

Essay: Dr M.C. Nandeesh -The Man Who Brought Gender Awareness to the Asian Fisheries Society

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The death of Dr Mudnakudu C. Nandeesh in December 2012 at the age of 55 left a deep void in the hearts of many. His personal and professional gifts are very much missed, especially among those who are now active in gender in aquaculture and fisheries. Among many other impacts, Nandeesh made unique and lasting professional contributions to gender awareness and initiated a steadily growing series of gender activities by the Asian Fisheries Society. I know some of the story of what happened because I was personally drawn into these activities by Nandeesh. In this essay, I will recount the history as I saw it happen. It is a good example of what one person, with vision, drive and inter-personal skills can set in train.

A brief professional biography

After his Masters graduation Nandeesh's professional career began in teaching at the College of Fisheries, Mangalore while he undertook his Doctorate in Zoology/Fisheries from Visva-Bharati University, Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India. Armed with a new Ph.D, he then moved into international development in Cambodia, first working for 5 years (1992-1997) with Padek, the Partnership for Development in Kampuchea. After this, he worked on two major projects for CARE in Bangladesh, LIFE (Locally Intensified Farming Enterprise) Project (1998-2000) and GOLDA (Greater Options for Local Development through Aquaculture) Project (2000-01).

Equipped with a great depth of field and international experience, and connections through his active participation in professional conferences and other events, Nandeesh returned to India in 2001 as Professor and Department-in-Charge, College of Fisheries, Central Agricultural University, Tripura State, where he remained until 2008 and built its programmes and institutional culture. From 2008-2010, Nandeesh consulted to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and others. In 2010 until the time of his demise, he was Dean of the Fisheries College and Research Institute, Tamil Nadu, India. During this time, he worked to establish the Tamil Nadu Fisheries University, an undertaking that came to fruition in 2012 and

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which he was scheduled to lead as Vice Chancellor. Nandeeshha was the Special Officer of the newly formed Tamil Nadu Fisheries University. The order appointing him as Vice Chancellor by the Government of Tamil Nadu was delivered to him on the 26th of November 2012. The Fisheries Minister, the Secretary of State and also the Vice Chancellor of the Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, of which he was a part before becoming the Special Officer, visited him in the hospital - congratulated him and wished him a speedy recovery.

He was also a board or council member of several regional and global professional bodies such as the Asian Fisheries Society, the World Aquaculture Society and the development charity Aquaculture without Frontiers.

Much could be written about the influence that Nandeeshha brought to all his professional fields, but I will focus on how he motivated gender in aquaculture and fisheries as this is where I knew him best. This is a microsm of his influence in education, research and development in aquaculture and fisheries, but also has the unique feature of having generated a new network of professionals in the Asian Fisheries Society (AFS) in times when similar networks did not form in other similar professional societies.

Impact on gender awareness in AFS and beyond

In 1990, the Asian Fisheries Society Indian Branch (AFSIB), which Nandeeshha had been instrumental in helping establish, held their first ever workshop on “Women in Fisheries in India.” In the Foreword to the Proceedings, Dr H.P.C. Shetty, the AFSIB President at the time, wrote: “*I also wish to commend the initiative of Dr. M.C. Nandeeshha, the dynamic Secretary of AFSIB, in suggesting the workshop topic and for spearheading its organisation and publication of the proceedings*” (Gadagkar 1992).

Following the success of this event, in 1994 Nandeeshha again used a workshop to bring together stakeholders to discuss “Women in Cambodian Fisheries” (Nandeeshha and Heng 1994). Working from Padek, he expanded the geography in 1996 for the “Women in Fisheries in Indo-China Countries” seminar (Nandeeshha and Hanglomong 1997).

All this time, he was building contacts on the theme of women in fisheries. In 1995, he persuaded Padek to support the women in fisheries photo competition at the 4th Asian Fisheries Forum (AFF) of the AFS in Beijing. This was a quiet entry – a toe in the door to bigger events, and more was to come. I recall seeing the photos in Beijing, and this may be where I first met Nandeeshha. In early 1996, he invited me to give welcoming remarks at the above-mentioned Indo-China seminar in Phnom Penh. As an outcome of this productive seminar, Nandeeshha suggested that we should request the next Asian Fisheries Forum to include a symposium on Asian women in fisheries. The organisers agreed and this event came to fruition in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 1998 at the 5th AFF (Williams et al. 2001), along with another photo competition. AFS, WorldFish Center, Padek and several donors supported the event.

Why stop at Asia? In 2001 at the 6th AFF, the Global Women in Fisheries symposium was held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan (Williams et al. 2002a) along with a photo competition. This symposium determined a broader agenda for future events and developed into gender and aquaculture and fisheries themes (Williams et al. 2002b).

