

HOW IT ALL BEGAN: Historical Stories

- A glimpse into the founding days & initial struggles of GRE.NFF.WFFP- the Movements among small fisher people.

Stories that matter- presented by Xavier Pinto at the SriLanka Training sessions in March 2025.

Introduction: It is said “no one can change history”. As founder member of the NFF-1978 National Fish workers Forum; and later founder member of the World Forum of Fisheries people -WFFP-1987; I am glad to present a glimpse into history.

Let the young pick up the threads, nets & ropes! Haul up the fish, sustain the ocean, keep the legacy alive! We are FISHERS, WOMEN AND MEN TOGETHER.

I begin with a song. All of us believe in a God. or a God-image ...Allah, Buddha, Khrishna, Mahaveer, GuruNanak for me it is Jesus Christ. So, I sing this song.

Bind us together God, bind us together
With chords that cannot be broken
Bind us together God, bind us together,
Bind us together with love

We are all Fishers together
We all struggle together
We all hold hands with each other

We are bound to one another.
We go fishing together
Unite with others, no matter.

Bind us together God behind us together
With chords that cannot be broken
Bind us together God bind us together ,
Bind us together with love

As I sing this song, relevant to our gathering today we are assembled from various parts of Sri Lanka and the countries of the world wanting to learn; wanting to keep alive the struggle and the issues that matter most to us.

I would like to place before you, for you, a basic principle of living & working which I have followed over the years. Three points:

We require a **VISION**: Where shall we arrive as we meet, as we gather, as we train, as we put our strengths together. Where do we want, we arrive?

It is most important to keep our **ENERGY** intact; so, the level of energy to be used, to be expounded, to be spent, for the cause of fisheries and fish workers -women and men; and their families; this energy has to be preserved and enhanced. Once you have a vision. Once you have the energy the third falls into place

The **WORK** itself falls into place, with ease.

So, I am very happy to share with you how it all began in the form of a few stories.

These stories are not necessarily in chronological order except for the first one.

The stories tell us of the tenacity, the grit, the determination of leaders in the fisheries movement as I have known it. And I'm very happy to see in 2025 so many years after the first seeds of getting together were sown that we can still think together, work together, get our energies together for the benefit of the sector we call the fish workers men & women & to stand for the sustainability and ecology of the ocean water bodies, The Maritime world.

STORY 1. It all began with an environmental issue in the state of Goa in the southern districts along the foothills and near the ocean. In the village of Velsao. On top of the hill; it is still there; is ZUARI the agrochemical factory. They were sending their effluents into the ground in a deep huge mud pond. These leaked into the streams of water underground and came up and polluted the well in the village. At first when people began to fall sick, they did not know why; but very quickly someone said the water is polluted. Let's find out. Not knowing what to do they approached the only learned man they thought was in the neighbouring village. He was a teacher in a reputed Don Bosco school. His name Mr Mathany Saldanha. Mathany was quick to look at the issues. He was outraged with this firm of injustice. He raised a hue & cry with the authorities and got the people together to protest. He offered a solution. Please line that pond with plastic or stone or metal and the chemicals evaporate into the sky. Do not let them enter the wells on the Earth. Huge protests. Demands to close down the factory were made. Things were not happening till ultimately the authorities relent and worked their way to change the effluents output.



