



S. Mahadevan

- Designation at retirement : Principal Scientist
- Period of service: 1953-1988

Just a few lines from my memory

Gulf of Mannar, My Friend

A silver stream pass the waters offshore

gilt with sunbeam all over

on whose enamelled waters I dived

and saw how prettily the denizens moved and lived

and how sweetly they moved and bred still

Oh! my friend Mannar gulf

still I adore you

though eighteen years past since I bade thee good-bye

*Marine Zoology, Mandapam Camp, Mannar Gulf and Mahadevan
Place-New Delhi, event UPSC selection in 1959 for Marine Zoologist
post in CMFRI-*

*I was leaving the hall after interview. An attendant emerging from
the chamber calls out my name "Chairman saab aapko bulathe hain"*

Apprehensively I enter the chamber. "Be seated Mr. Mahadevan the chairman tells me smilingly. 'Your reply about the unsuitability of Pulicot lake bed for Coral reef formation is correct. You can go'.

That was a defining moment. I knew instinctively that it was Dr.N.K.Panikkar, a member of the Board who must have corrected the assertion by the chairman who believed that Pulicot Lake bottom is a coral reef environment. I cast my grateful eyes on him before I left.

Defining Moment

Mandapam Camp. Dr. Panikkar's visit. What is Mahadevan doing here? he queried Dr. S.Jones Director CMFRI then. He is meant for underwater diving assignment under UNDP/ FAO scheme by learning Aqua-lung diving at Tuticorin. Transfer him". That was a defining moment. In the next two decades CMFRI became a pioneering organization in India in underwater studies.

We were the first that ever burst into the silent sea' to study the ecology of pearl oyster and chank beds. I reproduce here what 'Indian express' reported on 10.12.1972 about our work.

"At Tuticorin I met two institute scientists who form India's only scientific diving team. Mr.K.Nagappan Nayar and Mr.S.Mahadevan have led a tweedledom tweedledee existence passing out of the same college, gravitating to the same organization and learning diving at the same time from a visiting Italian expert in 1959. Ever since the two have been

regularly donning aqualungs to study inch by inch the topography and the forms off Tuticorin. They have discovered and charted rocky banks or 'Paars' where oysters abound". This encomium is more for the institute than for us. A language daily from Calicut also extold our exploits in its columns in 1972. Such Memorable events in my career were many but I restrict them to a few.

'Tornado' in Mannar gulf

During 70's we were surveying the near inshore sea-bottom on a cloudy, murky afternoon. Anthony Pichai and Susai were doing sample collection at the bottom with 'M.L.Chippi' anchored. One Mr. Salihoo from Sudan was witnessing our diving work. All of a sudden our rock pilot Pitchaiah Edo. shouted "Thumbikkai, Thumbikkai varudu", start the launch and run it westward." He pointed out far south of where we lay. To own consternation we noticed a deathly dance performed by a swirling dark, broad column of cloud in the shape of an elephant' trunk descending from over-hanging cloud mass connecting sea surface, twirling, churning and sucking seawater up and along with it fishes, small and large, weeds and what not and flinging them in to bits far off from the centre Tornado! a rare phenomenon. The gurgling noise was terrific and the worst! it was moving fast north in our direction! we could not heave anchor and run shorewards. Staff were working at the sea bottom! 200 metres separated us from certain catostrophy; The crew started prayers. As if in answer, miraculously the Tornado changed

tack moving East Northeast and dissipated sparing all of us underwater eternity!

Charming 'Poisonous Sea-Snake'

The most daring and dangerous attempt by me was during the visit of a German scientist (I forget his name), accompanying him diving, photographing deadly sea-snakes underwater at close range! I was very reluctant at first but yielded later. Attempts in diving at 10 fathoms drew blank. We were third time lucky (really lucky I, returned ashore alive). We encountered snakes in different dives, gracefully, (fearfully too!) swimming towards us, Nearer and nearer! Fear gripped me. The Germans earlier advice to me was if the snake approaches you swim up, breathing steadily. The bubbles from aqualung will be the object of curiosity for the snakes which they will follow, rising up. You dive deeper down. The snake will surface elsewhere. I did it with pounding heart. He had what he wanted. I survived! to write this adventure! Years later he sent a reprint of his publication (in German) Excerpts seeing my name I could not understand what he had written in it.

Escape from 'Saw' of Death

On a murky day April 1976 I was diving solo at 21 meters over a rocky bed, thick with overgrown seaweeds. Landing on the sea bed I experienced a sudden jerk under my flippers. Instantly I noticed a 4' long saw darting forwards. I realised it was on *Pristis cuspidatus* resting on sea

weed bed that I had put my feet wrong. My intruding feet were fortunately on its rear and not on the saw otherwise my companions above would not have seen me again!

I feel proud that our unit did more than studying the ecology of Gulf of Mannar beds. One such was underwater exploratory attempt in Andaman and Nicobar islands. My regret was that the fierce current system in coastal zones of Nancowry, Great Nicobar and Little Andamans which we visited precluded diving even in closeby coastal reefs. Ubiquitous mosquito nuisance also put a premium whether in the Northern islands or far south. On the other hand Survey of the 21 islands in later years in the Gulf of Mannar was rewarding and helped the Government to declare these islands, protected us National Marine Park.

My active participation in seminars, workshops and training programmes organized by the institute at different times was always a source of great satisfaction and achievement. It gave me and with immense pleasure at the encouragement given by the Institute deputing me to Indonesia, U.S.A and U.K.

Reflections

I visited Tuticorin Research Centre last month. As I saw the existing facilities, the centre permanently shifted to our building a great sense of pride and achievement filled my heart. Mr.K.Nagappan Nayar and myself with support from Dr.E.G.Silas the Director then took pains to establish a

mini hatchery laboratory in the early 80's after acquiring the land from the Salt department. This campus is now abuzz with the administrative work and research activities there. Well done. My congratulations to the CMFRI on the eve of the diamond jubilee celebration.