

# **A long voyage with small fishermen**

## **V. Vivekanandan**

### **South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS)**

For Vivekanandan, the journey on the coast and the sea began in Trivandrum in 1982. His voyage to champion the cause of small artisanal fishermen on the Indian coast has been continuing since then. With a rare blend of professional education and technological expertise that he possesses, he works with a single-minded devotion for the wellbeing of fishermen, helping them build self-reliant organisations.

The inspiring story of Vivekanandan and SIFFS is a role model for the Indian youth who aspire to make a meaningful contribution to society.

#### **Early influence**

Vivek, as he is known to everyone, grew up in an urban middle class family in Delhi and later in Chennai. His father and his uncle had taken part in the freedom struggle as youngsters. Attracted to communism, they had spent time in jail, subsequently going underground, for espousing revolutionary ideas.

Vivek recalled his growing up experiences, “By the time I was born, my father had decided to settle down to a normal life, giving up politics. He worked as a journalist. Unfortunately, he died when I was just nine, giving me very little opportunity to learn from him. Still he left behind a legacy that has influenced me.” Vivek takes great pride that his father was a freedom fighter, which in turn predisposed him to take interest in society at large.

“I was taught to revere the great leaders of our freedom movement. I still remember clutching my parents’ hands as a six-year-old and walking in a silent procession in Madras (now Chennai) to mourn Pandit Nehru’s death. In high school, history was my favourite subject and the freedom struggle was my favourite topic. I used to feel a sense of loss that I was born after the excitement was all over and could only read about it,” he recalled.

Vivek ascribed his direction in life to multiple influences. Vivek’s mother, hailing from a conventional background yet a progressive woman, was one of the first women of her times to get a PhD in a new discipline like bio-chemistry. “Being unconventional seemed to run in the family, like my maternal aunt who faced ostracisation for marrying outside the religion,” he quipped. The untimely demise of his father at the age of 39 left his mother with the

responsibility of educating Vivek and his two younger sisters. Her hard work ensured that Vivek got an engineering education and his sisters, their medical degrees.

Vivek also recalled another family member of being an influence. “My father’s elder brother, a member in the communist party was active in politics all his life. Interactions with him gave me an exposure to public life and access to radical literature.”

### **Broad-based learning leads to a new path**

The late 1970s was a period of great ferment in India, with an overall restlessness among various sections of society including the youth. The youth movements were greatly influenced, first by stalwarts like Ram Manohar Lohia and later by Jaiprakash Narayan. The late Indira Gandhi and the ruling Congress party under her leadership dominated the political spectrum. Vivek was fascinated by politics.

Vivek’s college days helped him sharpen his world-views further. “I had been attracted to development work as a result of my association with service organisations like the university’s YMCA and Rotaract Club,” he said, of his experiences in college. It gave him an opportunity to meet people from different walks of life, and develop organisational and leadership skills. His reading got him interested in radical ideas.

“A voracious reader of children’s books and thrillers later on, I found the five-year engineering course in a government college a great opportunity to learn a lot in addition to engineering. I picked up library books written by western authors rather than the official publications of the Soviet Union that adorned my uncle’s bookshelves. In that sense I did not ‘inherit’ my early left orientation from my father or uncle,” he said.

Despite his interest in the world around him and a leftist orientation, he had no direction on how to act on his ideas or his inclination. Vivek recalled those years, “Politics had a certain fascination, but I had no real conviction that any of the leaders or parties were worth following. I was fascinated by the rural situation, but I was too well entrenched in my urban middle class existence that there was no real possibility of doing something radical.”

In such a situation, it was natural that Vivek also followed the path that his classmates were taking: writing entrance tests for IIMs, attending job interviews for public sector companies and taking the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) preliminary exam. His uncle was keen that Vivek should go to the then Soviet Union for his higher studies in engineering, though Vivek developed a preference for the USA. “Influenced by a few close friends, I took the TOEFL and GRE tests. I got very good scores in both the exams, better than some of my friends who actually made it to the USA,” he recalled with amusement.

However, he chanced upon an advertisement in the newspaper that shaped his future and in fact the work that he took up as his life’s mission. The Institute of Rural Management

Anand (IRMA) being set up in Anand in faraway Gujarat, offered the opportunity to work as a professional for the rural poor, entailing a good pay. The course offered a generous scholarship too, making the education virtually free. So Vivek applied for the two-year postgraduate programme in rural management and was selected.

### **In the mecca of dairy cooperatives**

Vivek was nostalgic about his education in IRMA. “Choice of IRMA was the result of my personal inclination to do something radical without giving up the comfort of a career and decent pay. My joining IRMA perhaps was not just a chance, but destiny. My GRE results were lost in post. And when I got a copy of my GRE scores many months later, I was well into my first term in IRMA and feeling great about being there,” he recollected. In IRMA, Vivek and his classmates were taught to look at themselves as change agents who use their knowledge and managerial skills to bring changes in society.