In the meantime, a new problem arises - the trawl boat. The trawl net was invented in 1944 after World War II when sea mines were dropped into the ocean and one smart scientist from Norway discovered that if they make a net to drag the ocean floor, they could drag all the sea mines and end that problem. It happened. The vision was invented & executed; but the fallout of it has consequences today. With the tracking of the sea mines they also found fish, coral, shell fish, lobster, shrimp/ prawn in the net! So that's part of the idea: after we have finished with the mines let us keep the dragnet going and do some fishing! Disaster for poor & small fishers. The only problem is that rich people could afford the trawl net and boat and they didn't know where the fish are! So, they were always fishing in the waters of the traditional fishing community. Who don't catch fish bigger than they should; and know where the fish are? That's exactly what happened on the coast of Goa and India. Trawl boats began fishing in shallow waters; the people in Velsao village were upset. They put an appeal to Mr. Mathany Saldanha again. Again Mathany decided he should talk to the authorities first. Nothing was happening; till one day he said let us form ourselves into a better group and see what we can do. That was the time the GRE; the Goa Shore Siene Net fisherman got together: GOYCHEA RAMPONNKARAMCHO EKVOTT. That was the very troubled beginning of a movement which later flourished; to go into the NATIONAL FISH WORKERS FORUM: NFF; and as we have it today the WORLD FORUM OF FISHER PEOPLE: WFFP.

STORY 2.

The trawl boats did not stop fishing in the shallow waters of Velsao. The local fisherman were very upset. They waited. One day they intercepted a trawler in the shallow waters. Sent the men working on board(they are hired workers , not professional fishers) to safety ; burnt that boat & their nets; and lest they have trouble they escaped from the village into the hills that midnight. I lived in a village about 45 km away . That midnight there was a knock on my door. Two fishermen came to tell me the issue and the problem and that I should come immediately to the village .



So in the middle of the night on my two wheeler I went to Velsao to find early in the morning this situation of EMERGENCY in the village . Police crawling all around ; dogs have come to sniff where the culprits were ; but the men were all in the hills. I became the caretaker for the Fisher women and the children for at least three weeks staying in the village looking after the security issues asking the policeman when they came do they have a warrant to search ; asking the names of the policeman ; writing them down that in case we want to appeal we can say this person came to do this etc. Show us a warrant? They had no warrant for anything. We cleared them off. There were three sisters / nuns of the Holy Family order in the village ; so together with them we made sure that the women and the children were looked after safely day & the night. I kept alive and awake lest the police use the law and come to investigate in the night. As all this happened I was not happy to see that the policeman came and were harassing the woman. What do the women do? They isolated one policeman ; they trash him gently ; they removed his medals and his cap , embarrassed him ; and they sent him away without hurting or harming him.

The next morning the police team came to look for who had done this. The point of the fact is that the cap & the medals were entrusted to the fisherman ; who came back in the middle of the night to inform me . But with my advice they were able to return these insignia and they decided to go and keep it at the parish church steps, at night & return to the hills. Early in the morning when the police dogs came they sniffed ; and directly went to the church steps. There was the caps and the insignia. The policeman were very happy that they found what they were looking for. Now they must find the culprits. So it was the normal idea which I shared with the men who had kept those things there that after you keep those insignia ,the cap keep the medals ; go back to the ocean and swim away, then climb the hills . Don't go by Land to the hills and that's what they did. The dogs came. The Dogs kept running with the policeman towards the ocean. They reached the low tide level and the scent of the fisherman was over!

I said to them I don't know where the fisherman are now . You got your insignia and your cap so please leave us in peace. We will take this to the law.

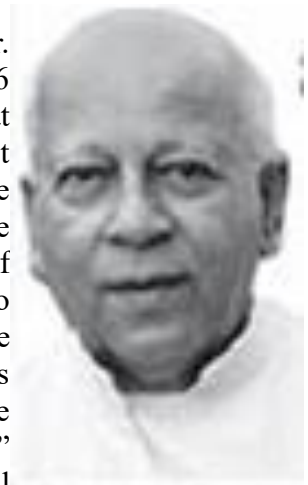
It was a great opportunity to be present among the distressed Women ,wives ,elder daughters ,Sisters , nuns and to get children together at various times after their school show them some magic , teach them some peoples songs , make them dance , keep the spirit alive ,that apparently their dads were okay in the hills. The emergency issue died out . Mr Saldanha was with them all the time in spirit and with the law fighting with the authorities to say justice is what we want and the trawlers have no right to come and fish in our shallow water , cutting our nets; destroying our boats and troubling our families.

STORY 3. .

