



Dr. P.S.B.R. James

- Designation at retirement : Director
- Period of Service: 1961-69; 1978-82; 1985-94

A nostalgic journey

I am extremely proud and greatly cherish the memory of being a product of CMFRI, having started my professional career as a Senior Research Scholar of the Govt. of India (1958-61) for research in marine fisheries at Mandapam Camp and culminating as the Director of the Institute (1985-94).

My desire to pursue for the Ph.D. degree twice earlier at the Indian Lac Research Institute, Ranchi (1956) and at the University of Delhi (1958) could not be fulfilled as the facilities and the environs there did not convince me. Moving to Mandapam Camp from Delhi was termed a 'banishment' by my supervisor, late Dr. Mary Chandoy, Reader at the Delhi University but it proved to be a boon as I instantaneously felt it the ideal place for research on fish, my long cherished goal.

It was a nostalgic journey to reminisce from Madras-Egmore to Mandapam Camp by the then boat-mail. The golden moments virtually

commenced as I crossed Uchappuli station and headed towards Mandapam Camp. The enchanting view of the Palk Bay, the adjacent crystal clear turquoise lagoons and the distant Gulf of Mannar with the chain of islands thrilled me beyond imagination. As I entered the CMFRI campus the canopy on either side of the road and the serenity and the tranquility of the place and its very location at closed doors to the sea impressed me most to finally settle down for serious work.

An absolute novice to marine sciences, it was the renowned and illustrious Dr. S. Jones the then Director who initiated me to research in marine fisheries and under whose guidance I received the Ph.D. degree of the Banaras Hindu University in the year 1964 for research on ribbon fishes. It was a thrilling and signal moment when I also received the D.Sc. degree from the same University in 1986 based on my published work at the Institute on some marine fishes of India.

My stay at the celebrated Mandapam Camp from 1958 to 1969 and again from 1978 to 1982, though a sort of vanavasam, offered note-worthy and unlimited opportunities, inspiration and motivation to explore the extraordinarily diverse marine ecosystems and aquatic habitats, the varied fisheries resources and methods of exploitation and the fascinating lagoons and islands. I am yet to come across an equally famous place excelling it for marine science research in the country - indeed it is a place for research from 'diatoms to whales'! If I am anything to-day, I owe it to my research

work at this unique place.

My first golden and notable moment at CMFRI was the reporting on the occurrence of a fourth species of ribbon-fish, *Eupleurogrammus intermedius* as early as in 1959. This was followed by the detection of two additional species of silverbellies, *Leiognathus leuciscus* and *L. smithursti*, and the discovery and description of two new species, *L. jonesi* and *L. striatus*, all from the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar region. However, I narrowly missed the bus, for unexplainable reasons, to describe two new species of ribbon-fishes from India although I possessed the requisite material, which were duly described later by others. My extensive and exhaustive publications on these two families of fishes gives me a deep sense of satisfaction, contentment and professional achievement.

During my stay at Mandapam Camp, I had memorable and breath taking encounters with schools of fishes, I used to enthuse about. The cow-nose rays, catfishes and mullets were at times captured in enormous quantities in shore-seines and purse-seines and the skipjack tuna during pole and line fishing in Lakshadweep. The occurrence of large fishes like devil rays (*Manta* sp.), the tiger shark, hammer-heads, saw-fishes, leather-jackets (*Chorinemus lysan*), the eels (*Thyrsoidea macrura*) and the live sea snakes in the region cannot be forgotten. My personal efforts to enrich the museum with diverse flora and fauna were a pleasant experience to recollect.

The remarkable perambulations along the coasts of Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar, the night observations and collections at Kundugal Point, the surveys and marine biological collections at zero-tides and post-cyclone (1964) period, camping on the Manauli island over-night for field observations including tide-related shore fishing activities, the unearthing of the deep rooted large sea-anemones (*Stoichactis*) with anemone fishes, the Sunday - morning (6-10 AM) swimming, diving, snorkeling, fishing and making field collections of benthic fauna including in-situ observations on commensal/symbiotic animals, the encounters with large shoreward drifting medusae capable of causing severe rashes with toxic tentacles (self a victim once) in the Palk Bay during north-east monsoon period, the identification for the first time of the blue-green alga, *Trichodesmium thiebanti* invading the coastal waters of the Gulf of Mannar in dense blooms and causing foul smell and fish mortalities in the aquarium, participating in day-long trawling and purse-seining by Indo-Norwegian Project boats and Karavalai (shore-seine) fishing boats, pole and line fishing for skipjack and night angling in rocky reefs of Bangaram island in Lakshadweep, early morning (4-6 AM) fish sample collection from bagnets operated from catamarans at Thangachimadam, soonthu (burning dry coconut leaf bundles at night) fishing at Rameswaram for white-bait and accidental injuries and pain caused to individuals by the sting of rays and the dorsal spine of large catfish remain memorial.

Dealing with large marine mammals like the dugong (live and dead) and the stranded sperm and baleen whales (24 to 80 ft) along the Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar coasts and studying them for various aspects, especially re-assembling of their skeletons was a singular experience.

My efforts in various capacities while in CMFRI and at the Council to get a Kendriya Vidyalaya established in the premises of CMFRI Mandapam Camp for the welfare of staff in particular and the community at large in a remote and backward locality often reverberate in my mind.

Besides several national and international seminars, workshops, symposia and training courses held in CMFRI, the FAO workshop on field identification of fishes of the western Indian Ocean at Cochin and the international training course in pearl culture at Tuticorin under the FAO/UNDP Seafarming Development and Demonstration Project were significant.

The successful implementation of the transfer of technology programmes in mariculture on the establishment of a prawn hatchery at Kannur, the oyster mela at Tuticorin, pearl festival and polyculture at Valinokkam, clam and oyster culture in the backwaters of Kerala, Mahima shrimp feed production and empowerment of women at Chellanam, seaweed culture by women at Rameswaram, seacucumber seed production and hatchery at Tuticorin will remain as memorable milestones.

Lastly, the distinguished and hardworking exercises by the scientists

and technical staff of CMFRI for the survey of fisheries resources of the Lakshadweep, documenting for the first time the status of marine fisheries in various States, analyzing the implications of monsoon fishing along the west coast, assessing the stocks of over 40 species and groups of fishes and the publication of the first bibliography of publications of staff of CMFRI have left deep, important and indelible impressions on me.