Producer cooperatives were seen as important instruments to bring about change in rural areas. “At the end of the first year, we were doing the kind of things that the leaders of National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) did: going to villages and organising rural producer cooperatives that would end the exploitation of middlemen, traders and other vested interests,” said Vivek.

Vivek was quite keen on organising rural producers. He also realised the need to carry out interventions in new sectors other than milk and oilseeds in which cooperatives along the Anand pattern had already been established by the NDDB.

In the three-tier Anand model, rural dairy farmers were organised as a cooperative that collected milk twice a day and gave input services regarding feed and veterinary service. The farmers were paid based on the fat content in the milk. The primary village cooperatives federated into a district union that processed the milk and introduced value addition. The district unions came together to form a state level federation called Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Limited (GCMMF). GCMMF owns the Amul brand. The surplus revenue generated at each level goes to the producers, as they are the owners of the cooperative.

“The idea was to work with new producer groups as it would take a lot of creativity to develop and replicate cooperative models. I was keen on a job that would give me an opportunity to work in new sectors or with new producer groups. I didn’t want to work with established rural producer organisations and do a ‘maintenance’ job,” he revealed.

## **Beginning of the voyage**

When Vivek graduated from IRMA, two job offers came his way. The first one was with South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS) and the other was for an intervention in the fruit and vegetable sector being planned by NDDDB. He chose SIFFS as he believed that the fisheries sector would be more exiting and satisfying to work in.

Though he was not familiar with the fishing community, it was clearly one of the poor communities and he felt that he would be able to make a significant contribution. Besides, an occupation related to the sea looked exciting and romantic! “Based on an article I had come across in the IRMA library, I understood that the marine fishing community was more egalitarian than the agrarian communities of the milk cooperative movement,” he said.

Vivek was always a bit uneasy about the disparities in the milk societies of Amul wherein the chairman would typically be a rich person from a higher caste who may not even touch a cow. Yet the mere ownership of a cow got him labelled a producer, giving the right of membership in the cooperative. “A fishermen cooperative in contrast would have actual workers as members and leaders. The SIFFS offer was once-in-a-lifetime kind of opportunity and I was lucky to land it. While SIFFS represented a huge opportunity, it could also be called a high-risk venture as it was a start-up and the promoters were not well known. However, I did not think too much of the risks as Dr Varghese Kurien himself had recommended the organisation to IRMA for placement,” said Vivek.

Kurien had visited the first cooperatives of the SIFFS network in the mid-1970s. He had recommended IRMA to SIFFS, for placement, as he knew those who promoted and supported SIFFS. As for salary, the SIFFS offer was on par with that of NDDDB in Anand. So, even salary-wise Vivek did not think he was making any sacrifice.

## **Landing amidst activists in a community organisation**

SIFFS had been registered in December 1980 as an organisation of artisanal fishermen and Vivek joined it in April 1982 as a marketing manager. SIFFS was built on the work of a number of individuals and the fishermen cooperative societies they had promoted, prior to being registered. It is therefore important to know the context of SIFFS’ work prior to 1980 and after Vivek’s joining so as to appreciate Vivek’s contribution to SIFFS.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, several interesting experiments were being tried in the southern state of Kerala. As one of the first democratically elected communist governments in the world, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), under the leadership of EMS Namboodripad, came to power in Kerala in 1957. The elected government proposed a number of radical reforms in the education and other sectors. The Namboodripad government was later dismissed by the central government, citing worsening of law and order situation. It was alleged that the Catholic church running

several educational institutions felt threatened by the radical reforms proposed by the communist government.

The fishermen also protested against some of the government policies, leading to police opening fire. There were several activists in Kerala who were in the forefront of mobilising workers, fisher folk and marginalised sections of society, a trend that was later identified as the civil society movement.

Kerala has about 20% Christian population. Inspired by the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's ideas of liberation theology, a small section within the mainstream Catholic church began working with poor communities including the fisher folk. An important event during these times was the formation of the Trivandrum Independent Fishermen Trade Union in 1979 under the leadership of Father Thomas Kocherry. Though Fr Kocherry was a Catholic priest, he was not a diocesan priest but belonged to Redemptorists, an international congregation. His group was strongly influenced by the liberation theology and this was not acceptable to the Kerala dioceses that had a strong anti-communist history.

In the '60s, young activists from the Trivandrum Social Service Society (TSSS), a social service wing of the Trivandrum church, undertook community-building activities in the newly inhabited coastal village of Marianad. It was gradually understood that economic empowerment of the villagers, all of them engaged in artisanal fishing, would be the key to realise the fruits of social empowerment. The economic empowerment could be effected only if the fisher folk collectively intervened on the shores. Because once they reached the shore, they usually lost control of their catch.

