

MISCELLANEOUS NOTE

3. BALEEN WHALE IN GULF OF MANNAR CAUSES DEATH OF TWO FISHERMEN¹

On 26 May 1961, a local Tamil newspaper *Thina Thanthi* carried a news item of a fishing boat in the Gulf of Mannar off Punnakayal, south of Tuticorin, being attacked by a large fish, resulting in the death of two of the five fishermen in the boat. In June 1961, while on tour to Tuticorin, I visited Tiruchendur Government Hospital where the injured were said to have been admitted and also Punnakayal village, to obtain first-hand information about the incident. It transpired that one of the survivors, Jayaraj Fernando aged 37, was admitted to the hospital with injuries on the forehead and back on 24 May 1961, the day on which the incident occurred, and was discharged on 5 June 1961.

At Punnakayal village I met four survivors and gathered the following information: Fishing about seven miles off Punnakayal on 24 May 1961, at about 04:00 hours after hauling in the gill nets (catch almost exclusively *Sardinella* spp. and *Chirocentrus* spp.), the six fishermen (not five as reported in the paper) were resting, waiting for favourable winds to sail shorewards. Suddenly, without any warning, a huge monster reared up and fell across the boat, smashing the sides and capsizing the boat. Two of the fishermen, Antony aged 28 and Tai Tones aged 35, were killed instantaneously being crushed against the boat. The others were thrown into the water, dazed and injured, Jayaraj Fernando more so, but they managed to cling on to the capsized boat and were picked up shortly after by one of the passing fishing boats.

In the twilight the animal appeared to be blackish on its upper side and pale whitish ventrally, and was estimated to be about thirty feet in length. As the animal fell on the boat and slid over it, bits of its skin were found sticking to the jagged edges of the broken timber. I was able to examine a few of these bits, collected and kept by the fishermen. They indicated that the animal was not a fish as reported, but a cetacean.

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It appears that on the day prior to this incident (on 23 May 1961) the same animal or one similar to it got entangled in some nylon fishing nets (gill nets) set in that vicinity but escaped, after badly damaging the nets. On several previous occasions fishermen have seen such monsters which they know do not belong to the true fishes, but are related to the *Ongil* (dolphins and porpoises) and which, on account of their enormous length, they call *Uravi*, *Panai uravi*, or *Timingalam*. They differentiate them from the Whale Shark, which is also occasionally found in the Gulf of Mannar and is known locally as *Panaimeen*, by their horizontal tail flukes and the two blow holes, from which 'fountains of water are spouted from time to time'. I was told that occasionally these whales are known to approach and lie alongside fishing boats in the fishing grounds, when even their eyes 'which are almost like those of a calf' can be seen! Also, on rare occasions, pairs have been seen in the fishing grounds off Tuticorin in waters six fathoms deep to rear the anterior part of their bodies above the water and fall back with a resounding noise, which antics fishermen consider as mating play.

On the information gathered there can be no doubt that the animal responsible was a baleen whale, but specific identification is not possible except, on the basis of the size, to presume that it was one of the smaller species, most probably the Lesser Rorqual, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* Lacépède. The occurrence of this species in the Gulf of Mannar during the month of May is not unusual, as there is a record of the stranding of a 21-foot *B. acutorostrata* on 19 May 1937 at Mannar on the west coast of Ceylon (Deraniyagala 1948, *Spol. Zeyl.* 25).

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to this unusual incident, which to my knowledge is the first of its kind to be reported from the Indian Seas.

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