As we began to get used to the idea of an Organised MOVEMENT among the local traditional fisherman and women as a UNION of the shore-siene fisherman of Goa we decided that some forms of protest must carry on so that the government would hear us , listen to us , and do what we would like on behalf and for the fishing communities. So we devised with the leadership of Mr Saldanha the CHAIN HUNGER STRIKE at the capital of Goa near a statue of the deceased chief minister of Goa Mr Bandonkar. Sitting around with a little tent that we were able to build for the shade in the sun , the hunger strike was organised by us to have at least 10 to 15 people fishermen women from each village of the coast of Goa; each day. The traditional fishers traveled to Panjim and sat there around/near the statue for the day ; on the open street with banners and posters from 9 am to 4 pm . The chain hunger strike lasted for a good 380 days beyond one year. I was closer to this point of the hunger track in my village Porvorim ; just 6 km away so with my daily trips standing in solidarity putting aside all other work I came in for some flack ; that some said what about your church work? I said : my church work is for people as long as people are liberated and they're free from the difficulties that they experience from people who harass them; that is church Work. The days I'm talking of was 1978-79 ; when there were no bridges across the river Mondvi. I had to cross by a flat bottom FERRY BOAT ; driving into it with a steep slope on a metal ramp; and emerging the other side up that same ramp . But that was the mode of crossing Mandovi those days. The beauty of how people managed the systems of movement was amazing . They did not grumble ; we enjoyed the time on the water , we met others also crossing , chatted with them, many of them just pedestrians and we are happy that things are now gone into development. Now instead of one , we have two bridges crossing the river Mandovi.

STORY 4.

The Chain hunger strike was going on at the foot of the statue of Mr. Bhandarkar in the city of Panjim. This was closer to my place of stay, just 6 km away. Myself and the leadership including Fr. Desmond deSouza the great thinker of how people must be liberated, got together and decided that we must try to decrease the harassment and difficulties they face, we must continue protesting in different ways. So we devised yet another form of protest while the hunger strike was going on. On a given day 40 fishermen turned up in the city of Panjim. Together with Fr. Desmond (and me in one group; 40 others and two other priests in another group the NEXT DAY) was directing the whole issue we marched around the city, carrying protest placards, yelling, shouting slogans against the government and the oppressors; asking for justice, demanding the rights of the fishing communities. Distributing an information and "demands" leaflet. We knew what could happen. We got ARRESTED for troubling civil society in the capital of Panjim. So, 40 Fishermen together with Fr. Desmond and me, got arrested, taken to the Panjim police station for an overnight stay. It actually happened 24 hours that we were there. I don't wish to tell you the conditions in this one room cell but something is important to know of how the law of the state deals with humans: We had one room. 40 of us to sleep on the floor. There was one toilet for all of us which you would have to hold your nose to enter. Water shut down at 5 pm. This is the way the law looks after or doesn't (!) people who are struggling for justice, standing for the rights of those who are poor, 24 hours in the prison cell of Panjim police station. We were taken, the next day, to the courts of law in Panjim city. There we were declared ARRESTED. Sentenced to 4 days in the central jail of Aguada. This was the first batch of 40 men with Fr. Desmond deSouza and myself. We were quite calm and cool. In the Prison we were looked after okay. We spent a lot of time drawing figures and images on the floor. We couldn't take any charts and boards or paper or pen. But we were allowed chalk which we asked the jailers to give us. I drew figures on the floor, of what is a Trawler? How do they mess up your life? What are you fighting about? How do trawlers destroy ecology & our ocean beds? What are we fighting for? How to get united? What kind of slogans to raise? Slogans that are aggressive enough, but true enough for the liberation of you all. And remember no violence on the streets of any kind. And please remember you are 40 but we are fighting for 40,000 people, including our women and children. So this was the time and we could say we were arrested for standing for the rights of fish workers only because we want to SET THEM FREE!



STORY 5.