Once on the shore, the catch automatically came under the control of the auctioneer. The shore or the landing centre became the first point of sale, where the fish was auctioned. Usually the auctioneer was a person who had provided loan to the fisher folk. Sometimes, he rigged the auction in cohort with the fish merchants. Either way the fishermen were exploited. The social activists in Marianad realised this problem quite early and hence helped the fishermen to form a fish marketing cooperative in 1970.

The Marianad cooperative focused on fish marketing, providing credit to the fishermen and also encouraged saving. As part of the marketing activity, the cooperative employed some people as auctioneers. These people collected money from the merchants / buyers, paid a part of the sale price to the fishermen on the spot and deposited the rest in the cooperative. The fishermen, who received a slip from the auctioneer, brought the slip to the cooperative office and collected the remaining money.

While paying the fishermen, the cooperative deducted a small part as the cooperative's expenses, deducted a part if there were outstanding loans from the cooperative and deducted another part as compulsory saving. The fishermen could withdraw the saving after a certain period or after it crossed a threshold value. The cooperative would also engage in direct selling, through outlets in the city and by engaging with export companies for selling

export varieties such as shrimp, cuttle fish and oil sardine. Thus the cooperative addressed the multiple challenges in the sale of fish, credit and savings. This model came to be known as the Marianad model. In next few years the Marianad model was adopted in several other villages in Trivandrum district.

In the '70s, the Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS) in Kanyakumari district of neighbouring Tamil Nadu, had also started forming primary cooperative societies of artisanal fishermen. By 1979 the need for a higher level institution to bring the individual societies of the Trivandrum district together was felt and the Trivandrum District Cooperative Federation was formed. There was an understanding that the Kanyakumari societies will also join the new federation in due course of time. Given that Kanyakumari and Trivandrum are in two states, the new federation was registered in 1980 as the South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS), even though the initial membership was confined to the Trivandrum cooperatives.

The network of TSSS, KSSS and SIFFS formed a sort of alliance that worked separately yet collectively for the betterment of fisher folk. However, the leadership in these three separate yet like-minded institutions soon realised the need to look at the business dimension more professionally.

According to John Kurien, who played a key role in developing and in replicating the Marianad model, SIFFS needed somebody at the level of a senior manager "At that time those who had done business management did not come to rural areas," he said. Vivek, an exception, joined as a marketing manager. John Kurian would joke that Vivek was the first paid professional in SIFFS, hinting that like himself, many volunteer professionals had mobilised fishermen, ultimately leading to the formation of SIFFS.

### **Vivek's contribution as a professional manager**

Vivek always maintained that it would be difficult to single out his personal contribution. "As administrative head, I was involved in all the activities but rarely did anything on my own; many professionals and external resource persons have made major contributions over the years," he said. Saying so, he listed "works SIFFS has done when I was present, rather than something that I can claim personal credit for."

- Introduction and commercialisation of marine plywood boats as alternatives to country boats for artisanal fishermen on the south west coast
- Development of a wide range of boat models in plywood and glass fibre
- R&D initiatives in artificial reefs, improvements to fishing gear, safety at sea, etc.
- Development of a network of many boat yards, manufacturing marine plywood and fibreglass boats

- Direct import of outboard motors and spares and establishing a network of 25 service stations along the south Indian coast
- Organising primary fish marketing societies and district federations in many parts of south India
- Running a microcredit programme which is one of the largest in the fisheries sector in India
- Experiments in fish marketing, export, etc.
- Lobbying and advocacy on issues including that of human rights of fishermen in detention for crossing into neighbouring waters.
- A number of studies related to fisheries
- Post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation work that includes construction of 2,000 houses in Tamil Nadu, distribution of over 700 boats, repair of 1,000 boats and 1,800 motors.
- Development of a methodology for conducting a census of fishing boats that is more accurate and detailed than the official census and at the same time much cheaper and easier to implement
- Acting as an important link between the key players in the fisheries sector of India: fishermen trade unions, scientific institutions, NGOs, fisheries departments, international organisations, etc.
- Developing the concept of the SIFFS model as a 'first point of sale intervention' so that it can be replicated in other parts of India and also adopted for other commodities.
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### **Grappling with the uncertainty and seasonality in fishing**

SIFFS catered to members of Trivandrum societies when Vivek joined. The activities included checking societies' accounts, auditing, and ensuring that their elections took place.

