

The Ocean Was His Oyster

Dr E G Silas Was
A Doyen Of
India's Marine
Biologists

Anand Parthasarathy



TRIBUTE

The Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute in Kochi today operates from a large campus at the northern end of Marine Drive. Formed in 1947, for the first 25 years of its existence this premier scientific institution operated like a nomad, shifting from one temporary building to another - for some time on Church Landing Road, then in a nondescript lane off MG Road behind Kavitha cinema. But it was from such modest lodgings that Dr Eric Godwin Silas helped bring name and fame to marine science in In-

dia, as a young marine biologist at CMFRI from 1959 and as its director for a decade from 1975.

He had one advantage: he was mentored by Dr Sundar Lal Hora, legendary director of Zoological Survey of India, his guide when he obtained his MSc by Research at Madras Christian College, and his PhD from Madras University in 1953. At CMFRI, Dr Silas helped create at the institute's

camp in Mandapam, Tamil Nadu, a pioneering group to study tuna fishery. When he took over as director, Dr Silas had large shoes to fill: those of Dr S Qasim, who moved to an illustrious career in oceanography in Goa and Delhi. But Silas's low key and soft-spoken persona notwithstanding, he was a worthy successor and in the next 10 years he brought the smack of firm purpose to marine fishery studies.

It was in this decade that I came to know and appreciate his understated talents: as head of instrumentation at another Kochi scientific institution, the Naval Physical and Oceanographic Laboratory (NPOL), I had many opportunities to partner with CMFRI. Dr Silas encouraged me to visit Mandapam, where by then, CMFRI had an excellent team which helped develop pearl fishery in India. When the ageing inshore research vessel Varuna proved inadequate for

CMFRI's needs, he lobbied powerfully with ICAR and the agricultural ministry to give the institute the ocean-going research ship Sagar Sampada. It was my privilege to be selected by Dr Silas to join the maiden shakedown cruise of the vessel in 1984, to qualify its instrumentation - and during debriefing sessions, I marvelled at his attention to detail.

In his post CMFRI days - donning what many warned him was a crown of thorns - the vice chancellorship of Kerala Agricultural University (1987-92) and later serving as founder-president of Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore (1991-95), as well as many other institutes, Dr Silas brought his experience in administering science to a wide swath of disciplines. But today, he will be remembered most fondly by former colleagues of CMFRI for steering marine biological and fishery research in India.