As the Goemchea Ramponnkaramcho Ekvott (GRE) flourished, collected strength, it was known among the fishing communities of Goa as a factor of uniting them. Mr. Mathany Saldanha was still in the leadership. It was decided that we talk and meet other traditional fishing communities to find out their situation. So it was decided to choose me to travel in 1978, the entire coast of India. I met leaders and fishing communities without telling them in advance I was coming. I shared with them about what issues we faced in Goa. Listened to what similar issues they faced. I traveled by train and bus

and road from Gujarat; down the western coast turning the Kanyakumari Peninsula and going right up to Calcutta. With the limited way in which I could move and travel I was able to meet in each village some fishing leaders. It was all new to them. Who is this man coming from Goa? One man; me; what do you have to say to us. I'm travelling with the minimum of luggage; ready to walk distances along the coast and meet fishing leaders. Many villages among themselves, no leadership as such. The leaders emerged only because I was able to put into their minds that the matters of leadership/planning are needed to set people free or oppressed.

I managed to convince & get together 25 people- mostly already in some form of leadership; others just 'Elders' sent by the people. Under the leadership of Mathany Saldanha we met at the AICUF [All India Catholic University Federation] House in Chennai in August 1978. We decided that 15 August would be a good date to establish what we called the national movement of the fishing community in India. As the 25 of us MEN got together; it was unfortunate at that time NO women were either in leadership or considered not good enough to lead. And that in retrospect is a great pity. As our meeting developed into understanding one another each

of the men put forward their issue. The fishing system in Tamil Nadu South India is different. They have logs of wood tied together which float. An unsinkable boat. CATTU-MARAM = Cattu means Tie. Maram means Tree. So logs of the trees are tied together, unsinkable, unprecedented, natural. Now the world has taken on that word in a different way: CATAMARAN!! Other fishers had different kinds of boats. Plank boats, nailed together and bonded with certain bitumen seals, wooden planks, boats carved out of one tree...etc. So with all the discussions we came up with a very complicated title. As we were coming up with the title; we said we have to talk and keep in mind the sustainability of fish. So the first title appeared very complicating and very long: National Forum for Cattumaram & Country Craft Fishermens Rights and Marine Wealth. There had to be the start somehow! Down the years we were successful in changing fishermen into fishers... then Fisher people....then fish workers.. As the movement grew and we met more often to strategize and plan; we discovered that once we train and tell the people on the coasts of India that all of us are TRADITIONAL we don't have to describe the kind of boats they use, as long as they are small fishers (not to be mixed up with the 'enemy' trawlers) as long as they keep maintaining the sustainability of the fish. And slowly and surely we came down to the title over the years of national fish workers. NFF. That's where we stand today having established that forum in Chennai at that meeting on 15 August 1978.



Story 6.

By this time famous , now become leader , Thomas Kocherry also a catholic priest became part of the national fish workers struggle. Why did you not come for that first initial meeting of 1978. I met him as I traveled the coast of I did in 1978; in a small fishing village near Trivandrum , Poothura; together with 2 other Priests living together. In that village/ church they had also discovered the difficulties of their local traditional fishing community. Those days with the leadership of Tom and the others they got together a group so that at least they could sustain themselves as a family. Tom and the two priests with him & nine other fishermen formed a COOPERATIVE. The 12 men owned one boat. They went fishing every day. When the fish came ashore they sorted it out. Divided it into 12 shares and each