The resource in and around Trivandrum, the catchment area of SIFFS at that point of time, posed a difficulty. The continental shelf near the Trivandrum coast is pretty narrow. But as a true characteristic of a tropical climate, the fish diversity in the area was high and quantum of individual species low, compared to the reverse situation in temperate waters. According to Vivek, sometimes the maximum quantity of fish catch would come under the broad heading of 'miscellaneous'. The fish catch was subject to high fluctuations – not just seasonally but daily. This added another layer of risk to the fish marketing business. According to Vivek, marketing was still not very profitable, and both profit and loss were marginal. But one bad day in 100 days of sale of fish could completely wipe out a few lakh rupees, the profit made earlier. "The bad day happens because landings on certain days can be very high. The companies were happy to take about three tons from us. On most days, landing will be around one ton, and then one day suddenly the landing would be ten tons. Usually if the catch increases, the price crashes, although that has nothing to do with the export price," Vivek elaborated.

Marketing fish required a lot of post-landing care. The fish needed to be iced immediately and carefully stored for a few hours; only then the exporters would take the fish. "If preservation is not done immediately, the fish would spoil quickly and companies would reject the consignment," explained Vivek.

Exporting shrimps was one of the several initiatives in marketing. But shrimp was accessible only to a small number of fishermen and only for a few months when they come up. Shrimp is a sea-bottom fish, and only trawlers engaged in bottom trawling had access to shrimp. So during May-June, SIFFS used to procure shrimp from its members; during August-October it bought cuttle fish and squids.

The idea was to export cuttle fish to Japan and Mediterranean countries like Spain. SIFFS planned to procure cuttle fish from the members in bulk and sell the same to export companies. According to Vivek, "We realised that our plan would work only if we had enough networking around the east and west coasts to beat the seasonality problem. The exporting companies overcame the seasonality problem by procuring far and wide. But then it would become just another business."

So export of fish was a difficult business but SIFFS was into it as it intended to become a long-term player. Also, at that point, talks were going on with the neighbouring district of Kanyakumari, where fishermen had been forming *sangams* since 1973, broadly on the lines of Marianad model. In 1984, a district federation was also formed, and it appeared that they might also join SIFFS. So SIFFS knew that their procurement area would increase.

At that time there was no bulk loan concept. But credit became a major requirement for members as there was a vicious nexus between credit and marketing operations as mentioned earlier. So SIFFS started approaching banks, helping members get loan.

### **Learning, unlearning and re-learning**

Having joined as a marketing manager in 1982, Vivek rose to become the CEO of SIFFS in 1985, after its restructuring. As chief executive and at the helm of affairs for over 25 years meant Vivek was constantly learning, as the fisheries sector was always in turmoil. Sharing his insights on this, Vivek said, "When I joined SIFFS, I had to unlearn what I had assimilated in IRMA and NDDB. I realised that fish and milk are not only different commodities but the issues confronting the sectors are completely different. Milk is a single commodity that can be marketed as such or converted into products. On the contrary, a fisherman on a given day catches five to 25 varieties of fish, of various sizes."

The annual variation can be in the ratio of 5:1, while the daily variation ratio will be much higher. It could be 1000:1 or more as some boats come back empty handed while some have bumper catches. The NDDB learning was to tap the city market for rural surplus milk. "Here, I realised that close to 75% of the catch went to nearby rural areas. So instead of

'rural surplus for urban consumption' as was demonstrated in the milk cooperatives of Anand, the marketing principle in SIFFS was 'coastal surplus for inland consumption'. Again, the inland market was scattered." It also became apparent that small fishermen had to move on from a low technology-low investment paradigm to a different mindset. This led to SIFFS' search and subsequent success with boat building, outboard motors and the like.

In many fishery cooperatives worldwide, it was found that the cooperatives made more money by selling inputs to members than selling fish to the outside world. SIFFS also sold inputs such as fishing nets, hooks, lines and the like to members. Polypropylene ropes were first introduced in Trivandrum by SIFFS. The society office also became a sales outlet. A new ice plant was constructed. According to Vivek, credit was crucial for the success of the Marianad model. If the fishermen are not provided with regular credit they would be forced to return to the middlemen.

The SIFFS credit model, in principle, was only for replacement of equipment and not for purchase of new equipment. As a result, SIFFS would provide its members with credit that would be adequate enough to help them to be free actors and sell their produce, but the same might not suffice the entire credit need of the members. SIFFS' foray into the fishing net business did not sustain and was discontinued in 1985. However, boat building, supply of motors, etc., that gave SIFFS an edge in the market, proved successful eventually.

### **Boat making and outboard motor sale as key interventions**

The boat building and the outboard motor (OBM) work started in 1983 when the boatyard was built. The members used to sail in *kattumaram*, a traditional boat built by tying a few wooden logs together. Water could pass through it, but it was unsinkable. The only problem was that it had limited capacity and was not suitable for deep sea fishing. The *kattumarams* that had evolved over the years, gave way to mechanised boats. Going deeper into the sea and quicker became a necessity by the '70s and the '80s. According to John Kurien, trawlers - the outcome of an Indo-Norwegian fisheries modernisation project - engaged in bottom trawling would often come close to the shore, where the artisanal fishermen fished traditionally. All these had an adverse impact on the fish stock available for the artisanal fishermen. It was clear that whoever went first, fast and deep into the sea and returned early had the possibility of getting a better price, again at the wishes of the cluster of agents and auctioneers who worked hand in glove with the input suppliers and creditors.

