex continued: “We have given different names for the *kanicham* in the three directions. That in the north is called the *mela kanicham*, that in the middle is called *neru kanicham* and that in the south is called the *kila kanicham*. Only if at least two of these *kanichams* are clearly visible can we locate the reefs at sea. The one who locates reefs by using the technique of *kanicham* is called a *kanichakkaran*.

Fishermen are also ranked based on their expertise in determining *kanicham*. There used to be a long, black flag pole on the sea shore that could be seen from the sea. For a long time, we used to rely on that pole to determine the *kanicham* of many reefs. After the pole broke down, we were unable to reach many of the reefs”.

Meanwhile, the others in the boat were busy fishing. Rajan caught a small fish and, hoping to catch a bigger one, used it as bait. Before it was taken by a large fish as he had hoped, a *mayavu* snatched it away. The *mayavu* are small fish with very sharp teeth. They are permanent residents of the reefs.

Velavu (caranx), *kozhuva* (caranx) and *oliya meen* (rainbow runner) are the species usually caught from the ship reef at this time. Alex explained that the baits were being snatched off by *mayavu* as the state of sea was not quite in good order. I wanted to watch them catch *velavu* or *kozhuva* or *oliya meen*. There should be nothing lacking in this perfect trip, I hoped. We saw Rajan, who was sitting at the stern, suddenly pull in the line swiftly. After drawing in a length of four or five arms of line, he looked dejected and said, “The fish is gone, taking the bait with it”. We tried to keep his spirits up. “Don’t worry. Next time you will definitely catch it”. Alex retrieved a pouch from his waistband and opened it. He took out an *aachil* (a fishing line that employs artificial bait), tied a hook to it, threw it out to sea and handed over the line to Rajan. Two or three minutes later, Rajan began to pull it in forcefully. After pulling it in half way, he handed the line back to Alex. We all watched with bated breath. There it was—a big *velavu*. Alex pulled it closer to the boat and with a *koluthotti*, hauled it onto the floor of the boat. Satisfied, we were ready to return. But it is unthinkable for a fisherman to turn back just when the fish have started to bite the bait. Within the next ten 10 to 14 minutes, they caught one more *velavu*, two or three small *kalavas* and two bigger ones, and two large *chooras*. Reluctantly, we then began our journey home.

On our return journey from the ship reef, Paul Calvert, A.J. Vijayan and I tried to learn more, with the help of a map, about the area in the sea where the ship was supposed to have sunk. The place is just 9.75 nautical miles from the Shankhumukham beach which is within the territorial limits (12 nautical miles) of our State of Kerala. In any other country, plenty of information would have been available by now. But in Kerala no efforts have been made to record what people like Alex have learned of the area.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THOMAS WHO DISCOVERED THE SHIP REEF

The visit to the ship reef made me curious to know who was the man who found this rare heap of metal in the depths of the deep sea? Who first stood over it proudly? My queries with Alex revealed that the man in question was still alive and we decided to meet him the coming Sunday.

Those who work at sea, especially the Catholics, have only Sundays left to take care of their personal affairs. As I expected, Alex came to me after the second mass at church that Sunday. But he was alone. I asked him about the person we were expecting and wondered if he was otherwise preoccupied. Alex replied that the person I wished to see lived in Poonthura and, as he was very old, we would go there to see him.

Poonthura was about three to four km away from our village. We set off on a bike. Poonthura is the most important fishing village within the city limits of Thiruvananthapuram. Even as we neared the village, the road was filled with people moving along in files. I felt that the time Alex had selected for our meeting was perfect. The man would definitely be at home at this time. When we almost reached the market beyond the church, Alex asked me to stop the bike. He pointed towards an old house by the roadside opposite the market, its door half open, and said, "This is Tomas *annan's* house". We were about to meet the great fisherman Thomas who had first discovered the ship reef.

We knocked at the door and it was opened by an old man about 75 years of age. "This is the man you have been searching for, Tomas *annan*," Alex told me. Thomas was wearing a clean, white *dhoti* and a white kurta. He had just reached home from church. I greeted him with folded palms. Alex told him the reason for my visit. He inquired after Kamalappan *annan* and my father. For the last ten years Thomas had not gone out to sea because his children had insisted so. His disappointment at not being able to see his adventurous fellow fishermen for a long time was evident. I asked after his well-being. Soon after, Alex bid us goodbye and left.

By now, Thomas *annan* had learned that I was the son of Panipilla and the younger brother of Kamalappan and Alex. It seemed as if he had taken a special liking to me. Very soon, he settled in front of me, ready to tell his story. He closed his eyes, reflected for a moment, then opened them and began his recollection of those crucial days of his fishing life.

“I remember one day in the month of August in 1968. In those times, August was the season when you went fishing into the deep sea and caught fish using mattu, a long fishing line with multiple hooks. That day I had gone to sea with a fisherman named Jose. We had immersed our mattu in the sea where it was 28 fathoms deep. It would have been about 11 at night. I told Jose to lay a plank at the head side of the craft and sleep on it. We could not afford to sleep simultaneously as the 28-fathom deep sea was very close to the channel used by ships.

I settled at the rear end, took out the betel leaves and nuts from the palm-leaf pouch and began to chew. Suddenly, I noticed it. Far away to the southwest, a red light was moving swiftly towards the shore. A little later, I could see a ship from the northwest moving toward the red light. I guessed that the red light was some ship in distress and the second one was going to help it. I awakened Jose. We watched the light for about half an hour. Now we could see that the red light was a big ship. It was burning even as it kept up its run to the coast. Suddenly it exploded into a very large ball of fire and vanished into the deep sea.

We felt anxious about the people inside the ship. In the koda winds that were blowing then we could sail only in the northwestern direction. The ship had sunk southwest of us. We were very perturbed. Usually, lifeboats are hung from both sides of a ship in order to facilitate the escape of passengers and crew in case of danger. The ship that had



Thomas

come from the north was still moving towards the spot where the burning ship had sunk. When it reached the spot, it stopped. After a while, we saw it move southwest. We reeled the mattu in, and returned to the shore with the fish we had caught.

As I had spent the night at sea, I was exhausted and slept off. When I woke, it was about 12 noon. I went straight to the beach. People had gathered in scattered groups. I was told the fishermen who had gone fishing in the morning had brought back lots of wood with them. I guessed they were from the sunken ship. I checked the wood and found them all to be excellent with good length, breadth and thickness. "Hey", I called out to Jose, "let's go to sea". When he saw the logs, he too got excited. We lashed the planks together, raised the sail, and set off in the direction where the ship had sunk.

About half past 2 we met some kattumarams returning to the shore with logs tied to them. They told us that there were plenty of wood still floating in the sea. We continued to sail inwards. Now we could see lots of wood pieces floating in the water. We pulled in whatever we could fit into our kattumaram. When it was loaded fully, we tied several of them with a rope and secured its other end to the raft. Though we sailed on wind power, the kattumaran moved slowly and by late evening, we somehow managed to reach land. We hauled all the logs to the shore and stacked them up neatly, one on top of the other. By then we were so exhausted we decided not to go fishing the next day.

The next morning, at about eight, the church sexton came to me and said that the priest wanted all the wood got from the sea yesterday to be contributed for construction work at the church. He added that the rest of the village was doing so. I told him that if everyone was chipping in, I too was ready to give my share to the church. Thus all the wood that we had laboriously hauled in from the sea was taken by the church. In those days, if we didn't obey the orders of the church, we could be denied our community rights. That was why everyone obeyed the priest Father without protest. The next Sunday I went to the church for the morning mass. The Father was very happy. He must have been planning some new construction for the church. I told him what we had witnessed at sea that night. In response, he told me what he had learned from the newspapers. It was an oil tanker that had burned that day and sunk in the offshore sea across Shankhumukham.

That day I swore to myself that I would somehow find the place where the ship had gone under. Any object floating in the water, however small, will attract fish. No wonder fish like to settle in the rocky heaps and laterite reefs where they can find the shade, food and safety that they need. If that were so, wouldn't such a gigantic ship settled on the seabed grow into a resident colony of fish? I was certain that if I somehow managed to locate that ship reef, I could catch lots of fish.

But it was not easy to locate the spot where the ship had sunk as it was in the deep sea. Yet, I devoted two to three months every year for that search, especially June, July and August. Those were the months when we wouldn't drop anchor anywhere but would instead drift in the direction of the sea current, fishing continuously. That practice had led to the discovery of reefs several times. That was why I chose that particular season for my search.

The first three years of search was in vain. But then something happened one night in the month of July 1972. That night too it was Jose who was with me. Several platform reefs could be found in the 31-fathom deep sea. Our destination was those reefs. When we reached there, we tied the baits to the hooks in the mattu and played it out to sea. Even before the mattu had settled, shoals of fish swarmed in and bit the line into several pieces. We could hear the sound of the movement of fish shoals all around us.

I had never ever seen such a sight in my life before. I stood up and tried to determine the landmarks and locate our position. As we usually do at night, I used the positions of the stars and the red light near the titanium factory on the land to calculate the mela kanicham. And, relying on two other lights shining near Shankhumukham, I determined our neru kanicham. We tried to fish again but most of our hooks-and-lines were ruined by the fish that night.

I examined the bite marks of the fish on the fishing lines. I knew the bites were caused by neduva and oolav. That night we hardly got any fish and we lost the baits and the mattu as well. But a new hope had filled my heart, which brimmed over with joy at having found a new fish site and determined its location. What remained to be done was to reach the shore as quickly as possible and prepare new, stronger fishing lines and baits. I told Jose not to wait for the wind. We began to paddle from the ship reef, and before dawn, reached shore.

As soon as I reached home, I told my wife all that had happened and then said, "You should somehow borrow some money from someone for me. I have to prepare good fishing gear. This may be a chance for us to solve all our problems if the Lord blesses us". She brought me the money by eight in the morning. Though I was feeling tired from the previous sleepless night, I was too excited to sleep. I set out to buy thick fishing lines and suitable hooks and other gear. Jose and I prepared a strong mattu and several single lines too. The single lines were tied to the hooks with silver filaments to strengthen them against the bites of fish with sharp teeth like neduva.

By evening, our preparations were complete, and before dark, we pushed our kattumaram into the sea. As we travelled into the offshore sea, my mind was full of the sound of the fish movements I had heard the day before. By half past eight, we reached the spot. I asked Jose to drop anchor, and then, looking at the stars and the lights on the land that I had relied on the previous day to determine the position, I made sure that we were at

the right spot. We held the hooks in our hands, prayed for a moment and, tying the baits to them, threw them out to sea. I waited, looking around. The fish we had sighted yesterday were nowhere to be seen. I was disappointed. Sometimes the shoals of fish would shift their habitat depending upon the state of the sea. We waited patiently. But I was growing dejected at the thought of returning home empty-handed that day too. Soon we lost all hope of catching fish from the same spot.

As a last resort, I told Jose, we would haul anchor and move to a platform reef a little distance away and try fishing there. We did so before sunrise. As soon as dawn broke, we reeled in the mattu. Though we caught plenty of chemballi (red snapper) and olivia, we didn't see bustling shoals of fish as we had the day before. We were both exhausted by then and so instead of paddling, we decided to wait for the kondal winds to sail back.

As we waited, Jose was the one who noticed it first. He stood up and gleefully slapped his thigh once or twice. Then he shouted to me, "Anna, look at that!". A good distance away west of where we were anchored, we could see the movement of fish shoals. I told Jose to haul up the anchor quickly. Even as he was pulling it up, I had begun to paddle. By the time we approached the spot, I had already determined the kanicham. We dropped anchor, and without wasting a moment, dangled the baits from single-line hooks and began to fish. Even before the baits settled in the water, fishes swarmed in. This time we had with us stronger fishing lines, so we didn't go wrong.

Then for some time we had fun fishing, competing with each other for velavu, olivia and neduva. Our kattumaram was fully loaded with fish in an hour. We pulled up the anchor rope and checked the depth of the sea –about 31.5 fathom. We knew that there were plenty of platform reefs in that part of the sea. But we had never before seen such a bustle of fish shoals there. I told Jose that it might be the spot where the burning ship had sunk. But we didn't find any proof to confirm my surmise. By then the kondal winds had begun to blow, and so we raised our sail and reached land with our kattumaram laden with fish.

Our successful fishing trip soon became the talk of Poonthura. That evening, my friends, Yanees and Alukkoos, came and asked about our trip. Usually, the discoverers of new reefs would not divulge their location to others. But as this particular reef was far out in the deep sea and since it had plenty of fish, I decided that Alukkoos would come fishing with me the next day. I asked Yanees to follow with somebody else. We got plenty of fish the following days too. But our lucky streak didn't last long. By the month of Karkkidakam, the landmarks needed to locate the reef became hazy and unclear, and until December we were unable to reach the reef.

In January, Alukkoos and I went to the reef. We determined the kanicham and dropped anchor. We didn't catch any fish till dusk. As we expected, the fish began to bite the bait

as soon as the moon rose. We got plenty of velavu, vattha and ooli. In a short spell of fishing we got enough fish to feed our families. During the fishing our hooks had snagged on something underwater and were snapped off several times. We didn't think much of it as it was common for hooks to get wedged in marine plants.

We knew there were plenty of fish left in the reef, and we had enough bait with us. We were sure of good catches once the sea calmed. We decided to wait there till then. It must have been about noon. A strong kondal wind was blowing. Suddenly, I noticed sheets of oil floating on the surface of the sea some distance southeast of where we were anchored. On careful observation, we could see bubbles of oil rising to the surface close to our kattumaram. I said to Jose, "So this is the spot where the ship had sunk".

We were overjoyed that our efforts of over three years had finally borne fruit. I stood up and offered grateful prayers to Velankanni Mata. When dusk was about to fall, using squid as bait, we began to fish again. Even before the hooks could settle, the fish began to bite the bait. That day too we got plenty of fish. I remember that season as a carnival of fishing in the ship reef".

Following that interview with Thomas *annan*, I met Alukkoos, Yanees, Jose and others. In their prime, they were the leading fishermen of the village of Poonthura. Each had plenty to say about the ship reef. All of them threw open to me the doors of their experiences of living and fishing in the ship reef –stories of courage in facing the hostile environment at sea, and tales of adventure and escape from danger.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JAWS!!

Perhaps few persons other than a fisherman can see with his naked eye the mysteries of the universe. Fishermen observe and experience the earth's enigmas day and night. On land, when a strong wind blows or when rain pours down heavily or when thunder strikes, people hurry to safe havens as fast as they can. But we never spare a thought for the fishermen who are at sea then. They have only the forecast of the Meteorological Department to warn them about weather changes. On most occasions, the forecasts have turned out wrong. The likes of Arogyam Pirusanthi, Panipilla, Thomas and others did not even enjoy the benefits of such forecasts. Armed with no foreknowledge, they ventured out on their craft to face the fury of nature in the vast expanse of the lap of the mother sea.

Anyone who has escaped with his life from the charge of a wild tusker in a forest will surely become the hero in stories of bravery. But a fisherman's exploits of battles with the dangerous creatures of the sea remain unknown to the outside world. That is what I realized after listening to the stories of Thomas *annan* and Alukkoos. Though the ship reef was located by them, it was Alex and others who laboured there the most. Being younger, Alex would probably remember more than the others, I felt. In the following days, I became his constant visitor.

Alex is now over 60 years old. Of all the memories of his long sea-life, it is that of the ship reef that he holds dearest to his heart.

Alex narrated:

“When we first found the ship reef, there were no conflicts as happened with the cherumankkara reef. As the ship reef was located in the interiors of the deep sea, only good sailors and experts of kanicham could reach the spot. Moreover, since the reef was in that part of the sea directly opposite Shankhumukham, the fishermen from Poonthura couldn't reach it easily, particularly during the rainy season. But even then we were able to go there and catch fish such as chewwa, moottan etc. Usually, reef fish wouldn't stay in the reefs during rainy seasons. Therefore, we wouldn't go often to the reefs during the rains. During the next rainy season after the ship reef was located, we got an unexpected catch of big fish from the cherumankkara reef. When we returned, Father asked us to go to the ship reef the next day. At that time, I didn't understand why he asked us to go there when plenty of fish was available in the

cherumankkara reef itself. I thought that when Father, an experienced man in fishing matters, said so, there must be good reason for it.

