

25 Years of the *Bay of Bengal News*

A success story in development journalism



The Bay of Bengal News (BBN) has entered upon its 26th year – after 80 issues, about 1 000 articles and several hundred photographs. This issue goes beyond the statistics to recall highlights of a quarter century of a small but power-packed newsletter. We have also recorded the perceptions of some readers about BBN – what it has meant to them, how well it has chronicled the many-faceted multi-disciplinary work of BOBP in helping small-scale fisheries and fisherfolk communities in the Bay of Bengal region.

I first came across the *Bay of Bengal News* during the late 1980s. An article on shrimp fry culture in West Bengal, India, caught my eye. I haven't missed another issue of BBN. It reported and analysed work of the Bay of Bengal Programme – concerning technologies and socio-economics in small-scale fisheries and the lives of fisherfolk communities in seven countries surrounding the Bay. The BBN was always well-researched, concisely and beautifully presented – a pleasure to go through. I carefully preserved every issue in a leather-bound jacket. Little did I realise that I would one day be the editor-publisher of the BBN.

In 1981, when Bay of Bengal News was born, small-scale fisheries was little-known and little documented. What it did for national economies, food and nutrition security and livelihoods was neither understood nor recognised. Over the years, BBN not only raised the profile of small-scale fisheries but became synonymous with it.

The Bay of Bengal News marks a happy blend of professional expertise in both fisheries and journalism. In other fisheries journals, scientists have doubled up as editors. Result: both readability and presentation have suffered.

The inputs that a talented journalist-editor can bring to a technical journal are many. He writes for the reader, something scientists normally don't manage to do. In fact simplicity, clarity and lucidity are the three characteristics of good writing, according to Somerset Maugham, who himself exemplified these three virtues. BBN considers these as essential. And brevity as well. At BBN we try hard to ensure that every word carries weight.

A few thoughts about editors. They have been compared to architects. Both turn out products that must be functional as well as attractive. Both must pay attention to detail. An

architect ensures that every brick or tile, every nut or bolt, is in the right place. An editor is fiercely particular too: fonts should be of the right size, shouldn't clash, columns should align, subheads should not be broken between lines. When an article opens with a two-page spread, the heading, sub-head and photograph should reinforce each other with a single message, not put out different messages.

The editor strives for maximum impact with every article. Is the article too dull? What can be done to liven it up? Would a photo essay lend an additional new dimension to the theme? How best can photographs for such an essay be organised? Would an anecdotal box brighten coverage? Can the artist come up with an imaginative illustration?

A professional, creative artist is indispensable for a magazine that takes design seriously. His perceptions of an article's message

and meaning may be entirely different from that of others. The editor-artist interactions can lead to wonderfully creative and imaginative ideas for eye-stopping visuals. This is behind the presentation style of *Bay of Bengal News*. The BOBP has been enlightened enough to respect professionalism in preparing and presenting information. Its sagacity has been well rewarded.

Should a fisheries magazine focus so much on the minutiae of presentation? The success of *Bay of Bengal News* provides the answer.

It is not surprising that *Bay of Bengal News* has surpassed the technical reports of BOBP in popularity. Even scientists prefer to read the short, illustrated summaries of technical work that appear in the BBN rather than the more thorough and rigorous scientific reports – at least initially. Very often, of course, they first read the BBN article, then go to the report.

The *Bay of Bengal News* was an important dissemination tool of the BOBP. It remains so during the BOBP's IGO *avatar*. Inter-country co-operation is an important feature of our content today. So is awareness-raising. We frequently bring important publications (of the UN, of international agencies) to the attention of the region. So also

important meetings. With the present issue, we begin a series of articles on leading fisheries institutions in the region.