The structural problems had to be addressed both at the business and political levels. This was addressed by various Trivandrum-based organisations in different ways. While the fishermen's union made this a political issue, organising mass movements led by Fr Kocherry, SIFFS, an economic organisation then, focused on technology to help the fishermen. Changing from *kattumarams* to motorised boats, promoted by SIFFS meant that SIFFS had to organise training programmes for their members.

SIFFS has been building boats of sizes ranging between 16 feet and 63 feet. According to Julian Teelar, the current CEO of SIFFS, these cater to the needs of the traditional fishermen. The boat-building centre in Veli is also the main centre for research on boat building. Research on technological upgradation is necessary since the surf conditions are different in different parts of the country and the boats should be designed accordingly.

In 2015-16, around 600 boats were sold from the five boat-building centres and the total business was to the tune of Rs 8 crore. The sales target for the next year is Rs 11 crore. Overall, SIFFS has been making profit on building and sale of boats. SIFFS provides discount only to members.

SIFFS currently plans to reduce the number of boat yards from five to three, and increase the size of the boat yards. Boat yards are located close to the sea so that the fishermen can take their new boat or bring their old ones for repair easily. Though the oldest centre is in Veli near Trivandrum, SIFFS' main boat centre is in Tarangambadi in Nagapattinam district. The Tarangambadi centre sold 350 boats last year, out of the total of 600.

The second commercial activity of SIFFS is importing Suzuki's OBM. The capacity of motors in fishing boats ranges from 2.2 hp to 40 hp. SIFFS also sells higher capacity engines, 240-300 hp, for non-fisheries purpose – like to the navy or for tourism purpose. Given that there are other private sector companies in the OBM marketing space, SIFFS' role is to act as a countervailing force to bring down the price of motors.

In 2016, SIFFS did business worth Rs 11 crore, selling around 1,000 OBM units, 90% of it to fishermen. The fishermen have the option of buying the OBM directly from the companies, but they prefer SIFFS because the companies do not provide after-sale service, whereas SIFFS does. As of now SIFFS has one central workshop, besides 14 other workshops, where after-sale service of OBM is carried out.

SIFFS is a distributor of Suzuki's motors for the whole of India and it grants franchisees where it is not administratively feasible to do retail sales. Currently Matsyafed, a federation of government-sponsored cooperative is the only other distributor of Suzuki OBM.

### **Balancing between the social, political and the economic dimensions**

Vivek was convinced that members should not confine themselves to SIFFS alone. "While we are a specialist organisation with a clear mandate, the trade union represents the political dimension of the work. In SIFFS we recognised right from the beginning that mixing up the two was not correct or workable. However, given the importance of trade unions, SIFFS maintains a strong link with the trade union leadership and also encourages members to be active in the union," he said.

As part of the first restructuring in SIFFS, some economic activities were shifted to the district federation as it was seen as the business unit. The current CEO of SIFFS, Julian

Teelar, classifies SIFFS' current work into commercial and promotional activities. The commercial activities include boat building and OBM, and the promotional activity pertains to the extension of SIFFS network in Tamil Nadu. SIFFS employs around 200 people, some on a temporary basis and some on its roll. All the activities pertaining to monitoring of the society and microcredit are managed by the district federations. So the various businesses that SIFFS had started and which were expected to yield profit in due course of time (fish marketing, net supply, and ice plant) were shifted to the district federation.

According to Vivek, combining the economic and the promotional activities posed some challenges. The day-to-day business activities generate revenue, as against the promotional activities that need a grant support.

In the beginning, SIFFS was a hybrid model, where both economic and promotional work had to be undertaken by the same organisation. In later years there were several attempts to demarcate the boundaries. SIFFS is now an organisation with limited promotional activities and runs entirely on revenues generated from services provided to fishermen. The organisation is managed by an all-fishermen board and run by staff from the fishing community. While Vivek feels this a great achievement, he is apprehensive about SIFFS' ability to face future threats without external talent.

Vivek has a very interesting way of capturing the changing dynamics in the interactions with a professional working in a community-based organisation. The 'inside-outside' dynamics offers a great educative value to those interested in promoting peoples' organisation and struggle with the so called 'exit' strategy of the promoting organisation and of the professionals who midwife the birth of the new entity.