The next day, Kamalappan annan, my brother-in law Insi, and I set off to the ship reef with some baits and aachil suitable for catching big fish. Sitting at the rear end of the raft, Annan took two lines, hooked the baits and threw them to both sides. My brother-in law and I set out the aachil. A big moottan caught annan's hook instantly, and no sooner had he reeled it in and struck it dead than a chewwa was caught in the other line. My brother-in-law and I replaced the aachil with live bait, which would attract more of oottan and chewwa.

During the rainy season, when the seabed gets colder, fish in the deep sea migrate to offshore reefs where temperatures are not so low. Father knew this. That was why, upon hearing that big fish were caught from the 24-fathom deep cherumankkara reef, he instructed us to go to the 31.5-fathom deep ship reef. In the following years, we would go to the ship reef even during the rainy seasons and return with good catches. Thus, for about 25 years, there was no respite from fishing in the ship reef. During the rainy seasons, when the whole of the coast faced scarcity of fish, we were welcomed like heroes when we returned from the vast sea with our kattumarams loaded with big fish like moottan and chewwa”.

Alex has a store of unforgettable memories from his long years of fishing in the ship reef. He continued:

“That day, five kattumarams had dropped anchor in the ship reef and were fishing. Mathew from Valiathurai, his younger brother Lawrence and Anchilees were in one kattumaram. Justin and Stephen were with me. It must have been about 10 in the morning. The kattumarams were catching fish, some more than the others. In Mathew's raft, his brother Lawrence was sitting on the middle plank, holding the line. A chemballi caught his bait. As he tried to draw in the line, the fish freed itself from the bait. Since it had risen very swiftly from the seabed to the surface, its lung had swelled up. Its tongue hung out, it thrashed its tail and remained floating on the surface. It could not go down again because of its swollen lung. It was flowing south.

Lawrence jumped into the sea to bring it back. We all watched him. He would have swum about 20 m. When the fish was about 10 m from him, we suddenly noticed a shark moving towards Lawrence from about 100 m away. The dorsal fin of the shark could be seen very clearly above the water. We began to shout and scream. We shouted to Lawrence to swim back swiftly to the safety of the kattumaram. Impulsively, as if ordered by someone, Mathew threw a rope towards Lawrence. Luckily, he was able to seize it. The moment Lawrence scrambled up to safety as Mathew and Anchilees pulled in the rope, the shark reached the kattumaram at a maddeningly furious pace.

Everything happened all at once and in a dazzling jiffy. The shark was a gigantic hammerhead, grey-coloured, with a white belly, and about 18-20 ft long, the most dangerous of all sharks.

Father had caught many sharks like this in his lifetime. I was seeing such a huge shark live for the first time in my life. I had heard from my father that hammerhead sharks would tail kattumarams sailing on wind and strike at its rear end with its sharp teeth, endangering the occupants. In case one of these very powerful sharks got caught in a hook, it would put up a strong fight for a long time, at the end of which it would dive straight down to the seabed, pierce the bottom with its hoe-shaped head and remain still.

As we all watched, wondering what to do, the enraged shark used its tail to deliver a strong blow to Mathew's kattumaram. The craft tilted to one side, but its occupants somehow managed to save themselves from falling into the sea. Wild with fury, as if bent upon catching at least one of us, the shark kept on circling us. Suddenly I got an idea. I hooked a big fish, tied it to a strong line and threw it out to the sea. As we expected, the shark caught the bait and sped off. I slackened the line slowly. Our kattumaram was anchored. I was sitting at the rear end and I called for Justin and Stephen to come towards me. The shark was making a swift escape.

As the line was about to reach its end, the three of us began to pull it in. The line arched like a bow. Though our kattumaram was anchored, the powerful pull of the shark began rocking it. Knowing that the line was very strong, we didn't give up hope and continued to pull harder. Our kattumaram was hauled to either side with tremendous force. The shark then dived down to the seafloor and the stern of the raft, where we were sitting, began to sink. Just when we felt we were in grave and possibly fatal danger, the fishing line snapped. And we were saved. So too was the shark!"

CHAPTER NINE

THE WONDER FISH

I met and talked with nearly everyone alive in the village who used to fish in the ship reef region. They all agree about the lie of the wreck under the sea, its slant and position. When they anchored on the reef, different lengths of rope were needed to secure their rafts to the head and rear sides of the wreck. The fishermen are fairly certain about the sea area where the ship's structures could be found. According to them, the ship that came in the northeastern direction from the south, burned and sank to the seafloor, with its head to the southwest and its rear to the northeast. The wreck lay slightly slanted towards the east. So on days when the current flowed from east to west, the anchor of the *kattumaram* would get caught in some part of the wreck. The fishermen caught most fish from the spot beneath which, they believed, lay the ship's cabins. Naturally, the fish aggregated in and around the cabins as they offered protection for the young fish from the attacks of larger fish. All fishermen agree that the fish are near the tail end of the wreck.

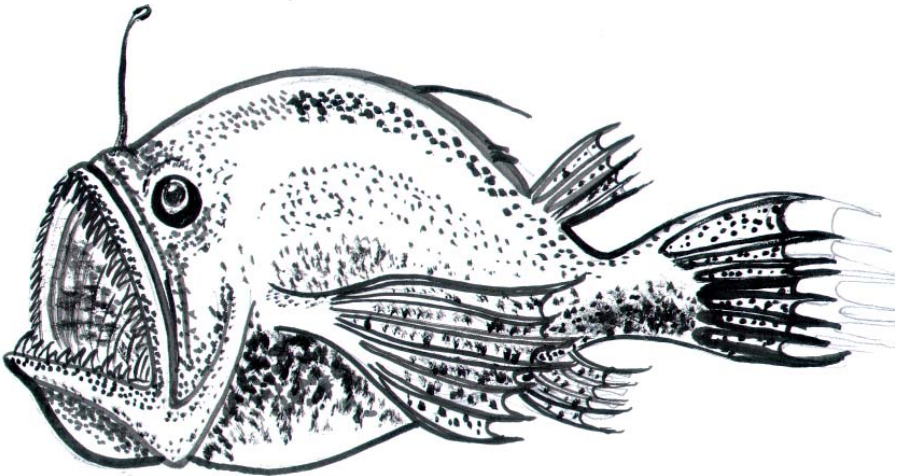
These fishermen have never actually seen the ship on the seabed either in photographs or through direct physical observation. But the certainty and uniformity with which all of them describe the lay of the wreck under the sea is a reflection of the quality of the traditional knowledge they have gained through experience and skilful mental calculations.

Today fish stocks are far fewer in the ship reef region which for 25 years, from 1972, secured the livelihoods of about 30 hook-and line-fishermen from the coastal villages of Poonthura, Valiathurai and Vettukattu. The continuous dredging by deep-water trawlers, the decrease in the number of fish coming into the reef from the deep sea and the nylon nets discarded in the reef are the reasons for the decline in catch, the fishermen say.

Nonetheless, there is one thing everyone is eager to hear about –the wonder fish in the ship reef region. It was during a rainy season four to five years after the reef was located that this fish first appeared there. At that time, there were about 10 *kattumarams* engaged in fishing around the reef. As the fishermen reeled in the fish caught in their bait, this huge fish would habitually grab the catch, biting away almost three-fourths of the fish caught in the hook. Each day it managed to rob the *kattumarams* of at least three or four fishes.

To date, no one has seen this fish that lives at the bottom of the ship reef. It doesn't surface. On the rare occasions when the fishermen reeled in a fish that had escaped from the clutches of this mystery marauder, the marks on it told them that it lacked sharp teeth but had a very large mouth. In a single gulp it could easily swallow fishes that are even 50 cm in width. Another astonishing aspect of the wonder fish is the way it moves with its prey clamped in its mouth. It doesn't swim like other fishes but moves in a paddling motion, using the large fins on either side of its body. Some fishermen like Alex made isolated and brave attempts to catch it with chains and hooks, but in vain.

The story of the wonder fish is one among the many experiences of the ship reef fishermen that could fill several books. Many of them haven't found a place in this memoir due to my time constraints or the fading of the memory of the fishermen concerned. Over half the number of fishermen who have shared their experiences with me over the past 10 years have passed away. And with their passing has vanished many engrossing stories.



The wonder fish in ship reef (An artist's imagination of wonder fish)

CHAPTER TEN

ALEX'S GREAT ESCAPE!

It didn't take many days for me to realize that Alex, who engages daily with the sea for his survival, is a treasure house of stories as unending as the sea itself. He reeled off stories in a row, ending one only to begin another.

"I was then about 25 years old. I had just got married. In those days, no kattumaram would venture alone into the inland sea. One day we set out to the ship reef region in two kattumarams, my neighbour, Hridayadas, from the village of Manakkudi and I in one, and Kamalappan annan and others in the other. As we sailed into the offshore sea on koda winds, we couldn't note any landmarks. Blindly guessing the direction we were going, we sailed further and finally dropped anchor. We waited for a long time for the landmarks to become clear. I ate my rice-gruel, placed a plank at the rear, and lay down to sleep. I asked Hridayadas to stay alert and wake me up when the landmarks became clear. Soon I drifted into sound sleep. It must have been very late. Somewhere in the depths of my subconscious mind I could hear some indistinct sounds.

They grew louder and louder. I was startled awake. I was lying face down on the kattumaram. The moment I turned on my back, what I saw was the front of a huge ship bearing down on us like a mountain. As I tried to clamber up, the massive wave created by the ship capsized the kattumaram. Though I was thrown off the raft by the first wave itself, luckily, the following one pushed it closer towards me. Somehow I managed to swim towards it and clung on tightly. I looked up and saw some persons on the ship deck shouting out something. I could hear the cry of Hridayadas a little distance away. He was still in the water, having been thrown off the kattumaram. I got hold of an oar and stretched it towards him. The moment he seized it, I pulled him towards me. By that time, the ship's rear end was close to us. Those who were on the deck were now shouting louder. They were probably warning us about the ship's propeller. But our kattumaram was still anchored. If we tried to swim away, we would certainly be sucked into the whirlpool caused by the rotating propeller.

By the grace of God, I pushed at the ship with the oar in my hand. For us, at that moment, an oar's length was the distance between life and death. In one breath, we called upon all the gods we knew. That paddle somehow saved us from being dashed against the propeller. Perhaps it was God who saved us in the shape of the paddle. If I didn't have that oar in my hand, we would certainly have been sucked into the propeller. Caught in the whirlpool, our kattumaram kept spinning for a while along with us. But we could see death moving away from us bit by bit.

For quite some time I could do nothing but lie down on the upturned kattumaram with my head bent. Then both of us sat up on the raft. We looked at each other with frightened expressions. Not a word came out of our mouths. We slowly tried to upturn the raft. We couldn't since our limbs were trembling so much. By then annan and the others in the other kattumaram had moved towards us. Even as he paddled, annan kept scolding us. Apparently, he said, Hridayadas too had gone off to sleep soon after I did. From their anchored point a little distance away from us, annan and the others could see the ship coming towards us and they kept shouting to wake us up but we didn't.

We had lost our sail and gear. Annan and the others tied our kattumaram to theirs and took us ashore. Even after we got back on land safe, we couldn't shake off our fear. Our families fetched Kunjan annan to perform a ritual to ward off the fear. It was only a few years ago before this incident that Hridayadas's father and his elder brother were hit by a ship and killed while fishing off their village, Manakkudi in Tamil Nadu. That was why he had left Manakkudi to settle down in Valiathurai."

The magical sights under the sea

The stories that Alex and Thomas told me about the ship reef aroused a new desire in me. No matter whatever it cost, I wanted to go down to the sea bed and take pictures of the sunken ship. I knew it was not going to be easy, but my mind resolutely pursued the dream, and the sight of the sea always strengthened it further. I knew that in the first half of the 90s the scientists and other experts from



To the bottom of the sea (Scuba divers Srimi and Beema)

CMFRI (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute) had, with all their modern equipment, failed in their attempts to take pictures of the artificial reefs 30m under the sea off Valiathura. Still, like the boy in a story that I learnt at school who wished to gather the moon into his hands, I kept that dream alive in me for a long time.

One day I told Alex about it. He said, 'In that case you can try to take pictures of the ship that is submerged in the sea opposite to Anchuthenkku'. This particular ship had sunk in the sea where it was 22 fathom deep. If only I could find someone who could dive into 40m deep sea my dream might come true. I went to Anchuthenkku and talked to the fishermen there. They had different versions of the story about the sunken ship, from it being a British war ship sabotaged by an enemy submarine to it being a Dutch ship caught in a fire or storm. I talked to some people working in the Archeology and Port departments but they weren't even aware that such a ship was lying submerged in the sea. Like Thomas in the village of Poonthura, Sukkoorachan was a legendary fisherman in the village here. My continued inquiries revealed that his second generation lived in the village now. Some of the villagers sang two lines of a song when I asked them about the ship reef.

The ship reef discovered by Sukkoorachan

Where southerners fished without bait'

Though it was Sukkoorachan who discovered the ship reef here, like Arogyam Pirusanthi, he too didn't know how to fish without using natural bait. But many fishermen from the south came to this ship reef and fished with artificial baits and returned with abundant catch. The fishermen from Marinaadu, a village about 10 km south to Anchuthenkku too are regulars of this particular ship reef. Alex has a friend there-Mathias. So one day we set off to the ship reef in Mathias' boat. Apart from Mathias and Alex, my friend, Nalini Naik and her friend, Gabriela, too were in the boat. We gathered the location details of the ship reef and those of other natural reefs too. Mathias, like Alex, is a treasure house of fishing experiences.

Now what remained for me was to find diving experts who could go down 40m deep sea. My friend Mari Rajan, a social activist from Tamil Nadu helped me here. His friend, Beemaraj, has the license to dive to 40m deep sea. He had done it only once before, but he was willing to participate in our endeavor. Now I had to find someone to accompany him to the depths of the sea. After a long search it was Mari rajan who came to my help again. He introduced me to Sreeni, a young research student with Zoological Survey of India. Though he had obtained the license he hadn't dived to 40m depths till then. But from our talks I could sense that he was interested. Now the next obstacle was the camera. The one that Sreeni

had could be used to take underwater pictures of only 10m depth. It could be useful for us only if a shield was made for it. It would set us back by at least 30,000 rupees. The preparations having gone so far I was determined that the project shouldn't be derailed for want of money. I sent 20,000 rupees to Sreeni to make the shield and promised another 20,000 rupees towards their diving expenses.

Finally they came- Maari rajan, Beema and Sreeni. Meanwhile I had met Aloshtyas, son of Sukkoorachan's daughter. I wanted to ensure the participation of someone from Sukkoorachan's family in our venture. His father was from my father's village, Inayam Puthenthura. When I mentioned my father's name he happily shook my hands. He had heard a lot about him and knew many of our relatives back in the village. Aloshtyas is a smart and intelligent fisherman who makes use of all available technology in his fishing. When I told him about our determination to dive into the ship reef, he too was enthusiastic.

The day after Beema and Sreeni arrived, we all went to the seashore. They gazed at the sea for a long time and finally said, 'The colour of the water doesn't seem right. It will be futile to dive today'. The average depth of the sea is 4 km. The sunlight penetrates only till about 200m. Though the ship lies at about 40 m in depth, it would be impossible to take pictures that day as there wasn't enough sunlight. It would be completely dark even where the ship rested. Though I was worried about the rising expenses I didn't lose hope. The next day, at the end of another round of observations they said, 'Today the water is clear, it will be even clearer and brighter tomorrow'. I didn't voice my anxieties to them, instead said that we could wait out for another two or four days if necessary. That evening they had a talk with Alex for a long time on the sea shore. Afterwards they came to my house and told me that we would go the next day for sure. I called Aloshtyas up and asked him to be prepared.

