

# A whale of a tale

**ISSUE** An evening of storytelling organised by Eric Miller was part of an effort to reinvent Chennai's Nochikuppam

Turning from the teeming sea of traffic on the Marina past the Lighthouse I was recently plunged into a sea of fishy stories and songs in Chennai's 'flag-bearer' village of Nochikuppam. The indefatigable Eric Miller, folklorist of the World Storytelling Institute, had gathered together some ancient mariners and feisty fishwives in the compound of an unremarkable community hall.

In a live demonstration of boat-building, men hauled in five udaya wood logs and put them together before you could say 'kattu maram!' Above them appeared a film of this audacious boat-cum-raft with a three-member crew. Sitting half in and half out of the water, they got their muscles going by sucking in energy from the earth and sky with every breath and letting it out in a rhythmic chant of "Olasa! Elelo! Olasa!.."

And then came a whale of a tale — "...For a third time, the fisherman drew in his net, and it felt very-very heavy! He was elated! A *timingilam*, surely! Puffing and panting and singing his thanks to God, he pulled the net into his kattumaram — No whale! Just a dingy brass bottle! Whoosh! Out came an angry ghost, determined to kill his rescuer for taking so

long to turn up..." This fishy yarn, redolent of the Arabian Nights, was told in pungent Madras Tamil (and translated onscreen). Embellished with local wisecracks by the storyteller Nachchatran — otherwise known as S. Muthuramalingam, vice-principal of the AMK Polytechnic College — it's a familiar story for Nochikuppam's fishermen. They haven't been catching much fish lately.

Next came the fisherman Arulmozhi's stirring rendering of the exploits of the empire builders Raja Raja and Rajendra Chola. This story is locally prized as a morale-booster for youngsters going to sea.

## Brave fishermen

Certainly, the roaring Bay of Bengal off the Marina is no pretty cove for touristy sports. Its dangers are well-known, and the brave deeds of fishermen are part of Madras lore. Efforts to improve their lives have come in sporadic waves from each government. In the 1960s and 1970s, tenements were constructed for fishermen, many of whom promptly sub-let them and moved back to their beach-side shacks. Atrociously maintained and falling apart, the tenements are to be replaced by



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others for "genuine" fishermen, with temporary shelters provided to facilitate the move. The fishermen have memories of police firing in the mid-1980s, following their refusal to make way for the takeover of their strip of shore. For the 'beautification' of the Marina, and the entry of trawlers.

"Fishing is a hard way to make a living. My son won't be a fisherman," says one man. Rules protecting the coastal 10 km zone reserved for small fishermen and containing the spawning fields are not easily enforced, since there is no fishing Coast Guard. The women on the beach show me small

sand-encrusted heaps of silver and blue-green 'kavalai' fish. The catch has been shrinking. As her disgruntled son trudges over the sand with his almost empty net, one woman blames the tsunami and pollution. An old fisherman says over-fishing is depleting the supply.

The community is not averse to change. Most have had some years of schooling.

They have taken to the roomier, less ecologically destructive, and certainly safer new boats issued after most kattumarams were lost in the 2005 tsunami. Some get jobs on the big boats. "Young peo-

ple are already hiring out computers in their shacks to show video games and run email centres...Making good money, too," says Miller. "We tell them to make their own video games about the sea here, their way of life, and about fishing... It's only a matter of time before they'll be running videoconferencing, and virtual study centres..."

## Dream project

This American-born Chennai-vaasi is talking about a future Marina Beach Complex — the pride of Chennai circa 2020. A 'green' tourist hotspot with state-of-the-art facilities for a virtual study of Tamil and culture here and abroad, along with a 'living museum' of boat-building, fish ecology and fishing; weather and satellite information centre; gift shops with fishing-related paintings and photos, and restaurants featuring fresh fish cuisine, minus alcohol.

This visionary proposal has been submitted to the State Government, complete with an integrated ground plan drawn up by the architect Benny Kuriakose.

Come to think of it, why shouldn't Nochikuppam reinvent itself? Moken and Phuket in Thailand are successful post-tsunami makeovers. This story-telling session is part of the net Eric Miller has thrown, with the glittering 'fish' of his optimism... Or, will this be another one that got away?

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