Vivek shared his journey and the ever changing roles and responsibilities, "When I started working in SIFFS, the then board comprised of fishermen who gave me almost a blank cheque. Over the years, the youth trained by SIFFS learnt to manage field-based activities in the societies and a few rose up to supervisory cadre. In this phase, the underlying message to me was - "Before you take any decision, why don't we talk it over!" This phase then led to the third phase in my relationship with the governing board. Here the clear message was, "Before you decide on any issue, you'd better take our permission!" While sharing this, Vivek emphasised that this clearly pointed to empowerment of the community rather than reducing the role of professionals like him.

## **Tsunami rehabilitation**

Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari districts in Tamil Nadu were the worst affected when tsunami hit the Indian coast in December 2004. Out of the 8,000 casualty in the country, around 6,000 were reported from a single district: Nagapattinam. At that time, SIFFS had a small presence among a few societies in Nagapattinam and a large network in Kanyakumari. In 2004, the Kanyakumari District Fishermen Sangam's Federation (KDFSF) had 48 fishermen societies and 2,368 small-scale fishermen members in 26 coastal villages. In Kanyakumari district, all fishermen were tsunami victims – everybody had suffered some loss - loss of life, boat, house or a combination of the three. Responding to this natural disaster, the board felt that SIFFS had to work for everybody in a nonpartisan manner and not just for their members.

There was a deluge of organisations and of funds. In the district of Nagapattinam, suddenly there were about 700 NGOs, whereas only six NGOs worked there earlier. None had a sectoral understanding, none knew what would happen if too many boats were given to the fishermen. SIFFS played a key role in coordinating with many agencies during this chaotic situation. SIFFS formed a partnership with SNEHA, a local NGO working with women in the fishing community.

Though SIFFS was acknowledged for its fisheries expertise, it had no previous disaster management experience. However, the arrival of senior development professionals with disaster management experience like Stan Thekaekara from the Nilgiris and Sushma Iyengar from Kutch, who identified themselves with SIFFS, enabled SIFFS to become a leader in tsunami relief work. Vivek became a go-to person for everyone. The funding to SIFFS suddenly increased manifold. In Vivek's words, "Other than the government and the Catholic church, we received the largest amount of funds: Rs 100 crore."

One of the major activities under post-tsunami work was building houses. According to Satish Babu, another IRMA alumnus, who had taken a sabbatical from his corporate career and stationed himself in Kanyakumari-Trivandrum for the post-tsunami work, the plan was to build 2,000 houses.

However as the reconstruction work progressed, the money did not suffice to cover costs of all the houses that SIFFS had committed to build. In Nagapattinam, though SIFFS started with a grant from a donor, due to various delays related to policy and land acquisition, the work was delayed and the donor backed out. In Nagapattinam, Swiss Red Cross funded the project, but in Kanyakumari, not many donors were ready to offer funds. SIFFS started with the relief and rehabilitation activity and were left with few hundred houses unsubscribed (no funding for the same) but still the houses were built.

Though a fairly large amount of money was mobilised during tsunami, SIFFS' capacity was stretched to its limit. The sudden turnabout of a few donors led to severe financial

stress for SIFFS, though their presence in the eastern and the western coasts had increased. SIFFS had to liquidate a few of its properties including its own building in Trivandrum to clear the loans of banks and financial institutions.

But apart from this setback, SIFFS' contribution to the rehabilitation work was phenomenal. According to Vivek, SIFFS played a larger-than-life role in the tsunami rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction work.

### **Peer feedback on Vivek's leadership and SIFFS' future**

John Kurian was privy to the processes that led to Vivek's recruitment and the subsequent years on the journey of both Vivek and SIFFS. He reminisced, "Vivek is a good public relations person. He knew how to handle fishermen – at their emotional level. Those are things which don't come naturally to many people. In a producer cooperative, time to time there will be issues, conflicts, misunderstandings, different perceptions. All these needs to be resolved otherwise things become very emotive, extremely polarizing. There was always a need for a person who could diffuse those things. Vivek was made for such a kind of role. He knew how to handle persons without direct confrontations, even when he didn't agree with what they said."

Liby Johnson, an IRMA alumnus who worked with SIFFS for a few years had interesting observations about Vivek's contribution to SIFFS' growth. "Vivek's understanding of the coastal ecosystem and its livelihood patterns is phenomenal. Another noteworthy trait is his candour. He has no qualms about admitting failures and mistakes, even when funding is at risk. The mandate of SIFFS is the mandate of fishermen and he has been instrumental in converting that mandate into action. Besides, Vivek demystified technology."

Vincent, a fisherman, who worked with SIFFS earlier and now leads the Deep Sea Fishermen Association said that SIFFS still missed Vivek. What is particularly perceived as a gap is Vivek's ability to network with a large number of external stakeholders.

According to Julian Teelar, Vivek knew every fisherman by name. "He is a patient listener. He trained us to run the fishermen society."