We came to the seashore at Anchuthenkku at about 9 in the morning and set off in Aloshtyas' boat to the ship reef that is 9 km away. Beema and Sreeni continued to shift their gaze up at the sky and down to the sea. The sea was very clear that morning, and the sky was cloudless. It was as if the clouds had decided to stay away especially for us. Aloshtyas dropped anchor when we reached the ship reef. Sreeni and Beema prepared to dive, wearing their diving jackets and cylinders. I looked at their faces. They reflected the determination and will that mountaineers setting off to scale heights felt. Still I said, 'In the moments to come the foremost priority should be your safety. If you feel there is any threat to it you should return immediately'. Aloshtyas instructed them to follow the rope tied to the anchor. He had anchored the boat almost to the midpoint of the ship. Having full belief in the knowledge of fishermen like Aloshtyas I asked the divers to do exactly as he said.



View of the front part of the The Netherlands' ship sunk in the sea bed

They released the air in their jackets and dived into the depths. Holding the rope, they moved towards where the ship lay submerged.

As one dives further into the sea, the cold and pressure increases. Anything can happen. It is the diver's greatest challenge. From the boat we could see our divers moving till about 10m down. The sight gave me great confidence. The ship must be about 20m high. If so, they would have their first sight of it when they reach about 20m. Talking about such things we waited in the boat hopefully. Half-an hour later the divers were back. As soon they surfaced they raised their thumbs and shouted, 'Success!'. The moment of greatest triumph and fulfillment. My mind swelled and brimmed over with happiness. We bristled with impatience for them to climb up into the boat and show us the pictures they had captured.

Massive schools of *kakkaklathi* (*Odonus niger*) moving above the deck, sometimes they even obstruct the view of the ship, the shalabha fish (family- *Cheatodontidae*) swimming along them, 10-20 Giant Coral Whip (family-*Antipathidae*) that resemble white wires on one side of the deck, swaying to the currents. The view on another side is even more amazing. There are shrubs belonging to the hydrocoral group about 3-4 feet high, multi-branched and white in colour. Corals too are seen here and there. At the back of the ship, almost at the bottom, a giant *kalava*(*grouper*) about half the size of our boat is moving. The moment it sights

our divers, it slowly moves away. Several species of fishes are encircling the ship- the red snapper, different types of caranx, Barracuda etc. It is clear from the pictures taken of the sides of the ship that it has suffered severe damage. Things like iron rope, crane and cannon could be seen on the deck. Sreeni said that the ship is stuck on the sea bed and is about 8m high. The depth gauge in their diving equipment showed a depth of 43m. We praised them for making this dream-like endeavour a success. In turn they gave Aloshias credit for their success. They had followed the rope to the ship and found out that Aloshtyas had anchored the boat right in the middle of the ship just as he had said. On our return journey they continued to shower Aloshtyas with praise.

The next day I began my research into the history of the ship. My search finally took me to Jagannatha temple at Varkkala where a 'Dutch bell' is placed in the inner courtyard. Today's temple authorities know nothing more about the bell other than the rumour that it was gifted to the temple by a Dutch captain as a gesture of gratitude for the miraculous escape he and his sailors had when his ship sunk in the adjacent sea. I quickly scribbled down the few words inscribed on the brass bell. Though cell phones and camera are forbidden within the temple a sympathetic temple employee kindly allowed me to take the photo of the bell. The next day I sent the photo and the inscribed words to my friends, Nathalie Steins and Cornelia Quist in Netherlands. They took up the research further and could gather valuable information about the ship. The ship, 'Wimmemum' that sank in the sea in 1754, adjacent to Varkkala had belonged to Dutch East India Company (VOC). Today I possess all the available information regarding the ship reef off Anchuthenkku and guard it like treasure. I don't know whom I should entrust it with to safeguard it for future generations.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAMALAPPAN AND THE SAW SHARK

Fishermen have a unique way of naming fish, based on its size. For example, the small species of *konchu* (shrimp) and *netholi* (anchovy) are called *konchupodi* and *netholipodi*, respectively. The young ones of *ayala* (mackerel) are called *ayalachooda*. The bigger specimens in the species of ray fish and sharks are called *virukam*.

Like hunters who keep horns or stuffed game and exhibit them in their home as souvenirs of hunting expeditions, the fishermen too like to display things that recall their big catch—the snout of a saw shark, the horn of a *kattukuman*, tails of ray fish, and so on.

My childhood memory of the long snout of a saw shark, over one metre long, kept in our thatched hut still troubles me. In all the marine museums I have been fortunate enough to visit, including the ones in Japan and Singapore, I never got to see the snout of such a large saw shark. But my distress comes from another memory. I was then studying in class 3 or 4. One day I found that the teeth on either side of the snout of the saw shark were loose. From then on, every evening after returning home from school, I would shake all the teeth to see how many were moving. There were about 30 to 40 teeth, each 1.5 to 3 inches long, on both sides of the snout blade. Once, as I was shaking the teeth, one of them fell out into my hand. Without hesitating, I plucked out the rest. At the time I used to keep a toy shore-seine. It consisted of a dugout canoe made with a shapely flower-sheath of coconut tree, a net woven from old and damaged cotton twine nets and ropes of coir or silk twines. After I came home from school, I carried this toy to the coconut grove on the shore where I acted out fishing with my friends. Broken pieces of tiles served as the fish we caught. Each time we cast our net, we caught plenty of fish. We would then auction the catch, divide the profit, and also argue about the day's work. When the game was over, I brought the canoe and the net home. That day my immature mind told me that the teeth of the saw shark would serve better as bait than broken pieces of tiles. That was the reason for my brutal act of shaking out all the teeth in the long snout of the shark. Anyway, I was thrashed for my action that day. Later, as I grew up, I was drawn more and more to the sea, made many trips in search of the fishing reefs where my father and brothers had fished once, and began to collect horns and snouts of bigger species of fishes as well as pictures of the reefs. Today, I have with me tails of different specimens of ray fish, *kattakuman*'s horns, etc., but I haven't been successful in

finding a saw shark, despite searching hard. To my regret, saw sharks are on the verge of extinction today.

Many years later, during a family reunion, the huge scar on the left leg of Insi, my brother-in-law, threw light on how the long blade of a saw shark came to be in the possession of our family. It was Kamalappan who narrated the story.

It was probably the season of Karkkidakam. The sea was turbulent, so we resorted to launching our kattumaram by pushing it off the Valiathura pier. There were two kattumarams, my Insi, Stephen and I in one, and in the other, Alex and Chippan from Kuzhivilakam. About half past nine in the morning, we reached the 24-fathom deep sea area. This was the path that big fishes took for their annual migration from the deep sea during this season. Two days ago we spread our net across that great path, along which various species of fish travelled from seas thousands of miles away, foraging in muddy platform reefs. We had now returned to retrieve the net. We confirmed the kanicham and, using a tool with hooks attached to its end, slowly drew the net closer to the surface. The net was woven with silk twines, with a mesh size as large as 7-8 inches. It was cast in four pieces, each about 100 m long. There were not many fishes in the first two portions of the net, only around three or four ray fish, one guitar fish, and a lot of big chanks (conch). When we hauled in almost half of the next portion of the net, we began to feel a force pulling it down. We struggled to pull in even a little more of the net onto the raft. Then we saw it—a gigantic saw shark trapped almost at the bottom of the net. It seemed to be pulling the net down with its mouth, but its blade-like snout had got entangled in the net. It was a very dangerous situation. The saw shark is the most dangerous of all sharks, sporting a nose-like snout, about 3-4 feet long, close to the mouth, with sharp teeth rising on each side. It resembles a saw, and hence its name.

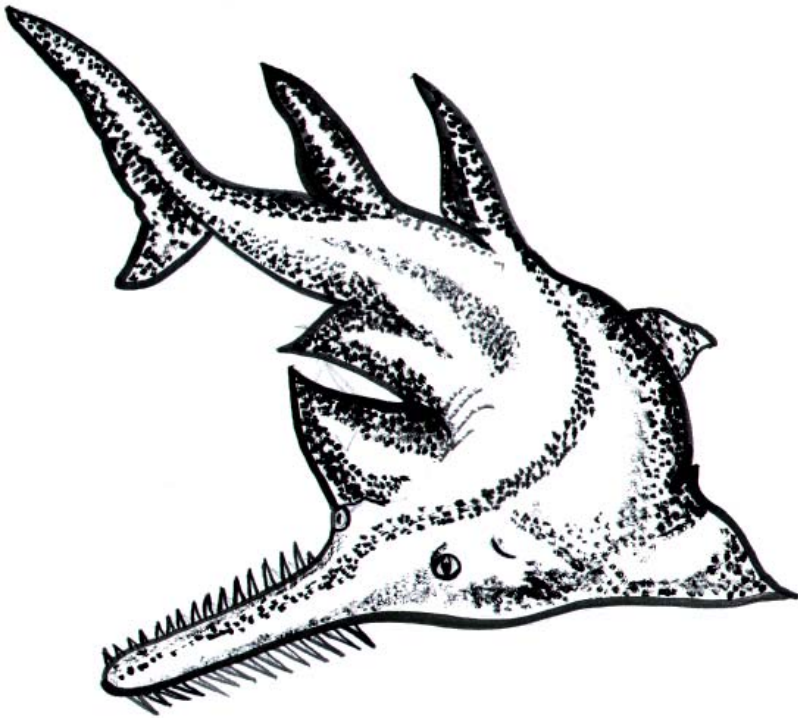
Stephen wasn't a very experienced fisherman at the time, so he climbed into the other raft while Alex joined us. The three of us began to think of ways to take this massive fish ashore. We could have easily cut off the bottom portion of the net and let it go. But no one from our village had ever caught such a huge saw shark either by hook-and-line or in a net. For that reason, we were determined to bring it to shore. If only the shark had been completely inside the net, the task would have been easy. But for the blade, the rest of its body was free in the water.

The shark intermittently expressed its rage, trying to extricate its blade and thrashing its tail. Alex was very young then. I said to him, "Brother-in-law and I will hold the net and sit on board. You dive into the sea with the hook and fasten it to the fish. Then, using both the net and the hook we can probably bring it up to the surface." Alex tied the rope to the hook and prepared to jump into the sea, but hesitated on seeing the shark thrash around wildly. We had cast our large-meshed bottom-set nets on the sea bed to catch the big sharks that came in from the deep sea during this season to prey on the

marine creatures usually found in platform reefs, like manthal (left-eyed flounders), nagara, crabs and chanks.

Seeing Alex hesitate, Insi grabbed the hook from him and dived into the sea. We admired his courage to plunge into this very dangerous task. He dived down, fastened the hook to the shark and swam back to the kattumaram. All the while, Alex and I were holding the net securely tight. Had the shark managed to escape from the net then, my brother-in-law would surely have met his end immediately. He had made a mistake and was saved only because of God's grace. Instead of hooking the shark by its gills, he had hooked its mouth. Nonetheless, his tremendous courage helped us overcome the first obstacle to catching the shark.

We then pondered on how to tie up its tail. We decided on the kind of rope and knot needed for the task. By then, Alex was feeling braver. He dived into the sea with a rope while my brother-in-law held onto the line that had the hook fastened to the shark's mouth. I held the net. The shark was held upright by the force of our hold. Our first few attempts failed as the shark thrashed its tail fiercely enough to scare away Alex. Finally, after about half-an hour of strenuous effort, Alex managed to tie the shark's tail



Saw Shark

with a special technique called vaariyapoottu. It involves a tight knot of hoops that entrap the prey. Once its tail had been secured, we felt we might be able to finally catch the shark. We shifted all our nets to the other kattumaram. Alex, my brother-in-law and I managed to pull the shark closer to the raft. The most vulnerable point in a shark's body is its netti, the region of the forehead between its eyes. Normally, when a shark is caught and drawn towards the kattumaram, the fishermen beat its netti with sticks.

But saw sharks are more dangerous and it is not easy to approach its forehead as the saw-like snout juts out right in front of it. I tried to lasso its snout with a long length of rope, but it got fully entangled in the net. Meanwhile, our efforts were provoking the shark. How were we to pull on board this massive shark which was heavier than our kattumaram? And what if the raft overturned? But we were not willing to let it go. Using the mast of the sail, we tied both the rafts together to make it one secure unit. We then pulled the shark closer to us. Almost half the length of its blade was aboard our raft. Alex wound the rope tied to its tail around the stern stem to keep it from thrashing. Taking turns, we began to beat its forehead. Since the major portion of its head was aboard the raft and its tail was tied, it kept still, blinking only its eyes. To make sure the shark was completely exhausted to enable us to relax our holds, my brother-in-law poked it in the eyes with a stick. Watching him, my hold on the net relaxed a little. The shark that was motionless till then suddenly gave a great shake of its head and tore into my brother-in-law's leg with its blade. The next moment it fell into the water and Insi fell back on the raft. Alex and I were saved by a hair's breadth.

Blood oozed heavily from my brother-in-law's wound, and the marks of the shark's teeth were visible on his leg. I didn't know my momentary lapse could take such a toll. To prevent further harm, Alex and I held the net tightly. Chippan annan came from the other raft and made my brother-in-law sit upright. Taking out the half-chewed betel-nut from his mouth, he placed it on the cut and, tearing off a piece of his towel, bound the wound tightly. My brother-in-law was crying out in pain. Chippan annan and Stephen carried him to the other raft and laid him on a plank. Alex and I drew the shark closer to the kattumaram again and began to beat it furiously until our rage subsided. We must have thrashed it incessantly for about half-an-hour, by which time it was almost dead.

Even after trying for hours, we couldn't manage to pull in even half of its body on to the kattumaram. Finally, we raised our sail and started our return trip, dragging the shark which was partly in water. But its weight prevented us from moving forward. Only if the wind picked up would the kattumaram reach shore before dark. All of us except my brother-in-law, who lay on his back resting his head on the fishing gear, picked up oars and started to paddle. By the time night fell, we had reached only about half way to the shore.

We were totally exhausted, fighting with the shark and paddling. After a little while, the wind carried to our ears the faint sound of the church bell calling the faithful for dusk prayers. We stopped paddling and stood up and prayed. Each of us drank a mouthful of rice-gruel water from the container, and then began to paddle again. When it was about 8 p.m., to our great relief, the kondal winds picked up strength. We stopped paddling and waited till the winds carried us ashore, and then dropped the sail. On the shore, as we were very late in returning, the villagers had hung a hurricane lamp from a bamboo pole. We could see them crowding together, looking out for us. My brother-in-law had dozed off. If we had carried him on shore in that state, it would have led to a good deal of needless weeping and misery. I told Alex to swim to the shore with the end of the rope that was tied to the shark. He did so, and while everyone on the shore was engaged in helping him pull in the shark, we paddled to the shore quietly with my wounded brother-in-law.

If Father had been alive today, he would have told you many such stories. As a boy, I have seen Father overpower sharks of this type several times,” concluded Kamalappan.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SEBESTHI'S GIANT RAY

Aanavirali

In my search for the stories of the sea I found good company in Arogyam Pirusanthi's brother-in-law, Sebesthi. Every Sunday, after the morning worship in church, he would come home with a new story to offer on each visit, so endless a topic was the sea for him. Were he alive today, he would have been a 100 years old. One morning after breakfast, he began a story:

“Once, the coast was reeling under a severe famine. The fishermen were returning empty-handed from the sea. At the time my brother-in-law, Arogyam Pirusanthi, was away in the north, fishing in the reef off the coast of Puthenthoppu. There, Theons (everyone called him Sami) had made boarding arrangements for him, his wife (my sister) and their sons, Prancha, Louis and Albert, as he did every year. I had not been going out to sea for several days then. We somehow survived on the income my wife managed to make by selling dried fish bought from the market in Chambakada. Dried fish like adauppan ayala were brought to Chambakada from the north. During trying times, our women bought the dried fish and sold them in other markets. On such days, our only meal of the day was the rice cakes that my wife bought from the market with the money she made from selling dried fish.

