



K. Nagappan Nayar

- Designation at retirement : Principal Scientist
- Period of Service : 1952 - 1987

Pearls to remember

It was in late 1958, while I was working as an Assistant Research Officer (Molluscs) at the Madras Research Centre of CMFRI, that I got an official letter from the Chief Research Officer, CMFRS, Mandapam Camp, asking me to proceed on tour to Tuticorin at a very early date. It was to join Dr. Salvadori, an F.A.O. Fishery Scientist who had specialized in SCUBA (Self contained underwater breathing apparatus) diving as an understudy. The pearl oyster fishery off the coast of Tuticorin had become very erratic and for a number of years no fishery was possible due to the unproductive nature of the pearl oyster beds. Hence the Central Government requested the Food and Agricultural Organisation at Rome to depute a fishery scientist who was well versed in SCUBA diving to Tuticorin for a few months to dive and study the actual status of the pearl oyster beds and their distribution and also to train personnel for SCUBA diving. As the pearl oysters in the State was under the jurisdiction

of the Tamilnadu Fisheries, Dr. Salvadori was sent to Tuticorin with instructions to the Asst. Director of Fisheries, to look after his accommodation and other facilities for carrying out underwater explorations. The work assigned to me was to work as an understudy to him in all his underwater studies. This work involved carrying out extensive underwater diving operations using SCUBA diving to study the distribution pattern of pearl oysters, its density and its populations in the pearl banks which are mainly located in the Gulf of Mannar off Tuticorin at about 15-25 km away from the shore.

Earlier only the Indian Navy had a team of SCUBA divers to carry out their underwater work. Some of my colleagues persuaded me not to get involved in this hazardous and dangerous type of work. I was able to lay my hands on a few underwater books and read and understood about SCUBA diving. I seriously thought about this type of work which was carried out extensively in different parts of the world, I decided to accept the offer and take up this challenging assignment. I immediately proceeded to Tuticorin and joined there to carry out this project.

At that time there was only one counterpart from the State Government. In addition to the two of us, Dr. Salvadori requested the State Government to spare the regular skin divers working in the Department also to undergo the SCUBA diving training. All the formalities were completed within a few days time and the expert started the

underwater diving training work for all of us in the open sea. Within a couple of weeks, all of us learnt SCUBA diving. Diving in the open sea was a fascinating experience. When I reached the sea bottom to a depth of about 20 m I found a variety of marine life all around me. The number of different types of small beautifully coloured fishes all around me and the number of live corals with their polyps fully opened surrounded with numerous fishes was beautiful. With great delight we caught lobsters and brought them up. I was able to photograph the underwater animals with the latest underwater cameras. I felt I was altogether in a fascinating work and enjoyed the experience tremendously. On alternate days we set sail in the early morning and reached the diving station for the day's work, usually more than 20 m off the shore. We returned back after the diving session invariably between 3 pm and 4 pm. Initially two of us used to dive at one single place and thus we started the survey operations. After a couple of months experience, we all started diving independently at different stations. In the meanwhile a few more counterparts from the State and also from the Centre joined the team and started their training.

Dr. Salvadori's initial assignment was for a period of three months, but before the period was over his assignment was extended for a further period of three months. I was also given to understand orally in the beginning of the assignment itself that after the expert left India, I would be sent back to Madras. When Dr. Salvadori left Tuticorin after completion

of his assignment, I got an office order stating that a new Centre is to be started at Tuticorin and I had been posted as the Officer-in-Charge of that Centre. This came to me as a rude shock, since I was anxiously waiting at that time to go back to Madras. This office order posting me at Tuticorin continued for a period of over two and a half decades of my life ! This however enabled me to work without interruption on pearl oysters and edible oysters.