

As Others See *Bay of Bengal News*

Some more reactions to 25 years of BBN

“The Bay of Bengal News and I”

I have the rather unique distinction of beginning my professional career with an article for *Bay of Bengal News* (1990). Then, after a decade, I found myself again in the BBN, this time as the author of a cover story about a group of fishers who lived along with their families on a type of boat called the shoe-dhoni in the Godavari belt.

The shoe-dhoni story, when it appeared, was a hit. But I particularly enjoyed a story that my father brought home on the day when one of his senior colleagues walked into his room waving the magazine in front of his face, asking in a dismayed tone: “How could some North Indian working in the BOBP have known about these boat people? They live right under our noses and have been invisible to us for so long.” It did not help that I inverted the convention and put my family name behind my proper name, but once my father explained the mystery to his senior colleague, the gentleman relaxed visibly and read the story all over again with a more appreciative frame of mind.

In fact, that particular issue of the BBN carried not one, but two of my articles; the other was about another very interesting speciality of central Andhra Pradesh coast – fish smoking. This brought me to the attention of the powers-that-be at the BOBP’s newly started Post-Harvest Fisheries Project, who were impressed enough to give me a contract and fulfil my long-standing ambition to join the immortals at the Bay of Bengal Programme.

Of course, the dreams of immortality melted when confronted by the cold reality of life and the

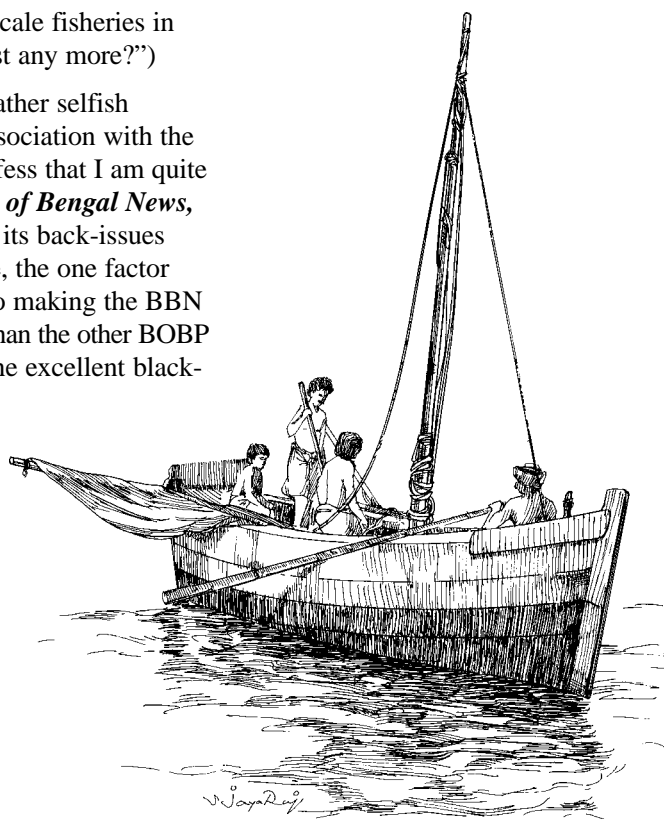


immortals themselves later moved on to other heavens. But the BBN survived and so did my association with it. I wrote many more pieces for the BBN in the intervening years. One of the last pieces I did was a kind of obituary of the Bay of Bengal Programme. (December 1999 – “Bay of Bengal Programme, a farewell and a beginning.”) The BBN survived the FAO-BOBP too and has continued to soldier on, albeit in a vastly different form. My March 2000 piece was another kind of obit. (“Small-scale fisheries in India: does it exist any more?”)

Apart from this rather selfish account of my association with the BBN, I must confess that I am quite an old fan of *Bay of Bengal News*, and keep reading its back-issues frequently. To me, the one factor that contributes to making the BBN evergreen (more than the other BOBP publications) is the excellent black-

and-white and colour photographs, sketches, drawings and pen portraits that so lushly adorned almost every page. Artists like E Amalore and S Jayaraj almost single-handedly perfected a unique art form that can only be called the ‘BOBP School of Art’. And as time passes, their drawings acquire new importance (tinged with pathos) as the way of life they depicted becomes tragically irrelevant.