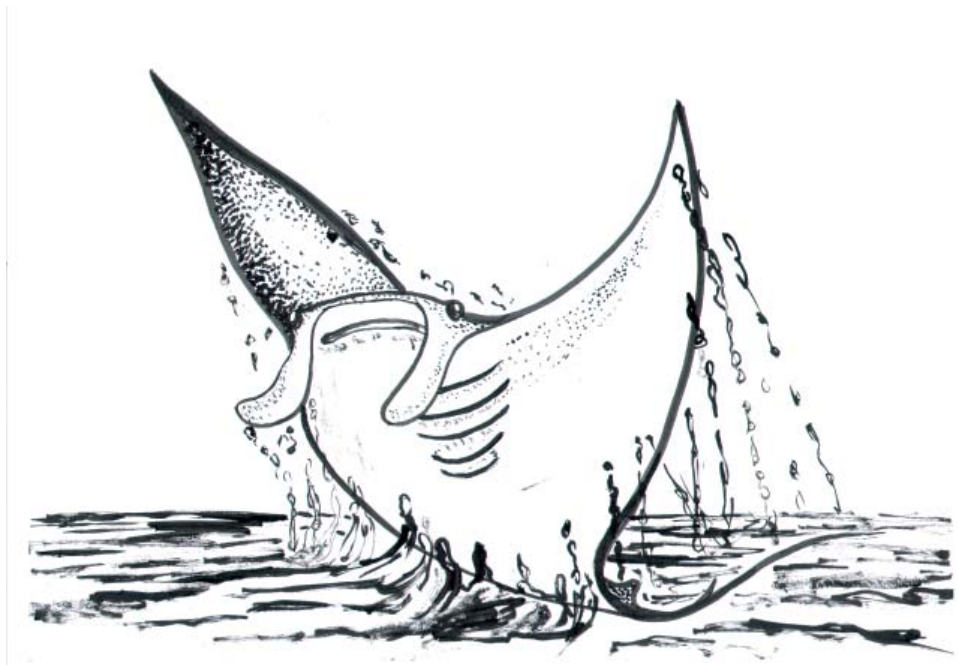
One evening, my children and I were waiting on the beach for my wife. It was already late and we were all very hungry. When she finally arrived and took the basket down from her head, we were surprised. It was full of plantains, coconuts, rice, grocery and two new spathes of areca-nut palm. My wife was in an advanced stage of pregnancy then. The areca-nut spathes were to bathe the new-born, our seventh child, when it arrived. She had met my sister in the market. Arogyam Pirusanthi and others had brought in a good catch of fish, and had sold the bigger ones in the lot to fish traders at Alamkodu. My sister had come to Chambakada to sell the smaller fishes. Hearing of our difficulties, she gave my wife some money and asked her to send me to Puthenthoppu as soon as possible. She gave me one rupee (or 28.5 chakram in the currency of that era) for my expenses.

The next morning, I set out on foot for Puthenthoppu along the coast. By the time I crossed the mouth of Veli lake and reached Valiaveli, I was tired. I went to a teashop nearby and had puttu made of tapioca root and drank chukku (dried ginger) coffee. The puttu shop, on the banks of the canal opposite the Valiaveli church, was run by a

Muslim woman. Those who travelled by boat through the canal used to stop by for coffee. The shop did good business.

It was a time of severe famine across India. The chief staple of the coastal regions in those trying times was tapioca. There were traders on the coast from Veli to Valiathura who produced flour from tapioca and exported it on ships to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and from there to other countries. They bought tapioca, dunked it (except the main root) in water, strained out the whitish fluid and dried the rest. They would then scrape the dried tapioca with a tin scraper, dry it again and then grind it into flour. The main root that was removed was cut into pieces, ground in a stone mortar, dried and made into flour. This flour was used to make delicious puttu.

Tying my towel around my head, I began to walk again. By noon, I reached Puthenthoppu. I could see the kattumaram of Arogyam Pirusanthi and sons where the waves broke on the shore. I went straight to the coconut grove nearby. In front of a thatched hut as large as a big shore-seine shelter, Arogyam Pirusanthi and his wife were standing next to the grove. She ran to me the moment she saw me. That thatched hut was put up for them by a local landowner; in turn, they supplied him fish daily. In those days, there weren't many from the village of Puthenthoppu who were engaged in fishing.



Giant Ray fish (*Aanavirali*)

My sister and I walked a short distance north, talking. Prancha and Loius, the eldest sons of Pirusanthi, were tempering the fishing lines by tying them on coconut trees. The strands of cotton thread were separated and weaved into four-strand twine. They were tightly woven again to make thick fishing lines. In those days, lines with 18 to 80 strands were used to catch fish. The 80-strand line was used for big species like sharks, the 60-strand line for neyymeen (seer fish), and the 36-strand for choora (tuna) and para. The task of weaving cotton threads tightly to make a fishing line required great care and expertise. If a knot remained somewhere on the line, it would surely snap at that point when it came up with the fish from the water. Only very few on the coast knew how to make good fishing lines. Those who didn't, bought them from nulayans (a Hindu fishing community).

Prancha and Louis were tempering such a fishing line tautly tied to coconut trees. A mix of the bark of the uthi tree and charcoal was beaten well. The sticky mix, oozing fluid, and charcoal powder were rubbed liberally along the length of the fishing line. The sticky fluid penetrated the strands, making the line hard and taut. It also gave it a strong black colour that would camouflage it in the sea. Most importantly, only if the fishing line was tempered well would the fishermen be able to feel when the fish took the bait at the other end of the line.

When we reached them, only Prancha and Louis were working on the fishing line; their younger brother, Albert, had gone to fish on the seashore. I went in search of him. When I reached the shore, I saw him casting his erithumbu in the water. The erithumbus were crude fishing lines made from the fibre of leaves of the olatti plant. They were used to catch fish from rivers and seashore. When Albert saw me, he brought his fishing line to me. He had caught four kalimeen. He took them out from the hooks and gave me the erithumbu. He said, "Paacha (uncle), I'll take these fish home and return. Meanwhile, you fish, but don't wait for too long before pulling it in".

I laughed. A young kid instructing me how to fish! I strung the baits from the four hooks and cast the line. Fish struck at the baits immediately. But when I pulled in the line, there were neither baits nor fish. I tried several times but didn't catch a single fish. Albert came towards me, chewing betel-leaf, and said, "Let's stop if you have got enough fish for bait". I handed over the line to him, and he drew it in. There were no fish or baits this time either. He then strung baits from the hooks and cast the line into the water. Before the hooks went down under, he pulled in the line. There were kalimeen in all the four hooks. I had waited too long after casting the line, as we did back in our village. Here fish were abundant. Only if you pulled up the line before the hooks went down would the fish take the bait; otherwise, they would make good escape with the bait. Within a short while, we caught enough fish for bait and went home where my sister served us rice and fish curry. After the meal, I took a nap in the shade of the coconut palm.

By about five in the evening, Pirusanthi woke me up and told me to get his sons to prepare for the trip. We carried all the fishing gear to our two kattumarams and just before dusk, we pushed our rafts into the sea and climbed onto them. After we rode past the breaking waves, I turned back and could see the Puthenthoppu church on the shore. Pirusanthi and I were in one of the kattumarams and his sons were in the other and we were paddling north into the offshore sea.

I was wearing a pair of trousers and a full-sleeved vest, and had wrapped a coarse cloth of about 10-12 muzham in length around my head. During the day that would be my headband while at night it could be used as a blanket. Pirusanthi wore a half-sleeved overcoat and a towel loincloth around his waist. The buttons of the coat were missing; it was held together instead with bits of fishing line. Pirusanthi had a headband of coarse cloth too.

When we reached the 12-fathom depth, we saw three kattumarams anchored there. We learned from them that the current was flowing from north to south. Pirusanthi told me to drop anchor close to them. His sons paddled a little further away from us and dropped anchor. I used pieces of kalimeen as bait and caught plenty of squid. Pirusanthi wasn't interested in catching squid. It wouldn't fetch a good price in the market. Moreover, it was said that eating squid might upset the stomach. I put the squid I had caught in the umal. After a while, Pirusanthi hooted and called the other rafts to come towards us. He told me to get in their raft and his eldest sons, Prancha and Louis to climb in with him. Pirusanthi gave Albert, who was with me now in the kattumaram, a long fishing line and a hook and said, "There will be big fishes near the kanava mada. You have to fish only for them. We will go to the reef and fish there". Thus the two kattumarams parted ways in the sea.

Though Albert was young, he was meticulous in matters of fishing, having learned the ropes from his father. He knew well all the reefs and kanava madas where the squid lay eggs in the moonlight. As marine creatures prefer to eat the delicious squid, they come to forage in the kanava madas. When the big fishes come in, the mother squid squirts ink and muddies the water. Hence the big fishes prefer to forage near the madas. That was why Pirusanthi told us to fish near the madas for big fishes. We paddled further into the offshore sea, singing elaam songs all the while. When you sing an elaam, you never feel exhausted. In the brilliant moonlight spread across the sea, we watched the other kattumaram for a long time, paddling away in the direction of the reef. After about half an hour, we stopped paddling. Albert looked at the kaniyavelli and said, "Paacha, the mada is a little distance away. Let's cast our lines here". We dropped anchor and cast our fishing lines. I had strung my bait, the squid, from an 80-strand fishing line and the hook was of No. 2 quality that my father had brought from Colombo in Sri Lanka. The line must have gone down for about 15 fathoms before it settled. I

wound the other end of the line around my leg, lifted it on the side plank of the raft, and pressing down strongly with my foot, sat on the stem.

The moonlight was now shining directly overhead. We opened our lunch boxes and sat down to eat. Half-way into our supper, the rope around my leg began to twitch. Swiftly, I grabbed it. The fish that had caught the bait was certainly a massive one, maybe a virukam. I told Albert that it must be a ray fish. He asked me to pay out the line to allow the fish to take the bait fully. Ray fish are not like other fishes. Only if it swallowed the prey whole and the hook got stuck in its stomach would we be able to overpower it quickly. I relaxed the line. It pulled again and I felt certain that the fish had swallowed the prey. But just because a virukam had bitten the bait, we couldn't be certain we could catch it. A fisherman's skill lies equally in pulling the virukam up and onto the raft as it does in getting it to bite the bait, particularly in those days when there was no strong kankoos.

I pulled in the line again. It became taut like a bow, being pulled at both ends. Albert warned me not to overtighten the line or else the fish might make it snap and escape. I asked him to haul anchor so as to avoid danger. While he was doing so, our raft was dragged further into the sea by the struggling ray fish. Until about 2 a.m. the fish dragged the kattumaram around. Then it lay motionless for a long time.

We realized that it had gone down and had settled on the sea floor, spreading its fins. We were disappointed, as we had heard that when a ray fish did that, it was nearly impossible to draw it up to the surface again. If we tightened the line any further, it would snap and the fish would escape. Suddenly an idea struck me. I asked Albert to give me a fishing line and a heavy round stone. Looping the line twice or thrice, I made a hoop and tied the stone to it. I passed the end of the rope that was tied to the fish through the hoop and then slowly dropped the stone as well as the hoop. As the stone fell along the rope tied to the ray fish, I was certain that it would drop on its body. I told Albert to drop the stone slowly and repeat the action. Each time the stone fell on the fish's body, it would startle it into movement. Finally, it came up to the surface slowly but continued to drag us around. After a point, it came near our kattumaram. When we saw it, we were stunned by its size. It was a gigantic aanavirali, a fully grown ray fish. I asked Albert to sit carefully on one side of the kattumaram with the koluthotti. I pulled in the ray fish closer, and then Albert struck the fish's gills with the koluthotti and held on to it tightly. Both of us then pulled it slowly closer to the stern of the raft.

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten. Both of us were exhausted. If only the ray fish turned over on its back in the water, our job would be made easier. Telling Albert to hold the koluthotti firmly, I tied the fishing line to the stern stem, and then beat hard on one side of the fish's body with the pole used to support the sail. Albert was then able to turn it over on its back. Now we were certain it could not escape. But it was impossible

to get it on board without upsetting the raft. Our kattumaram swayed violently each time the fish thrashed its fins. Only if it were dead could we have tied it to the raft and dragged it behind us back to shore. Normally, it is difficult to beat ray fish to death, unlike in the case of other fishes. Albert and I pulled the fish up again. When its head came above the water, it opened its mouth slowly. I thrust the stick into its mouth and held it there for some time. This is the easiest way of killing a ray fish. At about half past eight in the morning, as we were paddling back to the shore, with the aanavirali dragged behind our raft, we met Pirusanthi and others coming in search of us.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SEBESTI DEPARTS

13 May 2007. I woke up in the morning and sat in the verandah reading the newspaper. I saw Munnu, Chinnu and Mandakini, who were till then lying in different corners of the house, rush towards the gate as if they had got a sniff of something enticing. Years ago, my wife, Naina, found a kitten deserted on the street, brought it home and named it Munnu. Mandakini is Munnu's daughter. And Chinnan is Mandakini's son.

After returning from work in the evenings, Naina finds time to cuddle and pamper them. Every Sunday she gives them a bath. She buys fish and milk for them regularly. In the beginning, I did not like the cats, especially the idea of letting them inside the house. Gradually, watching the love and care Naina showered on them, and also persuaded by some of their playful antics, my prejudices began to wither away.

When I was a young boy, a glass of milk was considered a luxury. It was my dream then to drink a glass of milk at least once a week. Surely, these cats are not that desperate. Every morning Naina boils fresh milk which she pours into the bowls of the cats who come running in at her call and quickly slurp it all up. When she scrapes coconut, Chinnan sits beside her. He waits for Naina to put a little of the coconut scrapings into the plate, which he gobbles up. While shopping at the grocery store nearby, Naina always buys a packet of Lays crisps for Munnu. She goes running to her when she hears the rustle of the packet. Purring in a special voice, she cuddles against Naina and rubs her face and tail on her leg. She has three colours on her body –black, white and beige. Naina buys Lays, savoury mix and peanuts for Munnu. Every morning Naina's papa (father) brings fish for the three cats. They rush to the gate the moment they hear the sound of his sandals at the start of the lane that leads to our house, a distance of about 50 m. But they studiously ignore him on his later visits to our house. They know that papa brings fish only in the morning.

But that morning the three cats were fooled. Papa had come to tell me something urgent. Seeing the cats crying from behind the closed gates, papa called me towards him. He said, "Sebasti *appooppa*n has died". He learned of the death when he went to the beach to buy fish. He felt that he should inform me immediately. The burial was to be in the Valiathura church. Sebesti *appooppa*n had not been keeping well for quite some time. According to his relatives, he was about 100 years when he died. It is difficult to ascertain the date of birth or age of someone of that generation.

The family only remembers that so-and-so was born the day when the *vala* or *velavu* were caught in plenty in the nets. Sebasti *appoppan* had been fortunate enough to live for a century. But then, he was a unique man. Indeed, there are many fishermen on the coast who knew the sea inside out, but there are only a few who are willing to fish for precious information in their memory and share it with others.

My mind was racing with such thoughts as I attended the funeral of Sebasti *appoppan* in the Valiathura church. I couldn't bring myself to look at his face one last time before the lid came down on the casket. Rather, I didn't feel like it. How many old persons like him must have passed away all along the coast, taking with them experiences as vast as the sea itself? I sat through the funeral rites mechanically, my mind preoccupied with these thoughts.

Even after I returned home from the church, waves of memories kept surging into my mind one after the other. Why did Sebasti *appooppan* come to see me regularly, disregarding the infirmities of old age? Would he have visited me had he been educated? That night I couldn't sleep, troubled by the feeling that I was duty-bound to pass on the knowledge he had shared with me to the next generation. I got up and took out the bundle of papers from the shelf. As I flipped through the notes of my conversations with Sebasti *appooppan*, I found the admirable parts,



Sebasti Appooppan

the ones I had considered inconsequential at the time of writing. My mind brimmed over with respect for the deceased fisherman.

