

## 1.2 The Marine Biological Association of India Reminisces and Reflections

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The saga of the Marine Biological Association of India which started in December 1958, and the biotic environment in which it was nurtured to attain its present standing, nationally and internationally, completing half a century would not have happened, but for the untiring efforts of its founding father, late Dr. Santhappan Jones - a visionary, an administrator, a man of wit and compassion, and a futurologist. Who else could think of starting a scientific association in the then remote Central Marine Fisheries Research Station (CMFRS), Mandapam Camp? A person of grit, courage and confidence, he could see the potential and the untapped resources available for organizing such a venture. The erstwhile Madras Fisheries Department had already established a Marine Biological Station on Krusadi Island making it a Mecca for zoologists, botanists and marine biologists, professors and students from colleges and universities in India to visit and study marine life which abounds in the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay, especially skirting Rameswaram, Krusadi and other islands. Rich in animal and plant diversity, it was and is a paradise for those who wish to study marine life. An important consideration would have been to motivate and tap the talents of the relatively young multidisciplinary scientific pool at the CMFRS. This was also at a time when there was not a single dedicated scientific journal in India to cater to marine sciences.

When I joined CMFRS at Mandapam Camp as an Honorary Researcher in June 1959, I was targeted by a very proactive group of scientists in the campus extolling the virtues of the newly founded MBAI and over night I enrolled as a Life Member paying Rs.150. Individual Membership was only Rs.10 per annum with an entrance fee of Rs.5 and Institutional Subscription only Rs.15 per annum. Foreign Life Membership was Rs.200, and individual Rs.12.50 and Institutional Rs. 20 per annum. Incredible! Over and above this, the Journal priced at Rs.35 was issued free to Members. The Rupee had its value then, the exchange rate for an US \$ being about Rs. 6. Despite such tempting offer, it was not an easy task to build up the membership. Dr. Jones would joke that professors and students spend more than Rs.10 a week in smoking, but would be reluctant to become a member.

It takes time for any Association of this nature to take off, but the MBAI within a few months of its inception was showing an explosive growth in its activities. The prompt publication of the first volume of the Journal with good scientific content and embodying varied activities gave a great flip to the nascent Association. The greatest asset was the dedicated and committed office bearers Dr. Raghu Prasad, Dr. Prasanna Varma, Dr. P.R.S. Tampi, Dr. P.V. Ramachandran Nair, Dr. P.S.B.R. James, Dr. K.M. Gopal, Dr. D. Sudarsana Reddy and others.

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The selection of the Logo of the Association, namely "The Investigator", was most appropriate. This Royal Indian Marine Research Ship of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was on par with "The Challenger" and had the distinction of having Surgeon Naturalists A. Alcock, Wood-Mason, Lloyd, Seymour Sewell and others exploring the pelagic, mesopelagic and abyssal depths of the Indian Seas including the Andaman Sea bringing to light many organisms new to science indicating the richness of the biodiversity of tropical seas. Despite changes in the cover page, I am glad that the Logo is being retained till today.

Turning the pages of Volume I of the Journal would reveal the scope and objectives of the Association as well as the range of activities the Association was involved with. A "Marine Biological Service" to cater to the needs of the educational Institutions in conducting studies on the marine biota was a laudable activity. The Members of the Association also contributed greatly towards building up an excellent Marine Museum at the Mandapam Campus.

A stimulating recreational activity at the time was the Association's "Snorkel League" also associated with well known under water experts in scuba diving and snorkeling. Rodney Jonkloss from Colombo, Sri Lanka was an Honorary Adviser, with K.M. Gopal as Convener. The Italian Scuba Diver, Dr. F.B. Salvadori who trained some of our young scientists such as Mr. Nagappan Nayar, Mr. S. Mahadevan, Mr. Issac Rajendran (from Madras Fisheries Department) and others were associated with the League and donated sets of equipments for use. These are nostalgic recollections of precious moments which have faded away in the history of the Association.