Sajith worked with the Kerala government and then came to SIFFS where he had interned. He narrated his experiences of working with SIFFS and Vivek. "After working with the government, coming to SIFFS was a sort of a culture shock for me. The level of autonomy was unbelievable. There was no hierarchy. When we embarked on forming new guidelines for Coastal Regulation Zone (2007), SIFFS facilitated extensive consultations. It was a massive intellectual effort that only Vivek could steer."

Satish Babu, a contemporary of Vivek who continues to volunteer, acknowledged that SIFFS was the first to bring in technology, while ensuring that the community owned the technology. "The dynamics in the sector is rapidly changing. The small fishermen are moving

into higher powered motors as also boats that require bigger capital investments. The strength of the community movements of the 1980s that gave birth to SIFFS is starkly depleting. We do have SIFFS and associated organisations that are managed by professionals who have emerged from the community. We do need experts for certain functions.. The social analysis of the fisheries sector from the perspective of a small artisanal fisherman is missing. Vivek's contribution is that of a visionary, a person who has so much tacit knowledge."

### **A new voyage**

Vivek left SIFFS in 2008, after a long career of 26 years. "I left SIFFS without any bad feelings. In fact on earlier occasions when I planned to quit, some crisis or the other pulled me back to SIFFS. The organisation is doing fine. People from the community trained over the years are at the helm of affairs."

According to Vivek, breaking the credit-market nexus impacting the small fisherman is an ongoing challenge. "As fishermen have moved from small boats to bigger boats with some degree of mechanisation, the investment thresholds have increased. This means that the credit programme has to be constantly re-engineered."

Vivek reminisced the evolution of his relationship with SIFFS in the post-2008 period, "Fortunately, despite my fears, my moving out did not lead to breakdown of relationship; in the long run it has strengthened my rapport with the community there. My relationship continues to be that of a friend and a resource person. If they need me, I respond as a trouble shooter."

### **Contribution to policy and sectoral work**

Marine fisheries are based on exploiting common pool resources. Hence managing the level of exploitation to ensure perennial benefit is important. Unfortunately, fisheries management in poor in India, and the situation is close to an open access system, which typically leads to what is well known as Hardin's tragedy of commons, where over extraction and destructive extraction go unchecked. Vivek has been conscious for long that an entirely different set of institutions are required to manage fisheries in the Indian context where the scale of management is very high on account of resource boundaries being large.

SIFFS' experiments after tsunami proved that the traditional village governance system, which still has a big say in the day-to-day fishing operations, is the best bet as the lowest rung of a multi-tiered structure. Vivek had learnt that a purely community-based

organisation cannot do this due to strong internal divisions within the fishing community. He said that some kind of co-management with the state is required.

A quest for an appropriate structure to manage fisheries through field-based action, has been Vivek's priority since he left SIFFS. This has taken him to the FAO, which provided him the opportunity to work with the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department in developing practical guidelines for co-management in Tamil Nadu and to initiate pilot projects.

### **Setting up of Fisheries Management Resource Centre (FISHMaRC)**

Before leaving SIFFS in 2008, Vivek presented the idea of FISHMaRC to the SIFFS board and got their approval. FISHMaRC was the result of the need for an organisation to take up promotion, advocacy and sustainable resource management. It started working with a reputed Gujarat-based organisation working with the fisher community in Kutch region. FISHMaRC was designed as a resource institution. In 2011, FISHMaRC started a project with the University of Amsterdam, on the conflicts between Sri Lankan and Indian fishermen in the Palk Strait, as part of Competition and Conflict on Natural resources, a project funded by the Dutch government. Currently, FISHMaRC is working with the University of East Anglia as part of a study on migratory fishermen. Vivek is very candid in remarking that FISHMaRC is currently a "notional organisation" with an office and some research projects.

### **Voice of sanity in conflict situations**

Vivek recalled one of his experiences, "I remember one such international exposure where two communities, both involved in fishing were discussing issue that affected them. It so happened that one fishermen community that was practicing fishing with 6 inch diameter net and the other community living in proximity had in practice a 5.5 inch diameter net. As a result, of course one community was losing fishing catch. During my exposure to Canada, I saw how this dispute was amicably resolved through discussion among the two communities, by fixing mutually acceptable net sizes. It was a great learning for me." This and many such experiences had helped Vivek to advocate for a participatory coastal system management.

### **Indo-Sri Lankan fishermen issue**

Vivek has been working on the Indo-Sri Lanka fisheries issues since 1996. Frequent arrest and detention of Tamil Nadu fishermen in Sri Lanka brought together many civil society organisations, leading to the formation of the Alliance for the Release of Innocent Fishermen (ARIF) in 1997. In the initial years, with SIFFS as the host organisation and Vivek as the convener, ARIF provided humanitarian and legal support to arrested fishermen. While the

Indian fishermen were arrested for trans-boundary fishing in the Palk Strait, Sri Lankan fishermen were being arrested in India for fishing in the Indian waters. ARIF provided the same support to Sri Lankan fishermen arrested in India and built a strong non-partisan image with good links to government agencies in both the countries.