There is one story by Sebesti *appooppaan* about how the cross crab got the mark of the cross of Rimini. Once, St. Anthony was sitting in a boat and preaching the marine creatures. In between his sermon, the cross in the rosary that he held in his hand fell into the water. He felt sad at the loss of his constant companion of many years. Still, he continued with his talk. After some time, a crab hankered onto the boat, carrying the cross. As the other fishes watched, it went straight to St. Anthony and gave him the cross. As a sign of gratitude, St. Anthony placed it on the crab's back, prayed and blessed him. That was how cross crabs got the special sign on their backs.

For today's generation, this story may just be another myth. But the story of St. Anthony has been a part of the oral tradition of the coast for several centuries. A similar story can be found in our Hindu legends too – the story of how Sri Rama blessed and caressed a squirrel that helped the monkey army build the bridge over the sea to Sri Lanka to search for princess Sita and how the squirrel thus got the three characteristic stripes on its back where Lord Sri Rama stroked him.

The Christian tradition of Sebesti *appooppaan's* village, Valiathura, begins with the Franciscan missionaries of St. Anthony in the 14th century. The hero of the crab story ought to have been St. Francis Xavier who initiated the Christianization of the coast in the 16th century. The shape of the cross on the back of the crabs is the cross venerated by Christians before the 16th century. Thus, whether we believe in the story or not, we can't but believe that the Sebesti *appooppans* of the coast had passed down this story by word of mouth through generations.

Each story has a villain and a hero. It's the same with the crab story. The *vala* (cutla) fish that until a quarter century ago had saved the coastal people from the dark depths of poverty is the villain in this story. *Vala* used to be once caught in plenty all along the coast for about four months every year. When the catch was abundant, the coastal people preserved it as *kuzhiuppan* or *adauppan*. Pits about 6-ft deep were dug near the coastal houses, and shreds of palm-leaves were spread in them. The *vala*, its intestines and gills removed, were laid over the leaves. Salt was sprinkled over each layer of the fish. The *vala* were packed in rows of opposing sides to help preservation. Once the pit was packed with the fish and salted well, it would be covered with a palm-leaf mat and sand. Within three or four months, the *vala* would have dehydrated well enough to leave behind good-quality *kuzhiuppan* (*kuzhi* means hole) dried fish. *Adauppan* is the *vala* fish that is arranged in large baskets or pots, with salt sprinkled over them and left to dry. Sometimes the *vala* is sliced lengthwise and then dried with salt.

In those days, when *vala* was plentiful, the huts on the coast would be stocked with dried fish and children would stave off hunger by nibbling on dried and roasted *vala* filled in their pockets. Dried tapioca and *vala* formed the staple diet of the coastal people then. When the famine months arrived, they would sell their stocks of dried fish to clear off debts. It was during this supreme reign of *vala* that St Anthony arrived. He won over the hearts of the people with his sermons. The *vala*, however, boycotted the sermons—or so goes legend. This infuriated St Anthony, who cursed and doomed them to forever carry stones on their heads, making them live with lowered heads. The *vala* fish has white calcified projections on its head and other parts of the body.

I recently came across a page on which I had scribbled down a sea song that Sebesti *apooppa*n had sung to me. The *elam*, *ayilasam*, *kettu*, *poru* and *kolkali* are all fairly well known as part of the coastal community's culture. These songs tell of the hard labour, poverty, love and piety of the coastal people. But Sebesti *apooppa*n's was an environmental song that sings of fish reefs, swamps and the multitude of marine beings.

Shenkkanni naapalaka naapperu neettiye
Oodathe kuzhaliye kappakumariye
Kamaalikandayuden paketti oodave
Kallaruke chenthirunthu kalava orumeen konduvarave
Paararuke chenthirunthu payanthi oru meen konduvarave
Cheraruke chenthirunthu chewwa oru meen konduvarave
Cheru cheru pennkale aasakollathe
Asesa Anthoniyaarude aalayam pidikkave

Later, as I travelled along the Tamil Nadu coast, I tried to find out the meaning of the above lines. Most of the phrases were drawn from Tamil as it was spoken centuries ago. Though it would be impossible to interpret the song word by word, the general drift of the first two lines is about the rafts used by the fishermen, while the third line sings about how they raise their sails and travel into the offshore sea in their rafts and back. The next three lines speak of the salient features of the marine environment. Anyone who knows the sea well can identify with these lines. The fish belonging to *kalava* species (grouper) are commonly found in the rocky masses in the depths of the sea. Hence *kallaruke chennu meen pidikkuka...* (*kallu* = rock; *meen* = fish). The colourful *payanthi* fish (Ephiepidea family), which have wide fins, are permanent residents in the reefs. Even today those who fish with hooks-and-lines in the reefs bring back *payanthi*. There are many swampy areas in the depths of the sea which the fisherfolk call *tharapar*u or *cheni*. More

than half the creatures in the marine ecosystem live in or off such areas. Other fish that prey on these creatures come to forage in such swamps too, especially *chewwa* (Lutjanidae family). Just as land, which covers about 30 per cent of the earth's surface, contains mountain ranges, valleys, forests, water bodies, etc., the sea, which covers 70 per cent of the earth's surface, contains ecologically significant and biologically rich features like the ones mentioned in the song *Sebesti appooppan* sang to me—rocks, reefs, swamps, etc.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FISHERMEN'S ASTRONOMY

In 2009, we organized a meeting of astronomers and artisanal fishermen at the Science and Technology Museum in Thiruvananthapuram. Several youths from the coast, and some journalists and social activists attended the meeting too. The fishermen recounted the stellar constellations that they depend on while navigating in the sea and, also, fishing. In the beginning, the astronomers were confused by the names the fishermen had given those constellations. At some point, Dr Pappootti, the then director of Kerala Sarva Vijnanakosham Institute (an encyclopedia in Malayalam), took over the discussion. Standing next to the green board, he noted down the number of stars in each constellation and their rising and setting times. In the discussion that followed, both the sides began to recognize the stars. The *chottuvelli* and *vidiavelli*, two different stars for the fishermen, are actually the same and not a star; the scientists corrected the fishermen. Finally, it was time to recognize the *kappalvelli* comprising of seven stars. Dr Pappootti said it must be the "seven sages" as it is known to the scientific world. He drew the position of the seven stars carefully on the board. Both the sides realized then that the *kappalvelli* of the fishermen and the seven sages of the scientists are the same phenomenon. Suddenly, Stephen, a fisherman, stood up, and pointing to the drawing on the board, said, "Sir, the second star from the left is what we imagine to be a ship's brow. You have marked it wrong. It has to be marked a little above." Dr. Pappootti carefully observed his markings and then replied, "Yes, my mistake. You are right." It was a moment when those present in the hall made a silent bow to the observation skills of an illiterate fisherman.

Days and nights change as you travel across the world. Likewise, the rising and setting of stars and their positions in the canopy of sky are experienced differently all over the world. For the same reason, fishing communities and sea-navigators in different parts of the world hold on to their own specific astronomical insights and related occupational beliefs. Till early 1980s when OBM and GPS were introduced into the fisherman's life in place of sail and kanicham respectively, the astronomical knowledge had tremendous importance in traditional fishing. Given below are the astronomical insights specific to the traditional fishing folk in the district of Thiruvananthapuram.

The stars that appear one by one in the blankness of the blue sky after sunset may arouse nothing more than curiosity in our minds. But for the fishermen labouring at sea at the time, those magical nights probably show them ways to make ends

meet. They may be ignorant of the basics of astronomy, but these fishermen have intimate knowledge of the stars shining brightly in the sky.

In those times, for a fisherman who spent sleepless nights in absolute darkness surrounded by the sea, there was no other way to tell time but to look up at the heavenly stars. The setting of *chottuvelli* or the rising of *vidiavelli* or the positioning of *mulakkameen* directly overhead was markers for the fisherman in determining the time. He would carefully observe the movements of fish during the rising of *malayameen* and the setting of *aarameen* and accordingly set his net and hooks in the sea. He relied on the positions of *kappalvelli*, *kurishuvelli* and *mulakkameen* to navigate back to his village at midnight. He located the reefs under the sea at night using the position of the miraculous phenomenon known as *kaniyavelli*. Such traditional knowledge of fishermen, which has been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, is today on the verge of extinction just like the sea itself.

The fishermen classify the stars, which lie like pearls scattered across the sky, into those that help in navigation, those that help to tell the time and those that influence fish movements.

Chottuvelli and Vidiavelli

As the Tamil names of the stars indicate, the fishermen rely chiefly on them to tell the time. *Chottuvelli* is the luminous single star that appears in the western horizon after sunset. It remains in sight for only two or, at most, three hours. Usually, it sets between eight and nine at night; therefore, those who are engaged in fishing at sea set their dinner time by tracking the star. The light of this "star giant" shining brilliantly in the evening sky causes the fish to move and forage, creating favourable fishing conditions.

Vidiavelli is a lone, bright star like the *chottuvelli*. In Tamil *vidiyuka* means to rise. *Vidiavelli* rises in the sky, signalling to the fisherman at sea that dawn is imminent. For a fisherman, just before the sun rises is the time of *kavarachil*. If *vidiavelli* is sighted on the eastern horizon at this time, he can be assured of a good catch.

The scientific observation

Vidiavelli and *chottuvelli* are not two different stars but the same. Though the ancients called them an 'evening star' and a 'morning star', they are not actually stars. *Chottuvelli* and *vidiavelli* are nothing but Venus, one of the eight planets orbiting the sun and also the planet closest to the earth. Sometimes referred to as the earth's sister, Venus glows brilliantly because it reflects the sun's rays. It has

enough light to shine even after the sun has risen. Its closest distance from the earth is 45 mn km.

Aarameen

This is a cluster of six twinkling stars that appears like a gathering of several fireflies, very beautiful to look at. The fishermen say that when the *aarameen* come straight overhead, the waves on the sea surface begin to shift mightily and rise higher. A fisherman who gets ready to set out to sea at night observes the position of the *aarameen* carefully before fixing the time to launch his *kattumaram* into the sea.

Demersal fishes like *kora*, *parava*, *cheelavu*, *muralu*, etc. are traditionally caught with boat-seines. In the old times, when the *aarameen* rose in the sky you could always be sure of a good catch of demersal species.

The scientific observation

The *aarameen* is the cluster of stars known as Karthika in India. In Greek mythology it is called Pleiadius. They are supposed to be the daughters of Atlas who holds up the sky. According to modern science, only the sun and the moon can cause high tides on the earth. When the light rays from the constellation of Karthika, which is 630 light years away, reach the earth, they would have travelled about as many years. The observations of the fishermen that these light rays influence the movement of the waves and the marine creatures should be subjected to study.

Malayameen

Malayameen enjoys a special status among the fishermen. Once this star has risen in the sky, there will be no lull in the land breeze. Those who want to sail to the offshore sea for hook-and-line fishing launch their *kattumarams* as soon as the *malayameen* rises. The fishermen say that the changes that this particular star causes in the sea water rouse the fish and compel them to move. It thus brings in a good catch. Most times, the fish migrate in the direction of the *malayameen*. When this star rises in the sky, the fish swim towards land and when it sets, the fish swim back west. Fishermen in some areas link the star to the birth of Jesus. Since it appears in the sky from the eighth day after Jesus' birthday, it is also called Yeshu (Jesus) star.

Ray fish is an important migratory species. Old timers remember the common sight of fishermen returning to shore in the wee hours with huge ray fishes, caught with the help of the *malayameen*. Belonging to the same species as sardine, *kirimeen* is also linked to *malayameen*. A fisherman can be sure of catching *kirimeen* when the *malayameen* is shining in the sky.

The scientific observation

Malayameen is the blue star called Chithira in *Kannirashi* (the zodiac sign of Virgo). It is called Spica in English. It emits 2200 times more light than the sun and is 260 light years away from the earth.

Uliulikol-mulakkameen

This is the constellation of three stars that stand equidistant from one another. They shine brilliantly and it is easy to distinguish the *uliulikol* among the shining stars in the vast expanse of the sky. On moonlit nights it can be spotted easily. As the distance between the three stars is about the length of a *muzhakol*, the fishermen call it *mulakkameen*. *Aarameen* and *uliulikol* are positioned close to each other. The fishermen rely on the *uliulikol* chiefly for their night trips to the offshore reefs and back to the shore and also to determine the time of day. The fishermen look on the sky as a giant dial with the major stars as the hands of the clock. Careful observation is needed as each star is positioned at different distances. Moreover, the rotation of the earth and movements of the zodiac make the telling of time extremely complicated. Yet, if you were to wake up a fisherman sleeping on a *kattamaran* at mid-sea in the dead of the night and ask him the time, he will first look upwards to the sky and then answer correctly –to your utter amazement.

The scientific observation

These are the three stars that are seen in the middle of the Orion constellation. In Greek mythology, Orion is portrayed as the hunter and the monster. The three stars denote the three holes in the belt around the hunter's waist. In ancient India it was called the *trimoorthis*. These stars were used for navigation even in ancient times. *Mintaka*, *alnilam*, *al thakk* –these are some of the names given to these stars by the seafaring Arabs.

Kappalvelli

The fishermen use this constellation of seven stars to navigate in the sea. It appears to the far north in the shape of a ship with the first visible star being the anchor. *Kappalvelli* is a true guide for a fisherman who travels between different reefs and land.

The scientific observation

To the ancient Indians these are the "seven sages" (*saptarshi*). They glow with equal intensity and are seen in the northern sky. Mareeji, Vasishthan, Angiras, Atri, Pulastian, Pulahan and Kratu are the names of the seven sages.

Kurishuvelli

Like the seven sages in the north sky and *mulakkameen* in the middle, which act as navigation aids for the fishermen, another important constellation to the south is the *kurishuvelli*. This constellation of four stars is in the shape of a cross. When the *kurishuvelli* rises, it appears upright and when it sets, it is seen inverted. The duration between its rising and setting is not as long as that of the other stars. *Kurishuvelli* rises in the southern sky when *kappalvelli* is seen in the north. But the latter is visible even after the former has set.

The scientific observation

Kurishuvelli or *trisanckku* is one of the rare constellations in the southern sky. As it is in the shape of a cross, it is also called the southern crux, and also *mukkootti*. *Akrikis* is the most luminous star at the bottom of this constellation. The southern crux is 320 light years away from the earth.

Eranavelli

These are two stars close to *aarameen* and *mulakkameen* which the fishermen use for navigation.

The scientific observation

This is Sirius, the brightest of all the stars visible from the earth. It emits 26 times more light than the sun and is 8.6 light years away from the earth.

Kaniyavelli

Fishermen look upon this star with awe and wonder. That is because it does not move. It is positioned far away to the north of the sky. It can be seen only from the seashore or the sea. Fishermen use it to determine the location of reefs on the seabed at night and hence they have named it "*kaniyavelli*".

The scientific observation

This is the Pole star. As it is positioned far out in the northern horizon, we are not able to observe it easily.

The moon and the marine creatures

For us, the sky is like a tent studded with stars at night, a blue canopy decorated with planets and stars. As far as the earth is concerned, the position of its only satellite, the moon, holds special significance. If a fisherman starts on the subject

of moon, he will never stop talking. For them, the moon is *nelavu*. They call the rising of the moon *nelavu munduka* and its setting *nelavu adayuka*. In our second meeting, Thomas from Poonthura, our hero in the story of the ship reef, told me about the many changes that occur in marine creatures in the presence of moonlight.

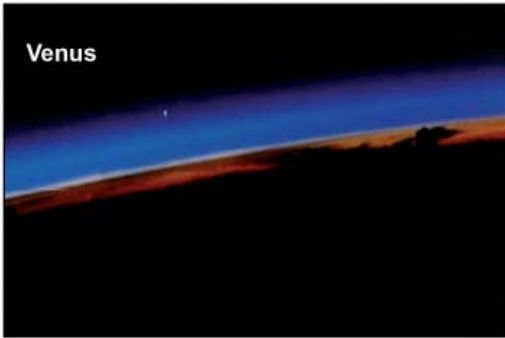
One of the most important species of fish to anyone who fishes in the reefs is the squid (*korukanava*). Thomas is of the strong opinion that the life cycle of squid is purely under the influence of the moonlight. I sought confirmation on this from several fishermen that I met on my travels along the coast. Every one of them agreed with Thomas. About a week after the full moon, the squid find a suitable spot to lay eggs. After that, they guard the eggs for the next two weeks. The fishermen call this *kanava mada tharuka*. The squid are meatier when they are caught during the waxing phase of the moon. During the waning phase they become leaner. This is what Thomas and others learned through constant observation.