of the fisherman had the right to take their share and do what they liked. Mostly they would sell the whole lot to the market keeping what they require for themselves at family life and that's the way Tom was able to encourage those fishermen to stay together , to stick together . That cooperative system still holds having started in Poothura; throughout the coast of Kerala . So as I, Desmond & Mathany went along ; Thomas Kocherry together with us joined the national fish workers forum. Tom had that special leadership of understanding the issues of fishers everywhere . So was elected as Chair of the NFF at a general body meeting ; after the tenure of Mathany. As we rallied together, studied issues together and looked at issues together he decided that he'll go and visit certain parts of the world where he had heard of the kind of problems we faced in India. . After contacting , travelling to & meeting leaders of small fishers ; he was able to get together leaders in what we said would be a meeting of the world fishers of small nature and so in November 1997 we got together leaders from at least 16 parts of the world. I organised the meeting in New Delhi at a social service Centre . With social, thinkers and partners encouraging us to set fisherman free & set people free ; the first ever WORLD FORUM OF FISHER PEOPLE was born AT THIS MEETING. We decided that the day we concluded our meeting 21 November 1997, we would like to establish as WORLD FISHERIES DAY. I'm very happy to say that , that idea has caught on in the social issues calendar of the whole world . 21st November is marked as world fisheries Day .

We are present today in March 2025 in Negombo at the premises of the national fisheries solidarity of Sri Lanka . This is this great occasion when we hold ourselves together , when we renew our dedication when we look at the young people here who can become the strong future leadership of movement .

Leadership begins, Leadership keeps going , Leadership has to be passed on. It cannot be forced and the passing on leadership depends on how the present leaders show the vision , show the energy they have , and above all DO the work that they are serious about.

STORY 7.

I'm very happy to state that leaders emerged from the initial meeting in Chennai at AICUF House, 1978. With the formation of the world form fisher people (WFFP) other coastal towns and fishing people who did not know about Nff; heard about us. They

open their eyes and were happy to associate with Nff. I made a second round collecting these people having NFF annual meetings of the national fish workers for different places. We met in Calcutta, we met in Orissa, we met in Chennai, we met in Goa, we met in Kerala, we met in West Bengal, we met in Gujarat. So as these meetings began moving to different points; the press was involved covering us; and our stance on Sustaibale small scale fishers. In each place that we met we made sure we'd have some form of a march or a protest in the town; one evening with banners, plac-cards; with plenty of

fishermen coming to join their opinion, to voice their demands; all based on the father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent protests SATYAGRAHA. You say what you want to say? You say it in the strong words. You don't mince your words. You don't go violent. You come across as people who are demanding the freedom from oppression; with all these thoughts leaders emerged. Hare Krishna Debnath was a refugee from the Bangladesh war of 1971. He became a citizen of India. The EMERGENCY of Indira Gandhi affected the progress of our movement as NFF. In spite of that, at the next meeting of the NFF Hare Krishna emerged as the next leader of the NFF; after Thomas Kocherry. Others following Hare Krishna were Mr. N.D. Koli, from Maharashtra. We had Rambhabhai Patil, also from Maharashtra. We had several other leaders who very faithfully kept coming to the NFF meetings. Some of them were going for the WFFP meetings in some parts of the world, together with Thomas Kocherry and myself as 'founder members'. Herman Kumara of NAFSO, also, founder member of then WFFP, has been a very active group striving for this small fisheries sector. From Pakistan was present the very vocal Mohamed Ali Shah, Pakistan Fishworkers Union leader. One very supportive part of the fisheries world has been and still are South Africa leaders. They were there for the formation of the first world Forum of fisher people in 1997. Active among them was Andy Johnson.

They still are in tandem with us; they are represented at this meeting in Negombo these days together with other people who are scholars, researchers, writers, mentors of what is the movement of the World Forum of Fisher people.

In the best of my memory I have shared with you the history of the movement. I apologise that I still may have left out some milestones, some people who were there.

I'd like to SING FOR YOU A SONG which is composed in Hindi. One of the languages of my country India. It salutes comrades holding hands together, saluting them, asking them to be honest about the



harnesses of injustice in society, to break free towards freedom & justice and guide the nation (like with a Stirrup in the horses mouth) towards freedom.

SATHIOM SAALAM HAI !

Comrades/companions we Salute you!

This is the gist of the freedom song in English:

Comrades/companions we Salute you!

The freedom of our nation is in your hands.

Admit that matters of caste & language keep you pressed down

Break these bonds , choose matters of freedom & liberation

Comrades/companions we Salute you!