Between 1962 and 1985, the Association held seven International Symposia. I had the pleasure of convening four of them, namely (1) The Symposium on Scombroid Fishes; (2) The Symposium on Indian Ocean, Its Origin, Science and Resources; (3) The Symposium on Endangered Marine Animals and Marine Parks' and (4) The Symposium on Coastal Aquaculture; besides involving actively with the others on Crustacea; Mollusca and Corals and Coral Reefs. The last said, held in 1969, was the First International Symposium on Corals and Coral Reefs held globally, the second and third being held by International Organizations at Brisbane and Florida in 1973 and 1977 respectively. In addition, there was the Journal, Special Publications and Memoirs prepared by Members of the Association. All these helped to enhance the status and reputation of the Marine Biological Association of India.

Always things have not been hunkey dory. As I reminisce, I must say that there were moments of concern about the very existence of the Association. There were impediments of various nature which the Association was able to overcome from time to time. I recollect an interesting event when two days prior to the inauguration of the Symposium on Scombroid Fishes on 12 January, 1962, the Director, CMFRI who was also the President of MBAI received a missive from the Fisheries Development Advisor, Ministry of Agriculture, Delhi instructing him that no work of the Institute on Scombroid Fishes should be discussed in a public forum. The message was passed on to me being the Convener, and the printed Abstracts had been delivered from Madurai the same day. The only option open to me was to despatch a person to Ramand to get a rubber stamp made, which was received by late evening, and with some colleagues we had to stamp 21 Abstracts in each Book as "WITHDRAWN"!! Looking back, I feel in a way this improved the Content of the Proceedings which was published in four volumes containing papers from eminent workers on Scombroid fishes

from India and all parts of the world and was in such demand that it went out of print soon.

There were many such experiences the Association has gone through and emerged to grow from strength to strength. Another interesting incident was in early 1975, the Assistant Director General (ADG), Fisheries, ICAR rang me up from Delhi to find out whether I would be in Cochin on a particular date as he had to meet me on an urgent matter. I was not on tour and met the ADG at the appointed time at the office. In his usual style, the ADG opened the topic in the presence of the local officer-in-charge that he had an unpleasant duty to perform. He had been sent by the Secretary, ICAR with a charge sheet to look into an allegation by the Ad-hoc Director of the Institute, of indiscipline and misuse of office staff and equipment on my part. I was rather taken aback, as I had gone to meet him thinking that he had to say something about the programmes of *R.V. Varuna* which I was handling and he was also interested in. The sum and substance was that I was using an office assistant to do secretarial work for the MBAI Symposium on Indian Ocean and Adjacent Seas - Its Origin, Science and Resources. There were about 330 papers to be edited and published, some of them in French and German. It was a daunting task, and I had taken the help of an office staff and he in turn used the office typewriter after getting formal permission from his superiors to also receive an honorarium from the Association. The ADG being an out and out gentleman with the highest integrity gave me and the office assistant a patient hearing and with his usual smile closed the file and left for Delhi. To make matters short, my appointment order as Director of CMFRI was delayed by about five months!!

There was a strong suggestion by some that the papers of the above mentioned Symposium should be returned to the authors. We had committed to publish them, and the only alternative I could find was to print them in the Associations Journal in Volumes 14 to 18. I am ever grateful to Mr. P.T. Meenakshisundaram who was at the Madras Research Centre of CMFRI, an ardent supporter of the Association. His help of getting the proofs from the Diocesan Press, mailing them and also helping me at a time of crisis, are matters which I can never forget.

In the early seventies there was also a crunch of the funds of the Association due to committed payments for some Special Publications. The situation was such that doubts arose whether the Association would survive. In fact, one of the Founding Life Members of the Association sent a resignation letter stating that he would not be responsible for any liabilities!! Well, that era is over and the Association has pulled through and is in better times. I mention these because scientific institutions and society some times lose sight of positive thinking and action, initiative and creativity. Such things should never happen.

As President of the Association for ten years from 1975, my colleagues and I have seen to the well being and growth of the Association, I am very happy that my successors, Dr. P.S.B.R. James, Dr. P.V. Rao, Dr. M. Devaraj, Dr. V.N. Pillai, Dr. M.J. Modayil, Dr. N.G.K. Pillai and now, Dr. G. Syda Rao are steering the Association to higher realms. The holding of MECOS 09 at this time taking into account our awareness of global problems of concern in marine ecosystems is timely. I wish the Association all success to be a fruitful and harmonious instrument for the development of ocean sciences, the associated biota and their judicious use.