

'A MILLION' FROM MINICOY

With Interests In Ship-Building, Marine Biology, Green Energy & Agriculture, This School Dropout Defies Labels & Disciplines

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Ali Manikfan, 84, lives in a small rented house at Perumanna on the outskirts of Kozhikode. It does not even have enough mantle-space for the national and international trophies he has accumulated over a lifetime of free-wheeling experimentation and creativity. With his long white robe, intense sage-like gaze and white beard, the tall and lean Manikfan seems to be a perfect embodiment of the Jungian archetype of Wise Old Man. A voracious autodidact, Manikfan is an expert of various proficiencies in areas as diverse as marine biology, traditional ship-building, astronomy, ecology and agriculture, apart from being a polygot with command over 14 languages, including Sanskrit and Persian.

Manikfan's formal education stopped at Class 7. Born to Musa Manikfan and Fatima Manika at Minicoy, an island in Lakshadweep, on March 16, 1938, the young boy's first school was the sea. Musa was the last Amin (chief civil officer) in Minicoy island under British rule which was the family's good standing and influence in the community. Manikfan's grandfather had a sailing background and often used to take ships to Kerala and Tamil Nadu for trade, and, of course, he tagged along.

As the ship facilities were scarce in the islands, Manikfan was sent to Kannur in Kerala after years of homeschooling. The boy found formal education stifling: monotonous and lacking in originality. By seventh grade, he'd

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Photo: Nishant Kodali

NEW 'SCHOOL': Even as a boy, Manikfan found formal education stifling and by seventh grade, he had had enough and took to the process of learning through keen observation, relentless reading, and used all opportunities to grasp traditional knowledge and innovate

had enough and returned to the islands. From then, it was an lifelong process of learning through keen observation, relentless reading, and never missing an opportunity to grasp traditional al and practical knowledge and innovation and put them to work. He has held jobs too. Manikfan began his "career" as a teacher in Minicoy in 1956 and later worked as a clerk of the chief civil officer of Minicoy. He also briefly served as staff at the observatory. It was a meeting with noted marine researcher and director of CMFRI, S. Jones that changed the course of his life. Jones was in the islands as part of his research into the marine diversity in the archipelago. By then, Manikfan was considerably advanced in own research on marine diversity in these waters.

Jones was astonished by the abilities of the young man who helped him a lot. In his book 'Fish-uses of the Laccadive Archipelago', Jones acknowledged Manikfan's contribution, and went on to recommend him to CMFRI where the latter soon got involved in classification, collection and identification of 400-odd marine species. He

discovered a species of fish in 1968 while working with Jones; the chocolate brown fish was named **Abdulfudul Manikfan**. In 1980-81, Manikfan got an opportunity to showcase his expertise in traditional shipbuilding on the international shipbuilding when Tim Severin, the British seafarer famed for replicating spectacular journeys of explorers, asked him to supervise the building of *Sohar*, a replica of the ship in which Sindbad the Sailor of the Arabian Nights is believed to have sailed. Severin met Manikfan in Calicut and together they arranged the Aini wood from Kerala to build the ship. Around four tonnes of oak bark came from Lakshadweep to stitch the planks of the 26

metre-long ship. It was built the traditional way by hand-sewing wooden planks with the hand-rolled coconut rope without using a single nail and powered by two triangular sails. The 38-member team of ship builders under Manikfan camped at the port town of Sur in Oman to build the ship in less than a year.

Severin travelled 9,600km from Oman to China in a voyage which took nearly eight months. In his book *'The Sindbad Voyage'*, Severin is all praise for Manikfan and repeatedly mentions him as his 'Man in a Million'. The epithet stuck. Describing Manikfan's multifarious talents, Severin says "at a pinch he could cook and sew, sail a boat, mend an engine, or make up

a book of accounts. From his marine collecting days, he knew the Latin name of every fish and shell on his islands".

From the seas to the skies, the intellectual pursuit he was perhaps most invested in was to develop a lunar Hijri calendar. "The most scientific way of calculating months and years". It was published in 1983. If the lunar calendar is followed, he says, it would ensure that key Muslim days including Ramadan fasts and Eid could be observed and celebrated in a uniform manner across the world. He has travelled extensively to popularise his version of the calendar and to convince authorities, including those in Saudi Arabia, but it hasn't found widespread acceptance. In the course of his travels, he became conversant in up to 14 languages. Each of them, he says, opened up new cultures, people and perspectives before him. "I had picked up Urdu, Malayalam, English and Arabic early on. It was when I went to Calcutta on a voyage along with sailors from Minicoy that I collected books to learn Latin," he says. Over the years, he learned French,

Russian and other languages. Manikfan didn't give any of his four children formal education. His son is a marine engineer and two of his daughters are teachers. The youngest daughter is also self-educated.

A strong exponent of equitable development, he says most problems of the modern world stem from over-exploitation of natural resources. "Raised in the islands where natural resources are limited to fish, coconut and some agricultural produce, self-reliance and frugality got instilled in me early on. I had lived on an almost coo-

nut-based diet for four years without any issues as part of experimentation in Minicoy," he says. Manikfan could well be the last of the polymaths in an age which reveres specialists and where education is highly compartmentalised. "Every student is unique but formal schooling just doesn't take that into account. I managed to explore and understand the world around me just because I broke free from that system," he says, his eyes unwavering. "The educational system should teach children how to live but sadly it is the one thing that is lacking."

POLYGLOT PADMA SHRI WITH A FISH TO HIS NAME

Born in Minicoy in Lakshadweep in 1938, Ali Manikfan studied up to Class 7 in Kannur, Kerala

Man of the islands, learned the art of ship-building, sailing and as many as 14 languages on his own

Developed interest in marine biology. 'Abdulfudul manikfan', a brown fish, named after him in 1968 to honour his contributions to marine biology



He supervised the construction of ship 'Sohar' for British explorer Tim Severin who recreated the voyage of Sindbad the Sailor from Oman to Canton in 1980-81

Developed a 'Do Nothing Farm' on 15-acre barren land in Vailapur in Ramanathapuram to practice natural farming, non-aggressive methods of cultivation & eco-restoration

Developed a roller-driven motorcycle as part of experiments in alternative energy

Developed unified lunar Hijri calendar



As part of his formal career, he was a teacher, worked as a clerk, even served as staff at the Minicoy observatory

Having been raised in islands with natural resources limited to fish, coconut & some agri produce, he is an exponent of equitable development

At CMFRI, Manikfan was involved in classification, collection & identification of around 400 marine species