A question arose in my mind. True, the fishermen could indeed observe directly the changes in the squid's body when they caught them. But how could they so emphatically determine the time when the squid lay eggs in the depths of the sea?

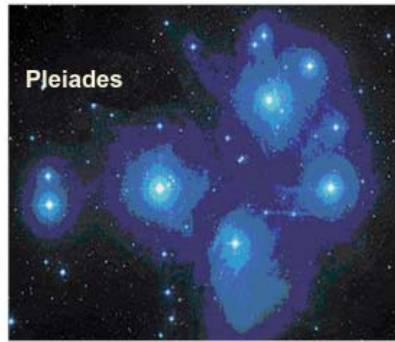
I got my answer in my third meeting with Thomas. When the hook-and-line fishermen go to sea they first select the spot where they want to fish and drop anchor there. In the past, large granite rocks were used to anchor rafts. In the months of January, February and March, when the moon shone with exceptional brilliance, a week into the lunar phase, when the fishermen hauled in the anchor, they would find squid eggs on the rock most of the time. Moreover, these eggs would be exceptionally soft indicating that they were just laid. Sometimes the squid eggs were also caught in the nets that were cast in the sea floor, but they would be denser like air-filled balls. Such eggs were closer to the hatching time. In the latter half of the second lunar phase, eggs were not caught at all.

For Thomas and others like him, the sea, as endless as the sky, is a laboratory where they stumble upon newer discoveries almost every other day. In their struggle to carry life ashore, they don't give much importance to them.

For them, the high tide caused by the moon is not a pleasant thing. The waves rise bigger, *kattumarams* capsize. But still, they can reel off a long list of creatures at sea that are roused as the moonlight spreads in the water. Important among such fish is the reef fish. The *thangal* fishing trips that involve overnight stays at the reefs during seasons is very popular among the fishermen. Thomas says that most of the fish sleep when darkness spreads in the sea. As they don't move, the catch then will



Venus

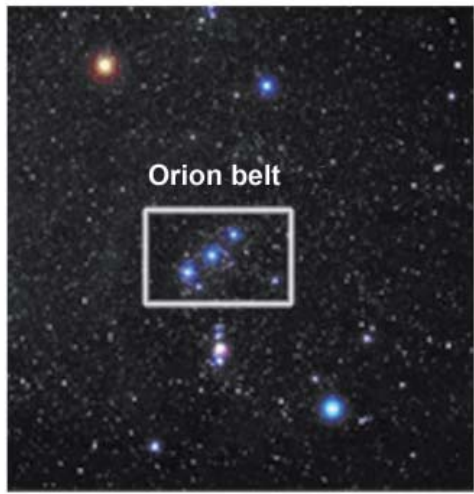


Pleiades



Arcturus - 0.1

Spica

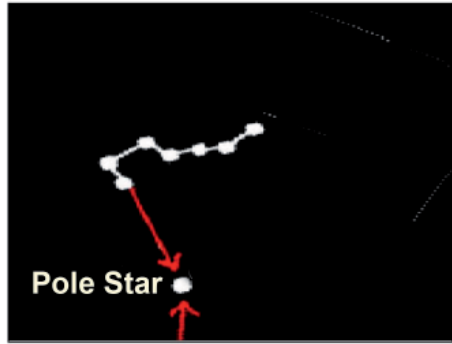
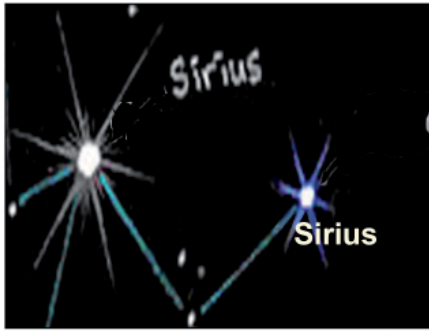
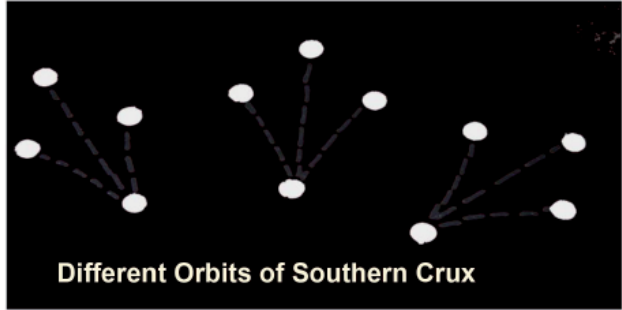
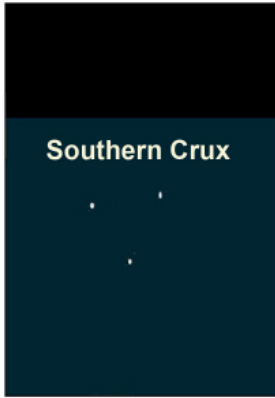


Orion belt



Ship Star

Ursa major



be scanty. The fish get roused and begin to forage in the moonlight. The fishermen know that fish are mostly caught in the moonlight and also during the dawn hours. This knowledge has led to the use of lights in fishing today. The fishermen believe that if the slant of the moon rays is towards the south at the beginning of the lunar phase, that lunar month will be favourable for reef fishing. They have also observed that during the waning phase of the moon, the crabs and oysters are leaner while during the waxing phase, they are fleshier.

The fishermen are immense storehouses of such knowledge. Anyone involved in traditional fishing wherever there is sea may possess such a vast amount of information. Such knowledge is an integral part of a people who have shared their lives with the earth and sky for centuries.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF THE COAST

As for the rituals that are still followed, no one knows how they came to influence coastal minds. It can be said with certainty that there is no record of the history and influence of these beliefs. Earlier they had tremendous faith in the power of rituals to remove obstacles in fishing, provide a remedy for diseases, ward off fear and also purge ghosts and evil spirits that supposedly dwelled in one's body. But today, the live presence of rituals that had been observed for generations can no longer be found.

The ritual of *thodakkuand*, the madder plant

I was twelve years old then. It was late evening and I was playing *kuttiyum kolum* (a game with sticks, which crudely resembles cricket) with my friends on the beach. A short stump of wood placed on a small mound of sand served as the wicket. There would be two teams with eight or ten players on each side. The game was played with a long stick (*kolu*) and a shorter one (*kutti*). The long stick would be about 45 cm long and 5 cm thick, while the *kutti* would be of the same thickness but only 10 cm long. The *kolu* and *kutti* were cut from the branches of yellow *arali* and *chilaanthi* shrubs that served as fences for house plots in the coastal areas in those times. A player from the team that won the toss would take position near the wicket and hit the *kutti* hard with the *kolu*. The players of the opposite team would stand guard in different positions on the field. If anyone managed to catch the flying *kutti* before it hit the ground or could throw it back to the wicket, the batsman would be out. The rules were similar to those of cricket, but *kuttiyum kolum* is no longer played on the coast.

That evening, we were about to wind up the session, when Mother came to call me. I was wearing only shorts and my body was covered in sand. With the towel that she had thrown over her shoulder, Mother rubbed away the sand. Then, holding me close, she walked back home. Sometimes she would send me to buy kerosene oil at that time of the day. But, as we walked back, she said, "It has been a few days since your father caught any fish. We are doing a small ritual at home today. You should perform the ritual".

I was suddenly reminded of the story of the sacrifice of Abraham that the church priest had told the congregation during recent prayers. But I hastily banished the thought from my mind and reassured myself that it would not be the case. Curious, I kept badgering my mother with questions. She said, "Go and take a bath. I will

explain everything later”. I carried the bucket to the well and drew water up. I scrubbed myself with coconut fibre and washed off with a final bucketful of water. My mind was brimming over with curiosity about the impending ritual. Quickly, I pulled on a pair of shorts, put on a *santo* vest and went to Mother. She was holding a small pot in her hands. By then, it was almost dark. She held out the pot towards me and said, “You should go to the shore with this pot. Count the waves and when the seventh wave comes in, immerse the pot in it, fill it up and return. Meanwhile, you are not to utter a single word. Not even when you reach here with the pot full of water. Then I will tell you what to do next. Just obey me”.

My mother instructed me what to do but didn't explain why. I was baffled. Since I was holding the pot, I wasn't supposed to talk. Anyway, mentally prepared to face anything, I walked to the shore. All my friends had finished their game and returned home by then. That was fortunate; otherwise, I would definitely have talked to them, forgetting Mother's instructions. Mother had cleverly chosen the right time to make me do this ritual. It was very dark on the shore. I began to count the waves in my mind. As the seventh wave came, I went forward, immersed the pot in it and filled it up with water. As I walked back home with the pot, I didn't meet anyone on the way. Mother was waiting for me in front of our hut. She told me to go inside the room on the left.

All the fishing gear that father took to sea was spread out there on the floor. I didn't understand anything. In one corner of the room, the branches of the madder plant (the *Rubia* genus of flowering plants) still bearing leaves and flowers were gathered in a bunch. Normally, we wouldn't play with madder as it oozes a thick fluid even when a leaf is plucked. It is said that the fluid can damage your eyes. So no child goes near the madder plant when he goes butterfly-hunting in the thickets. As I stood in the room, immersed in such thoughts, Mother came to the door and said, “Don't worry. You need only obey me. First, place the pot filled with water near the branches. Then lock the door from inside and remove your vest and shorts. Taking water from the pot, sprinkle it well over the madder branches. Then beat all the fishing gear kept there with the branches till the leaves fall off. When you are done, you can dress and come out”.

Mother pulled the door shut and I was left alone in the room. A kerosene oil lamp burned near the window. I placed the pot on the floor but didn't feel like removing my shorts. Then I remembered that I hadn't locked the door. Quickly, I latched it. Now I felt bolder. I decided to do what my mother had asked me to do for my father. I removed my clothes. Fully naked, I took some water from the pot and sprinkled it lavishly over the madder leaves, turning them over till they were soaked well. Then, I gathered the branches in my arms. Holding them tight, I began to

beat the fishing gear. I felt that Mother was still standing right outside the door, listening to the sound of my beating. It made me beat more vigorously. In the light of the lamp, I could see the thick milky fluid of the madder plant sprayed on the gear and in the room, strewn with fallen leaves; I could also see the silhouette of my naked body. I quickly pulled on my shorts and vest and came out of the room. Mother said, "It's okay. You can talk now".

But I didn't feel like talking. A little later, Mother brought me dinner. Silently, with my head lowered, I ate. But my mind was bursting with questions. Why did Mother make me do all this? She would tell me when she was ready, I thought. I was determined not to ask her myself. After dinner, I went out to the beach and stretched out. Sleep came very late that night. Father woke me up early in the morning to help him push off the *kattumaram* into the sea. I could see the madder plant's milky fluid sticking to the gear that Father had placed in the *kattumaram*. That morning, I felt attached to the gear for some reason. Usually, when I helped Father launch the *kattumaram*, I would pray for him to go safely past the breaking waves. But now I could only pray that he got a good catch that day.

As I sat in class, my mind kept rushing to the sea. I imagined Father drawing his lines in and pulling in big fishes. Time dragged on and somehow it became noon. Usually, I partook of the midday meal at school. That day, I wanted to go home during the lunch recess. My house was about three-quarters of a kilometre from the school. I knew a shortcut which could get me home in 20 minutes, but it involved walking barefoot over the burning sands. (I had not started wearing sandals then.) I hurried home, walking and running alternatively, cooling my heels in the shades of the coconut and palm trees along the way.

When I finally reached home, I found the hut and the adjoining kitchen locked. Mother would be on the beach, waiting for Father's *kattumaram*, I thought. I walked to the shore. I could see my mother and others sitting in the shade of the coconut trees. From there, one could spot the rafts returning from the offshore sea. Pointing towards one of them, Mother said, "That is your father". It would take another half an hour for Father to reach ashore. When Mother asked me why I had come home instead of having rice-gruel at school, I lied that lunch was not available that day. It was clear to me that I would have to go hungry. I walked back home. I had to start for school immediately; otherwise I wouldn't reach on time. I went straight towards the well and drew up a bucket full of water. I had my fill of water and started my walk back.

When you are hungry, you drink water to fill your stomach; at other times, you drink to quench your thirst. I felt sad not for having missed the rice-gruel at school but for missing Father's landing ashore with his catch. I got a beating too for

coming late to school after the lunch break. When I returned home in the evening, I came to know that Father had caught plenty of fish that day and that Mother had gone to the market with it. I felt very relieved. My burning mind cooled down. The memory of my mother returning home from the market in the evening, putting down her load of basket and taking out a large, ripe *kappa* mango from it and offering it to me is still vivid in my mind, as if it all happened just yesterday.

It took many more years for me to understand the meaning of the ritual performed that evening. It is customary for most of the traditional communities not to allow their menstruating women to attend auspicious functions. Some of the Adivasi communities in Kerala have built separate huts for their women to spend that time of the month. In traditional agricultural families, the women, if they are menstruating, don't touch the main tool, the plough, which would be rendered unclean. In Hindu and Muslim communities, women don't attend prayers or light lamps in the evenings, or recite from the holy texts of Quran or Ramayana on these occasions. Though some explanation can be found in the Old Testament regarding this practice, the Catholic coastal people don't seem to follow it. But, in the face of adversities, they too fall back on superstitions, and resort to performing such blind rituals in an attempt to find solutions.

If fish catches are consistently scanty for a particular fishing gear over a period, the coastal people reach the assumption that a menstruating woman may have touched it. This is denoted by the word "*thodakku*". The sea is considered a woman and it is believed she wouldn't bestow favours on a tool that is rendered unclean by a menstruating woman. The ritualistic solution for *thodakku* is as strange as the belief itself. It is the ritual that I performed that evening. The tool rendered unclean by a woman is made pure once again by the purification ritual performed by a naked boy.

On the surface, this practice may appear uncouth. But in Hindu rituals, plants and flowers are commonly used to propitiate gods. The *tulasi* (sweet basil) in the front yard altar of Hindu households is a religious symbol, a manifestation of goddess Mahalakshmi and is sacredly guarded by Hindus. The hibiscus flower is considered special in the worships of Kali and Hanuman. The flower of *elakalli* is used in the rituals for propitiating demi-gods and snake gods. The lotus is considered very dear to goddess Lakshmi and the flower of the madder plant is considered special for Shiva and Ganapati. Madder flowers are also used in the sacred sacrificial rituals performed for the appeasement of Shiva and Ganapati. Historically, the coastal communities were converted from the Shaktheya-Shaiva culture. They may have preserved the ritual performed with madder plants even as they changed tracks to ensure their survival.

I called a meeting in 2010 to which six to seven persons from the coastal region of Thiruvananthapuram came. Apart from me, all the rest were highly educated persons. Born into fishermen families, they had gone on to gain high status in society, but continued to live on the coast. The chief purpose of the meeting was to gather information and publish the experiences and knowledge of fishermen. Each of us shared our experiences of living among the community. For my part, I recounted the ritual I had performed with the madder plant. Everyone listened to me keenly, and when I finished speaking, they began to narrate, in turns, similar experiences they had when they were young. Apparently, these were common experiences, though they had been buried in memory and time.

The following story of henna was narrated by one of the persons present at the meeting. In those days of yore, some people who harboured enmity or jealousy against fellow fishermen sought to pour henna mixed with water over their nets. This, they believed, would cause fishes to avoid the nets. When such a net was immersed in the sea, the portions stained with henna, so it was believed, would shine and scare the fish away. Remedies were prescribed for the problem too. These varied from region to region. One remedial practice was to pour the cow dung of a one-year old calf, mixed with water, over the net. Another was to grind the red leaves of the *ummathinka* plant into a paste along with *vayambu* (a medicinal root), mix it with coconut milk and pour it over the henna stains.