It might not be an exaggeration to say that some of the pictures carried in the BBN were perhaps the first (and even the last) attempt at



recording a particular aspect of life in the fishing communities and preserving it for posterity. I remember an old man in Chandipur-at-sea in Orissa who flipped through the pages of an old issue of the BBN (which I carried with me for reference). When he saw a particular photograph, he exclaimed, "But they don't do this any more!" He became quite wistful after that and told me several interesting stories about how life used to be different not so long ago.

Crowded with people and activities

An important point that strikes anyone who goes back to the old issues of the BBN (especially those from the 1980s) is how crowded it used to be: crowded with people, activities, news and, most strikingly, with an infectious sense of optimism. So many things were taking place at so many levels and in so many places that the editor must have had a tough time to reduce the information to manageable proportions.

No wonder then, that the sense of nostalgia that BBN brings to people like my father who had lived through it all is not much different from going back to an old family photo album or reading an old diary; the BBN is in many ways a family heirloom to a whole generation of people. I know an officer in the Department of Fisheries in Orissa who has got the old volumes of the BBN bound in calf-leather and preserves them so carefully that even his wife is forbidden from touching it! Tragically, it was people like this officer – the smaller cogs in a giant system for whom receiving the BBN every three months was not just a means to keep up with the latest developments, but also a symbol of the recognition of their worth – who had been left out of the mailing lists that were culled during the 1990s.

In any case, by the 1990s, the jostling for space in the magazine of people and news and activities subsided and the magazine itself took on a more sober and even



brooding demeanour, notwithstanding the switchover to colour and glossy paper. Its publishing standards, always first-rate, remained the envy of the more commercial journals (as the editor of a well-reputed fisheries magazine in the country once told me, the BBN in its heyday was a formidable rival).

But there was no denying that the newsletter itself became more introspective. And as it entered into the 21st century, it became even more withdrawn, confining itself almost to a matter-of-fact record of the goings on at workshops and other events organised by BOBP and its successor organisation, the BOBP-IGO. The changing tone might be a reflection of the changing fortunes of its parent organisation, but I also tend to see it as a reflection of the changes that have taken place in the larger world, which do perhaps call for more sobriety, more circumspection and less optimism from everyone of us.

So what is the relevance of the BBN in the present time? What does it seek to address and who does it address? Obviously, these are difficult questions, but these must be confronted and addressed if the magazine were to fulfil a useful purpose. Most of the BBN has been written in-house, but it served a few other purposes as well: first, along with its more top-heavy cousins (working papers, reports, manuals) that the BOBP also fathered, it gave the small-scale fishing communities of the east coast of India (and elsewhere in the Bay of Bengal region) a recognition that they richly deserved. It also gave flesh and blood to a way of life that had gone almost unnoticed for a long time

and made it possible for outsiders to relate to, and empathise with, a whole new culture that was yet so close to their own.

Now, as the same people and their cultures face new threats, the BBN must re-invent itself to address their needs in a meaningful manner, as it has done in the past, and this might necessitate broad-basing the magazine to source from, and cater to, a wider range of people and organisations.

– *Venkatesh Salagrama*
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Management, Kakinada

“My favourite fisheries publication”

I have been a regular reader of BBN from 1980. I know it as a useful and educative chronicler of BOBP's work concerning technology, resources, socio-economics, extension, education, biology and management in all the member-countries.

“Glimpses into BOBP projects” were short fact-filled descriptions of activities in the seven member-countries. The statistical factsheets on fisheries were nutshell summaries of the entire fisheries of a state or country in a single page. There were many technology reviews, socio-economic analyses, stories on women in fisheries, personality profiles, World Food Day articles. Every issue of BBN was in fact a wide window opening out into seven member-countries. The evocative photographs captured event and action very effectively. They also mirrored the many moods of fishermen and fisherwomen, ranging from elation to despair.

Over the years, BBN has changed from black-and-white to colour, from litho offset to art paper, but its dedication to insightful reportage and analysis and striking photo coverage remains. It is my favourite fisheries publication.

– *M Paramasivam*
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