Vivek's prior links with Sri Lankan NGOs working for fishermen helped him initiate dialogues at different levels in India as well as in Sri Lanka to resolve the problem of trans-boundary fishing. In 2004, ARIF organised a fisher-to-fisher dialogue in Colombo, with funding support from FAO, Rome. Both the governments were represented as observers as fishermen thrashed out the issues and came up with suggestions. Unfortunately, the tsunami and the resumption of the civil war in Sri Lanka scuttled the progress. With the civil war coming to an end in 2009, Vivek took the initiative again in August 2010 to organise the second fisher-to-fisher dialogue in Chennai. This dialogue resulted in a set of fresh recommendations for resolving the issue. The government of India then decided to take the fisher-to-fisher dialogue forward, as a joint initiative of the two governments. While this vindicated the approach of ARIF, it has not borne fruit as the governments have neither exhibited the sensitivity required to handle the issue nor shown the political will to act on fishermen's recommendations. Vivek continues to work on this issue, keeping close contacts with actors on both sides and is hopeful of finding a solution that would be fair to all concerned.

### **National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) and Coastal Regulation Zone**

Vivek has been an active supporter of the National Fishworkers Forum, an independent trade union of the traditional fishing communities of India. The NFF has used Vivek as its resource person on a regular basis. He was part of the NFF delegation that negotiated the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification 2011, with the Ministry of Environment and Forests. He played a role in incorporating fishermen's perspectives in the final notification. He also helped the NFF develop a position on the draft law on Marine Fisheries Management of the Government of India.

Vivek shifted his base to Chennai after 2008 though his association with SIFFS and its activities continues. He serves as a consultant to many national and international institutions that work with the fisheries sector including the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) for its post-tsunami livelihood project. The project envisages building new primary societies, district federations and strengthening the existing district federations.

In recent years, Vivek has acted as a bridge between NABARD and KDFS and Nagapattinam district federations, enabling the federations to receive soft loans from NABARD. This microcredit fund has given stability to the district federations and they have performed pretty well in the recent period. Vivek has also facilitated MAERSK fund a few small projects of SIFFS in the west coast.

## Reflecting on the long voyage

For this story, we met Vivek in February 2017 in Chennai for two days. We had long conversations. Vivek said self-effacingly that he was at the right place at the right time and that he acquired the tag of fisheries expert.

"My broad-based education combined with my overall developmental orientation has made me what I am today. No doubt Dr Kurien and IRMA education had a big influence on me. The group that founded the Marianad Cooperative - Dr John Kurien, Nalini Nayak, Father Kocherry and their colleagues - influenced me. Books such as *Strong society weak states* by Joel S. Migdal influenced my perceptions. I continue to read and update myself. I am fortunate to have had many opportunities for international exposure."

During our weeklong visit to Chennai and the coastal villages of southern Tamil Nadu and Kerala, we witnessed various moods of the Indian and Arabian Sea while interacting with members of the fishermen community. The long sea coast was dotted with various sizes of boats, kattumarams and trawlers that have been providing livelihoods to thousands of fisher folks. SIFFS' and Vivek's journey for over 35 years might look like a drop in the ocean. But the contribution of that drop to the wellbeing of the most marginalised artisanal fishermen is invaluable for its breadth and depth. Needless to say it would be difficult to fathom it in a few days of interactions and pen it down in few pages.

Vivek's contribution is best summed up in John's generous accolades for Vivek. "Vivek is probably one of the most knowledgeable persons today, about the Indian coast and fisheries, from the perspective of people, the NGO sector and from the perspective of the bureaucracy. If you ask me to pick one person who knows Indian fisheries, the problems thereof, and means to solve them, it is Vivekanandan without doubt."

## About V. Vivekanandan

- Championed the cause of small and artisanal fishermen, as CEO of South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS)
- Led SIFFS' massive post-tsunami rehabilitation efforts, by constructing 2,000 houses for fisher families and distributing over 700 fishing boats
- Initiated FISHMaRC to take up promotion, advocacy and sustainable resource management.
- Started boat building operations across five yards
- Contributes significantly to policy changes at the national and state level

V. Vivekanandan

South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS)

Karamana, Trivandrum

PIN: 695002

Phone: +91 471-2343711, 2 343178, 2345056

Fax: 0471-2342053

Email : [admin@siffs.org](mailto:admin@siffs.org)

[vivek@siffs.org](mailto:vivek@siffs.org)

<http://www.siffs.org>

**Written by Ajit Kanitkar and Nirmalya Choudhury**