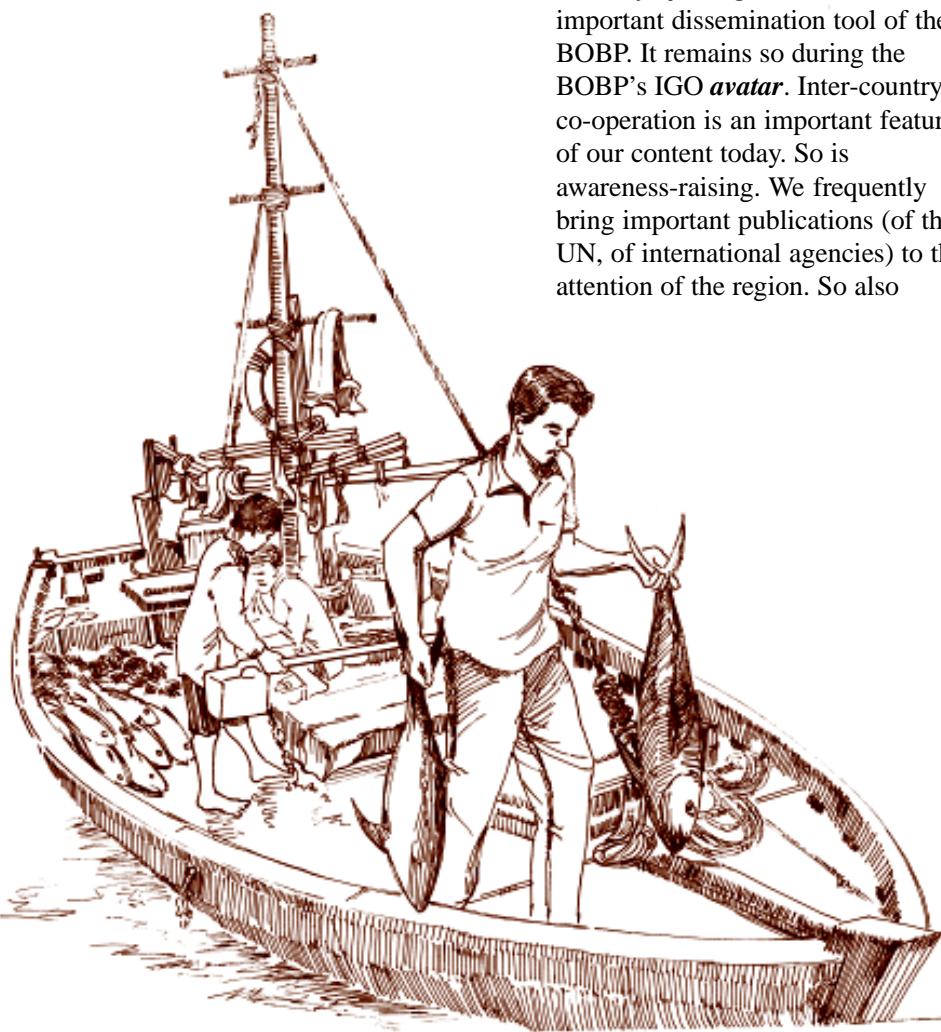
In 2001, the BOBP produced a CD-ROM from the first 71 issues of BBN (1981- 2000). It was an instant hit and continues to be in great demand. We plan to update the CD-ROM with later issues of the BBN. Eventually, our website (www.bobpigo.org) will also contain back and current issues of BBN. This will enable universal access to *Bay of Bengal News*.

During its two main periods of transition – between the second and third phases, between the third and IGO phase – the BBN was irregular, and a few issues had to be combined. This was unavoidable, with staff and activities having been reduced to a bare minimum. But during these periods, we were snowed under with queries and complaints, a reflection of what BBN meant to readers. With the IGO now having been established on a firm footing, we can promise unerring regularity in publication and periodicity.

Apart from changing subject orientation, BBN has kept pace with technology as well. Today, the pre-press part of newsletter work is done entirely in-house. Our only interaction with the printing press occurs at the very end, when we hand over a CD. This is in striking contrast to the every-day interaction during the first decade of BBN. In future, we plan to reach fisherfolk communities as well, through vernacular editions of the BBN.

The *Bay of Bengal News* has been a keen and conscientious chronicler of development – both of BOBP and of small-scale fisheries. It will remain so, and continue to pursue the highest standards of development journalism.

—Y S Yadava



Tuna landings in Malé, Maldives