Later, however, with the change in the nature of nets, the practice of using henna to defeat the enemy died down. Nets made of cotton twines were in use all along the coast until the 1970s. These twines were susceptible to the shine of henna. Such nets would be spread over the beach for a long time to dry, which provided a good opportunity for someone intending to pour henna over them. Towards the end of the 1970s, the cotton twines gave way to silk twines and, in the 1990s, to the *kankoo*s nets. Few of today's generation know about this use of henna or the counter-measures prescribed for it.

At our meeting, talk soon turned to the use of *vayambu* and coconut milk, both of which are still used along the coast as panaceas for certain beliefs. For example, if a cat bites a fish before it is cooked, the coastal people believe that the particular fishing implement used for that catch will no longer be able to catch fish. As a solution, *vayambu* would be ground to a paste, mixed with coconut milk and sprinkled over the tool. Elders in the fishing household can often be heard advising the younger generation not to put fish meant for cooking into a dry pot.

Last year, I had a peculiar experience during a study on marine biodiversity. I was waiting for the shore-seines to return so I could gather information about

various sea snakes. These are mostly caught in the nets right after the season in the month of Karkkidakam, during which the sea floor remains turbulent. More than one shore-seine beached simultaneously. To make sure I didn't miss any net, I asked an acquaintance to inform me of any catch of sea snake while I checked on the other nets. His response was: "Such snakes will be netted only by those who are yet to fulfill their promises to God".

I have heard this affirmation many times before. Each year, when the nets are launched into the sea, their owners make special promises to their favourite gods. When the fishing craft and gear are launched into the sea for the first time in the year, special rituals are performed. Shore-seines and boat-seines were the chief fishing gear on the coast before the 1950s. In agriculture, at the start of each season, farmers till the earth and then place their ploughs and other tools in the field for worship, and they pray and perform certain rituals. Likewise, the coastal people too perform rituals at the beginning of each fishing season. Boat-seines and shore-seines have separate fishing seasons, the former from May to August and the latter, from August to May. When nets are launched into the sea for the first time in the year rituals (*velarambhakriya*) are performed in the house of the owner of the craft, in the presence of the crew of fishermen.

My father too owned a boat-seine during the time when cotton twine nets were used. Boat-seine fishing depends greatly on the state of the sea and the presence of stars. This type of fishing is taken up during the reef fishing offseason. The transparency, turbidity and temperature of the sea water, the currents on the sea bed as well as the water surface and the 'sea stains' all go to determine the nature of the sea. It is also very important to be able to recognize the behaviour changes in certain types of fish species caused by the presence of the moon and the stars.

As far as I know, in the times when there was no deep-sea fishing, the routine of most of the fishermen began early in the morning and ended by noon. But, at the same time, those who worked in the fishing reefs stayed at sea, and fished irrespective of day and night. As a result, Father knew very well the changing state of the sea and the influence the rays of stars exert over marine creatures. Hence the fishermen were eager to be part of Father's crew.

When it was time to launch the boat-seine into the sea for the first time in the year, the fishermen would arrive at our house. The boat-seine made of cotton twines would be prepared beforehand for the event. The net would be dipped in boiling water in which cow-dung was mixed, and wrung out and dried. When the prayers were about to begin, the net was brought and placed near the image of Christ. The prayers that lasted about 20 minutes would be led by the women in the household. As soon as the prayers were over, Mother would sprinkle water kept in

a bottle over the boat-seine. The water was most probably sourced from some pilgrimage site and preserved carefully for this purpose. Some of those present would sometimes offer coins. Following this, the lead fishermen and the others would carry the boat-seine on their arms and shoulders out of the house. An earthen pot filled with water would be kept outside the door step. As the lead fisherman knocked the pot down with his right foot, it would fall slanting to one side, and the water would pour out. Every one present would observe this carefully. When the boat-seine was placed on the *kattumaram* on the shore, the rituals ended, but for the young ones like me, the interest lay in the *payasam* (sweet porridge) being prepared by Mother.

At that time, a boat-seine unit comprised two *kattumarams*, a *thattu* and a net. The way in which earnings from the boat-seine was shared was unique. The fishermen who took part in fishing that day would take their due from the amount earned from a day's fishing expedition and the rest would be divided into three extra shares. Two of the extra shares would go to the owner. The last share was for giving out *eduppeen* and to pay those who helped in the preparations on the shore and also for offerings to gods.

The fishermen set off to sea at night and returned in the morning with their catch. The day was spent in drying the fishing equipment and preparing them for the next day's expedition, and in the evening, the day's earnings were shared. When the fishermen arrived, Father came out to the front yard of the hut, placed a grass mat over the sand and sat on it. Then he spread a coloured *mundu* or a towel in front of him. He kept all of that day's earnings on one side of the cloth. By this time, everyone would have arrived. They took their places in different corners and waited, chewing betel-leaves and nuts from the platter kept there. This was followed by about 15 minutes of silence. No one would utter a word. That was the time when Father did calculations in his mind. At the end of that mental exercise, he began the day's task of dividing the amount equally. He placed the share of each fisherman separately in different parts of the cloth. Then he called out their names and paid them the amount. From the remainder, he took his due as the owner and kept it carefully in the fold of his *mundu*. He divided the remaining share into smaller amounts which were placed in different folds of his *mundu*. Once the folds were exhausted, he placed the other shares behind his ears. A small share was intended as an offering for God. The rest was divided among those who helped in the preparations for the fishing expedition, which included helping to launch the *kattumaram*, drying the fishing tools and readying for the next trip. It was then that we, the young ones, got a coin each for helping in the preparations.

Finally the time would come for Father to distribute the small shares he had tucked away in his *mundu* folds. This practice was called *eduppeen*. It involved rewarding the crew members according to their expertise. All the boat-seine owners on the shore carried out this task of sharing the earnings fairly and efficiently. My father, who had never stepped over the threshold of a school, who couldn't recognize an alphabet, who was ignorant of the numerical system, and who, in short, was untouched by the grandiosity of literacy, did the job of sharing the earnings efficiently and without any cause for complaint, throughout his life.

In the case of the shore-seine the owner got a bigger chunk of the earnings as the investment was much more than for a boat-seine. In shore-seine operations the traditional kind of fishing would fetch larger catches in a single fishing trip. Even today, when a particular shore-seine consistently lands up with heavy catch, the coastal people assume that it must be through the application of some black magic. The basis for this belief is not just jealousy or blind superstition. Some people still believe that there are persons on the coast whose black magic is powerful enough to catch lots of fish or to draw the fish away from the reefs. The black magician recites mantras and stops the movements of fish shoals. And if the net is cast at the spot he points to, it will surely haul in a good catch. For this, the magician demands a share of the earnings. If that is not met, dire consequences will follow. Today's generation, thankfully, considers such blind beliefs as gross falsification.

I went in search of the black magic mantra that is recited to stop the movements of fish shoals. The black magicians were outsiders who engaged in rituals to purge the body of ghosts and evil spirits and to relieve it of discomforts caused by excessive fear. They used to be present all along the coast till the end of the 20th century. They had tricks up their sleeves to remove the harm caused to small children by jealous eyes, fever, worm infestations, menstruation problems, stomach ailments and so on. Their solutions included reciting mantras, fumigating with herbs, applying ointments to the head, etc. Kunjachan from the village of Kochuthoppu was the uncrowned king in these matters, as far as I remember. Once, upon my special request, he came to my house. I had to first convince him that I was not trying to jeopardize his livelihood. It was only when he was fully convinced, did he open his heart out to me. He said, "When I was young, I underwent great hardship to learn these mantras. They will be effective only if you recite them after doing severe penance".

Finally he agreed to teach me the mantras, including the one that is recited to facilitate fishing by stopping the movement of fish shoals, which was what I had been searching for. Kunjachan told how he came to take up this calling. When he was 16 years old, he went to a festival in a church in Ovari, Tamil Nadu.

He bought a book there which was published from Sri Lanka. It was titled “*Periyajnana Samudram*”. When he turned over the cover page, he read the following line:

Ulakathilirikka samudrathile thanni yethulli thulliyayi enni naalumithukkulle jnanathe oruvalalum kandupidikka mudiyathu. (“Even if you could count every droplet in all the seas in the world, you could never grasp the true knowledge that is contained in this book.”) It was that book which transformed Kunjachan and guided him throughout his calling. He promised to bring me the mantras the next day, which he did. Before leaving my house, he said, “Today’s generation does not believe in such things”.

CONCLUSION

THE SUN NEVER SETS

As this is my first attempt at writing a book, I had to go through my notes several times. Each time I read them, the image of the oar that saved Alex and others from being killed by the ship clung to my mind. Until the 1980s, an oar was the most important tool for a fisherman. Oars are made from bamboos. An oar of good length will have about eight nodes. There used to be a time when bamboos of good length and thickness were brought to the coastal villages in bullock carts from distant places. Fishermen bought the bamboos, cut them to the required length, slashed away the sides and nodes and polished them. Then they filled these oars with the wet sands of the shore. If they were kept like that for a week or two, they would be safe from the attack of insects. My father always used the oars made from *kallan* bamboos. When we loaded his *kattumaram* with fishing gear, we placed his oar carefully near the stern. During the seasons of massive waves, when the fishing tools were tied tightly to the *kattumaram*, Father's oar would be safely kept on the right side of the bundle. Countless are the number of waves he had tussled with and broken through with that oar in his lifetime at sea.

Two bamboo poles are needed chiefly to navigate the *kattumaram* on wind power – *paaimula* and *challimula*. If the *paaimula* snaps mid-sea, there would be no option but to paddle back to shore. Father trusted these poles to carry him to the depths of the sea and back home safely. After great insistence from his children, he finally stopped going to sea. On one of the days after his retirement, he went on a visit to Inayam Puthenthara, his native village. The next day he fell ill and had to be brought back home. It was the first time ever that I saw my father fall ill. He regained his health after undergoing specialised treatment for a while, but it seemed as if the curtains were about to fall on the proud reign of a fisherman over the coast and the sea.

One of those days I brought back home a tender plant of *kallan* bamboo from Tamil Nadu. I planted it in the yard of my house in Valiathura. Though bamboo plays an important role in coastal lives, no one grows it here, especially the *kallan* bamboo. The neighbours raised objections as my bamboo began to grow, fearing that the bamboo attracts snakes. To satisfy them I had to uproot it and plant it in a different spot. I did this twice. The protests did not subside even then but I couldn't bring myself to destroy it.

Meanwhile, as the bamboo became tall and strong, I had to leave for Japan in search of a job. After about two years, Naina called me one day and said, “Father has taken a turn for the worse”. A few days passed and I came to know that he was now confined to bed. One night, sitting next to Father’s cot, Naina prayed with my siblings. After the prayers, she called me and said, “Everyone is saying Father will not live to see tomorrow”. I told her to go home immediately and water the bamboo well. Though she didn’t understand anything, she went home and watered the bamboo at that midnight hour. The next morning, I told her all about the bamboo. Father lay unconscious for another 10 days or so as if he were in a deep sleep. Each day people would say he would not last the day. Naina watered the bamboo on all those days. Father was staying at Lucy *chechi’s* house in his final days. Finally I wrote to her about the bamboo. The day she received the letter, Father left us.

What I have bought from the soil where my father was born and brought up and what I have planted in the soil where my mother was born is a living replica of the tool that had helped him ascend to great heights in his work. The bamboo grove has been growing in my backyard for 20 years now.



Struggle to make both ends meet

APPENDIX

SONGS OF THE FISHERS

I recently came across a page on which I had scribbled down a sea song that Sebesti *apooppa*n had sung to me. The *elam*, *ayilasam*, *kettu*, *poru* and *kolkali* are all fairly well known as part of the coastal community's culture. These songs tell of the hard labour, poverty, love and piety of the coastal people. But Sebesti *apooppa*n's was an environmental song that sang of fish reefs, swamps and the multitude of marine beings.

Shenkanni naapalaka naapperu neettiye
Oodathe kuzhaliye kappakumariye
Kamaalikandayuden paketti oodave
Kallaruke chenthirunthu kalava orumeen konduvarave
Paararuke chenthirunthu payanthi oru meen konduvarave
Cheraruke chenthirunthu chewwa oru meen konduvarave
Cheru cheru pennkale aasakollathe
Asesa Anthoniyaarude aalayam pidikkave

Later, as I travelled along the Tamil Nadu coast, I tried to find out the meaning of the above lines. Most of the phrases were drawn from Tamil as it was spoken centuries ago. Though it would be impossible to interpret the song word by word, the general drift of the first two lines is about the rafts used by the fishermen, while the third line sings about how they raise their sails and travel into the offshore sea in their rafts and back. The next three lines speak of the salient features of the marine environment. Anyone who knows the sea well can identify with these lines. The fish belonging to *kalava* species (grouper) are commonly found in the rocky masses in the depths of the sea. Hence *kallaruke chennu meen pidikkuka...* (*kallu* = rock; *meen* = fish). The colourful *payanthi* fish (Ephiepidea family), which have wide fins, are permanent residents in the reefs. Even today those who fish with hooks-and-lines in the reefs bring back *payanthi*. There are many swampy areas in the depths of the sea which the fisherfolk call *tharapar*u or *cheni*. More than half the creatures in the marine ecosystem live in or off such areas. Other fishes that prey on these creatures come to forage in such swamps too, especially *chewwa* (Lutjanidae family).

Just as land, which covers about 30 per cent of the earth's surface, contains mountain ranges, valleys, forests, water bodies, etc., the sea, which covers 70 per cent of the earth's surface, contains ecologically significant and biologically rich

features like the ones mentioned in the song Sebesti *appooppan* sang to me—rocks, reefs, swamps, etc.

Listening to Sebastian Appooppan's song prompted me to research sea songs. I sang many songs as part of the fishermen's struggles in the 1980s. Most of them were written by Peter *chettan* of Alapuzha in Malayalam as it is spoken today. Though I have listened many times to the fishermen singing *elam* and *ayilasam* songs while hauling in their nets under the sweltering sun on the beaches of Veli and Shankhumukham, I haven't been able to grasp the meanings of those songs. I have approached several fishermen, countless times, with inquiries on the content of the *elam* songs. Though each answer differed, they all implied an ailment in the modern search for meaning in each and everything. When we sing an *elam* song, its tune enthuses our souls with energy and fires up the blood in our veins, making the most gruelling labour in the world, effortless. What more do you need to know, the fishermen seemed to ask me. Yet, most of the sea songs that depict the intermingling of the bitterness and sweetness of coastal life have been made extinct by the waves of time.

Elam songs

Elam songs are of different kinds. All the fishermen engaged in a fishing-related task are involved in singing the *elam* songs. The singer who starts is the lead singer and the others are back singers. *Elam* songs differ according to the choruses of the back singers. For instance, after the lead singer sings one line of the *elam*, all the back singers together sing "elevator *elamma*". In other *elam* songs, the back singers sing "ayilasam" or "ayyayyaam".

Elam song -1

The *elam* song sung to me by Cyril from the village of Kochuthoppu is sung when canoes and *kattumarams* are being pulled onto the shore from the sea.

Lead singer Back singers

Elo eelo eelo
oovelayyaam ayyayyaam
eelelayyaam ayyayyaam
elavalayyaam ayyayyaam
elathandi ayyayyaam
elachumbe ayyayyaam
chumbelaana ayyayyaam
chumbavalana ayyayyaam aamavalana ayyayyaam

aanganooru ayyayyaam
elenooru ayyayyaam
ilanoora ayyayyaam
ilaanaatti ayyayyaam
elemundee ayyayyaam
vellarimundee ayyayyaam
mundacheri ayyayyaam
cherivangkallam ayyayyaam
valiyada vallam ayyayyaam
eerettu vallam ayyayyaam

Elam song -2

This example, sung to me by David from the village of Kochuthoppu, is sung when the shore-seine is being drawn in. (Only the first ten lines have been transliterated here.)

Lead singer Back singers

Ovelayyaam karavaaleyyaam elee elamma
Oovelakku nalla poka venam elee elamma
Poyivaratto kappaleele elee elamma
Kappekadal melada elee elamma
Kaariyankke oormellamma elee elamma
Ooradiye uravaadiyaam elee elamma
Uravadiye mannaankaare elee elamma
Manaaru kara choriyaam elee elamma
Malaipole munthakhaankki elee elamma
Munthikanakkithamma elee elamma

Elam song -3

This song, sung to me by Michael, James and Gasner from the village of Valiathura, is sung when the shore-seine is drawn in. (Only a few lines are transliterated here.)

Lead singer Back singers

Oovelaykku eleele karavalayaam ayilasaam
Paaravale eleele veesithada ayilasaam

Pattunalle eleele roukkakkari ayilasaam
Paavankade eleele chelakkari ayilasaam
Muttankki eleele ittalada ayilasaam
Oodivanthu eleele ananjhaallamma ayilasaam
Chankkakkharum eleele paanayamma ayilasaam
Paana thanthe eleele kadalamma ayilasaam
Kaattaana eleele koottamma ayilasaam
Karadipuli eleele kaanakamo ayilasaam

Elam song -4

This song, sung to me by Cyril from Kochuthoppu, is sung when the shore-seine canoe and *kattumaram* are paddled and also when the net is being drawn in. (Only a few lines are transliterated here.)

Lead singer Back singers

Thandaana elee
Thandumille thaankkumaram
Thaankkumaram koleduthu
koleduthu vaamakale
vaamakale venkkampuli
cheythidave cheyyavittu
cheyyavitta chaavalayo
chaavalayo meendivare
meendivare kaanathille

Kettu songs

Apart from the linguistic variations of the *kettu* songs sung in different parts of the coastal region, various versions can be found. That's may be because they are part of the oral tradition and heritage of the coast. For this very reason, I do not wish to claim that they are conscious efforts at poetry, nor will I comment on their literary value. But one thing is for sure. They will enable us to comprehend the inner workings of the lives of the past generations of fishermen and also their dialectical differences. Among all the sea songs I have been able to gather, Kettu songs with their thoughts and layers of meaning are distinct. This song given below sung to me by Michael is women-centric in every possible way. Evidence underlining this can be found aplenty in the coastal tradition of south Travancore. At the time of partitioning the movable and immovable assets of a household, the girls in the family are favoured most. Also, the practice of groom staying in the

bridegroom's house after marriage is also specific to the coastal community. *Kettu* songs are indeed superior to other sea songs due to their unique rhythmic tones and style of singing. This fact was especially brought out for me by the singing of Michael, a fisherman from the village of Valiathurai.

Ikkaayikkapathiyirai talavanada
Thoorkkam vanthalada kelava thoonoode chaanchaayo (2)

Mayakkam vanthalada kelava maarode chaanchaayo
(Ikkaayikkapathiyirai)
Arisi chanthayile kelava arisi vikkitheda
Arsi vaankithantha kelava annam samachuthaaren (2)

Kallumparidathile kelava kalava nikkitheda
Kalava konduvantha kelava curry samachuthaaren (2)
Cheepuchanthayile kelava cheepu vikkitheda
Cheepu vankithantha kelava nethom thalayothuppen (2)

Kannadi chanthayile kelava kannadi vikkitheda
Kannadi vankithantha kelava nethom mokham paappen
(Ikkaayikkapathiyirai)
Perakka chanthayile kelava perakka vikkitheda
Perakka vankithantha kelava pembille pettuthaaren (2)

Aappulam chanthayile kelava aapulam vikkitheda
Aapulam vankithantha kelava aambulle pettuthaaren
(Ikkaayikkapathiyirai)

The above song may be roughly translated thus:

Leader of the clan, my warrior
If you are sleepy, sleep against the pillar
If you are drowsy, rest against my chest
(Leader of the clan, my warrior)
In the rice-market, my husband, rice is being sold
If you buy rice, my husband, I will cook a meal for you
In the rocky reef, my husband, *kalava* is plenty
If you bring *kalava*, my husband, I will cook curry for you
(Leader of the clan, my warrior)
In the comb market, my husband, combs are being sold
If you bring me a comb, my husband, I will comb my hair daily
In the mirror market, my husband, mirrors are being sold
If you buy a mirror, my husband, I can see my face daily

(Leader of the clan, my warrior)
 In the guava market, my husband, guava is being sold
 If you buy guava for me, I will give birth to a girl child for you
 In the apple market, my husband, apple is being sold
 If you bring an apple for me, my husband, I will give birth to a boy for you
 (Leader of the clan, my warrior)

Kolkali songs

They are also called *kambadi* songs. Until half a century ago, *kolkali* songs were an integral part of the religious festivals and marriage celebrations of the coastal people. They are similar to the *kolkali* performed in other parts of the State, with the performers singing and dancing, holding short sticks in each hand, and going around in circles, bending and straightening, and clashing their sticks in rhythmic movements. Eleven dancers form a *kolkali* team. Among them, eight dance with the sticks, two sing and the remaining one rhythmically beats the *jaalar*, a circular musical instrument made of brass. The *kolkali* songs are full of the old beliefs and mythological imaginings of the coastal people of those times.

The first responses to my inquiries about *kolkali* songs were confined to remembrances of the names of some singers of the previous generations. They were the elders of the community like Markoos Pirusanthi, Kambacharu, Tavanessannan and Kittacharu. These too are now rare names among today's generation. Though Markoos Pirusanthi's son, David (70) had sung *kolkali* songs with his father when he was very young, he could now remember only a few lines.

Kolkali song sung by David

Thuntharanadhane thuntharanadhane
Thuntharanadhane thundaranam
Nadukadalile valavalaythu naankkal
Naagarameenkkale shekharichu
Nayathukkilamai poosaykku pookale
Nayangal kelppathu devamata malli
(thundaranadhane thundaranadhane)
Pachamarathile thottilketti
Cherupalakanepottu tharaatti
Pachamaramellaam pattumanakkittu

Ponnushavariyaar aalayathil-malli
(thundaranadhane thundaranadhane)
Kalalakolala adivayare samayei sowkhya
Aanandhasarkkat roopankkalaal
Koodathilirikkum kulathayeepottu
Kumbittu kumbittu kummiyadi-malli
(thundaranadhane thundaranadhane)

Chinthu songs and *dukha* (sorrowful) songs

These songs, also called *amma* songs in some parts, are believed to be about three centuries old, according to coastal lore. An Italian Jesuit priest, Constantine Joseph Beschi (Fr. Beschi, 1680-1742) lived in Madurai and its adjacent regions from 1718 to 1742, and engaged in missionary activities. Historical documents say that he later came to be known as Veeramamuniver (the great priest). He may be the author of the *chinthu* and *dukha* songs that were an integral part of coastal culture until recently. His contribution to Tamil literature has earned him a fairly significant place in history.

The old timers remember how the sacred rituals performed during the holy week of Jesus' crucifixion were enriched with devotion by the singing of *chinthu* songs. At dusk, men would gather on the shore and women in the front yards to sing *chinthu* songs in the light of hurricane lamps. For two days –from Maundy Thursday, which marks the arrest of Jesus on orders of Pilate, until Good Friday night, when he gave up his life on the cross and was buried –*chinthu* songs would be sung without a break in the churches on the coast. Those who led the choir would submit themselves to 40 days of strenuous penance.

Dukha songs too were sung in the holy week by small groups of children. Each group fixed a wooden cross, shrouded in black cloth, atop a powder tin can in which they accepted coins as donations. At dusk, they would visit houses, carrying hurricane lamps and the cross, and sing *dukha* songs. At the end of their rounds, they counted out the coins collected in the powder can and used the money thus raised to make buttermilk and mango pickles in large vessels. On Good Friday, they served them to the faithful leaving church after worship.

I asked my friend, the coastal history researcher Joseph Devanand Fernandes from the village of Vembar about the origins of *chinthu* and *dukha* songs. I learned from him that the *amma* songs popular in the coastal regions of Tamil Nadu were similar to *chinthu* and *dukha* songs in their style of singing and composition. Moreover, the *amma* songs too were sung only during the holy week. It is surprising that no parish has preserved these songs that, for centuries, have had such a great influence on the religious beliefs of the coastal people.

A Dukha song

*Vaanam bhoomi naduvai valar
 chiluvai meethinile
 vallarbhane nee maritheero
 Makane (vaanam Bhoomi)
 Marithavarkal meethirankku
 Marupadiyum uyirkoduthu
 Parane nee marikkalakumo
 Makane (vaanam bhoomi)
 Uyirirukku uyiralikkum daiva
 Ulaka manu paapam porkke
 Unathu uyir veettiranthiro
 Makane (vaanam bhoomi)
 Papavarsam pokutarkku
 Paralokam veettirankku
 Bhoovulakile maritheero
 Makane (vaanam Bhoomi)*

A Chinthu song

*Ayyo ayyo en makane...
 Aadi pita sutane...
 Meyyakkum thane thedi...
 vimmi azhuvutene... (ayyo ayyo)
 Kaavilumme pidithaarkal...
 Kannamathiladithaaro...
 Kalakaaykadithaarkalo...
 Kanmaniyo ponmakane...
 Tulunthurukai kettinaro...
 Tuyaranaitha en makane... (ayyo ayyo)
 Dushtarunmai kondakarmmam
 Vysanikkavo kondukarmmam
 Makane eethenna marmmam
 Matapatanariye... (ayyo ayyo)
 Bahujoodar thaankkittaaro
 Vitariyumayi thaankkittaaro
 Velpulipol paynthittaaro
 Kanmaniye en makane (ayyo ayyo)*

Poru (War) songs

Poru songs are not sung, like the *elaam* songs, to ease the strenuousness of hard work; instead, they are sung in special circumstances of labour. For the fisherman who toils alone in the darkness, surrounded by the sea, as endless as the sky, the *poru* songs are intended to bestow courage to endure the tales of ghosts and evil spirits that inhabit the coastal imagination. These *poru* songs are mainly eulogies extolling heroic kings of the past and their victories in wars. Plucking courage from these songs and their rendering, the fisherman spends his nights alone at sea.

I never got the chance to spend nights at sea with my father who was an excellent singer of *poru* songs. However, I clearly remember listening to him singing on the occasions when he and I were together. I was reminded of this recently by Dr Sreejith, a zoology professor at the Kerala University. Sreejith researches organisms that cause the disease *puzhukadi* (a skin disease caused by worms) that is prevalent among the fishermen who work at sea at night. There was a time when my father too suffered terribly from the disease, which infects the hairs on the arms and legs, filling the pores at the roots of the hair with pus. Until the festering hair is plucked out along with its root, the person suffers severe irritation and itching.

In those days, Father would take me with him to the shore after lunch.

He would spread a cloth in the shade of a coconut tree and lie down, taking in the breeze. Then he would stretch his legs and begin to sing *poru*. I would gently search for the infected hair and pluck them out. His song would rise and fall as he endured the pain while I pulled out the hairs. Sometimes, when the pain became too much to bear, he would raise his head and shout at me. The next moment he would smile, as if to tell me to ignore the angry outburst and continue with the task of plucking hair. Only much later, when I began to write about it, did I realize that Father had looked upon the singing of *poru* songs as a sort of music therapy. I would continue with my task until Father fell asleep, his pain dissolved in the *poru* songs. He could have protected himself from the disease by not going to sea at night. But how could he do so when the fish in the reefs so dear to him prefer to forage at night? Moreover, it was the only way he could earn enough to feed all 17 of us. I have heard my father sing only *poru* songs. During his time, fishermen who could sing *poru* were rare. While he was alive I did not bother to take down even a few lines of the songs he used to sing. I regret that deeply now.

I continued my search for *poru* songs all the while that I travelled back and forth along the coast. Finally, my efforts landed me on the doorsteps of Dr Thikkurissi Gangadharan. He has researched *thekkanpattukkal*, the

cultural heritage of the old kingdom of Venad that included today's Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari districts. He gave me important information about the *poru* songs. According to him, there are chiefly four *poru* songs that sourced their stories from the literature of *theakkan pattu*. In all the four stories—*Eravikuttipilla poru*, *Kannadiyan poru*, *Purushadeviyamma pattu* and *Ulakudeperumal katha*—*poru* or war is the main theme. The songs earnestly describe the rivalry and battles of the native States of those times.

There are about 30 *tampuran* temples not far from the coast in the districts of Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari. One of the main events of the annual festivals in these temples is the singing of *poru* songs, which lasts for several days. The history and engagements of the coastal people of Venad bear close contact with Hindu culture; the *poru* songs must have been passed down through generations by word of mouth. Thikkurissi Gangadharan has also published a *poru* song, *UlakudaPerumalPaattukatha*.

(Translator's note: The Malayalam text has more than a few examples of songs, of which only a select few are transliterated here. It should also be added that this is the first effort at recording this cultural heritage of the coast.)

Apart from the songs given above, there may also be other types of songs that have been weaved into the coastal culture, like the *opparu* that praise dead persons or songs sung for children or songs sung when lice are picked off children's hair. All such songs have almost completely vanished now. I had to spend a great deal of effort and money to record these songs.

These songs have survived for many centuries as part of the oral tradition of the coast, and each is distinct. None of the fishermen who sang the songs to me is literate. Though the majority of the coastal people now know how to read and write, no one has taken the pains to learn the songs or put them on record, probably because the cultural preferences of today's youth are different. Perhaps they find the dialect of the songs not cultured enough. But the start of a process of evolution into the "cultured" language of today can be gauged from the songs. The songs that Michael and David sang to me are proof. The songs that Michael sang are at least a century older than the *elam* song sung by David. One thing is certain. After the lifetime of fishermen like Michael, David and Cyril, these songs are unlikely to survive.

Glossary

Arali	a flowering plant to send
Aazhantha	Fountain tree (family - Bignoniaceae)
Chilaanthi	<i>Thespesia</i> tree
Kalava	grouper, a species of fish
Kattamaram	catamaran
Kadal	sea
Koda wind	the wind that blows from east to west along the coast of Kerala
Kondal wind	the wind that blows straight in from the sea, west to east, along the Kerala coast
Kachan wind	the wind that blows from north-west to south-east along the coast of Kerala
Maash	teacher
Muzham	a measure, length of forearm
Murikku	Coral tree
Mangal sutre	traditional pendant worn by married women
Puttu	traditional breakfast of cylindrical cake with layers of rice flour and coconut scrapings
Panjyilavu	Red silk cotton tree (family - Bombacaceae)
Payasam	a sweet dish made of rice, jaggery etc. served in feasts or on special occasions
Ummathinkkai	Thorn-apple (family - Solanaceae)

Kinship terms

Achan	father
Annan	elder brother, a term used to address someone older to you in general
Chechi	elder sister
Chettan	elder brother

Eyes On Their Fingertips

Some Aspects of the Arts, Science, Technology and Culture of the Fisherfolk of Thiruvananthapuram, India



Robert Panipilla's *Eyes on Their Finger Tips* deals with the traditional marine wisdom of a set of people and the rarest of rare experiences they have had at sea. Through these numerous chapters he takes us into the seas of the fishers. It is a voyage which we cannot make in reality. But through the heroic deeds of his father, the riddles of oldman Sebesti, the shark story of brother Kamalappan, and the rituals of his mother, we get a fascinating peep into the wisdom of the watery world of the small-scale fishers of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India.



Sindhu V. Nair's translation of *Kanneerum Kinavum (My Tears, My Dreams)*, the classic autobiography of social activist-writer, V.T. Bhattathiripad, in Malayalam was published by Oxford University Press in 2013. Her translations from Malayalam to English have appeared in reputed journals. She lives in New Delhi.



ICSF is an international NGO working on issues that concern fishworkers the world over. It is in status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN and is on ILO's Special List of Non-governmental International Organizations. It also has Liaison Status with FAO. As a global network of community organizers, teachers, technicians, researchers and scientists, ICSF's activities encompass monitoring and research, exchange and training, campaigns and action, as well as communications.