This started the regular GAF (Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries) events, the first at 7th AFF in Penang, Malaysia in 2004 (Choo et al. 2006); GAF2 in Kochi, India at 8th AFF, 2007 (Choo et al. 2008); GAF3 in Shanghai, China in 2011 at 9th AFAF (Asian Fisheries and Aquaculture Forum) (Williams et al. 2012). Little did we know that this would be the last that Nandeeshha could attend.

These events did more than raise awareness; they created a platform for researchers, including students, and development workers to meet each other, present and discuss their work at the events and in the proceedings. The events also brought in outside partners such as Padek and CARE, and drew in a number of development donors, as well as supporters in national institutes and universities. So far, the Asian Fisheries Society is the only professional aquaculture and fisheries society to hold regular and well-branded events on gender/women, although, 20 years later, some others are moving to highlight women's contributions.

An important development for the AFS movement has been publishing the written papers from the symposia. Gradually, the quality of these proceedings has improved. More rigorous peer review has done much to raise the standards.

Nandeeshha's gender approach as revealed in four publications

Stimulating AFS, a major fisheries and aquaculture professional society, to incorporate women/gender events in its programme is one indicator of Nandeeshha's approach. Further insights into how he approached gender equality in fisheries and aquaculture are revealed in his publications. I have chosen four publications to analyse: Debashish et al. (2001), Nandeeshha (2006), Williams et al. (2012) and Williams and Nandeeshha (2012). These publications all reveal a strong focus on gender equality in institutions (a development agency, university, society and the aquaculture sector) and in education.

Institutional approaches in CARE Bangladesh (Debashish et al. 2001) was based on a paper presented in 1998 at the AFS Women in Asian Fisheries symposium. It analyses the case of the Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) sector of the development agency CARE-Bangladesh which decided to focus on helping women in aquaculture. This decision came about from recognising that the women in rural Bangladesh often managed home vegetable gardens and livestock and, in hard times, their nutritional needs and those of their children were often not met.

The act of helping women was confronted by challenges. For one, the extension systems of the time, both CARE's and most others, did not include women. Almost all extensionists were men, with a low appreciation of women's learning styles and needs. Putting together their experience over several high profile fisheries/aquaculture projects, CARE recommended a three-

tier approach. In the first tier, logical frameworks for each project should specify goals for women's participation. In the second tier, extension methods and interventions should be chosen for their ability to increase benefits for women. The third tier, building a more gender-sensitive organisation, is internal to the institution. CARE found this one of the most difficult to achieve.

Field experience revealed further that very local social attitudes and the types of aquaculture resulted in different gender roles. Among the CARE projects, the GOLDA project had a participation rate of 43% women, whereas the cage culture project, CAGES, had only 14% women. Within ANR, although a level of 28% women staff had been achieved by 1998, women's retention was low and workplace culture contained a certain degree of resistance from the men.

The conclusion from this analysis is that making a decision to benefit women in a sector entails much more than deciding to do it. Changing the focus of an organisation to create more value for women is akin to a mission change and requires a deep internal organisational change to support and achieve it.

In two publications, Nandeeshha revealed his dedication to encouraging institutions to increase opportunities for women students and staff. In his paper on gender participation in the Indian state fisheries colleges under the agricultural universities, he looked at the relatively low numbers of women among teaching, administration and support services staff (Nandeeshha 2006). For students in the Master of Fisheries Science programme, the participation rates of women students varied by state and were related to female literacy and social status by state. Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India and in the Kerala Fisheries College, women comprised 70% on average of the top 10 fisheries graduates from 1995 to 2003. He recommended that greater gender equity could only be achieved by sensitising senior leaders, constructing curricula that are more gender sensitive and better support infrastructure for the women, including ensuring their physical security and comfort.

I know he put some of his own recommendations into practice in Tripura where he was instrumental in getting his then employer, the College of Fisheries, to construct suitable dormitories for women students, and gave his best paper prize money from the 2007 GAF2 symposium towards scholarships for women students.

The second paper (Williams et al. 2012), was a wide ranging review - *Sustaining aquaculture by developing human capacity and enhancing opportunities for women* - undertaken for the decadal aquaculture conference convened by the Food and Aquaculture Organization (FAO) and the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA). At the intersection of human capacity development and women's opportunities, Nandeeshha suggested we should report on the rates of women students in relevant university courses, and changes over time. Knowing that no ready statistical database existed, I was sceptical of the feasibility of doing this. Undaunted, Nandeeshha undertook to write to his friends and colleagues around the world, which he did. Sixteen of the key institutes responded promptly, with varying collections of statistics which we were able to present in a table, and a figure (Fig. 1) that showed the overall upward trend across all continents surveyed (Asia, Africa, Europe, North America).

This showed Nandeesh's insistence to move forward and support observations with hard data, even if it had to be collected from scratch.

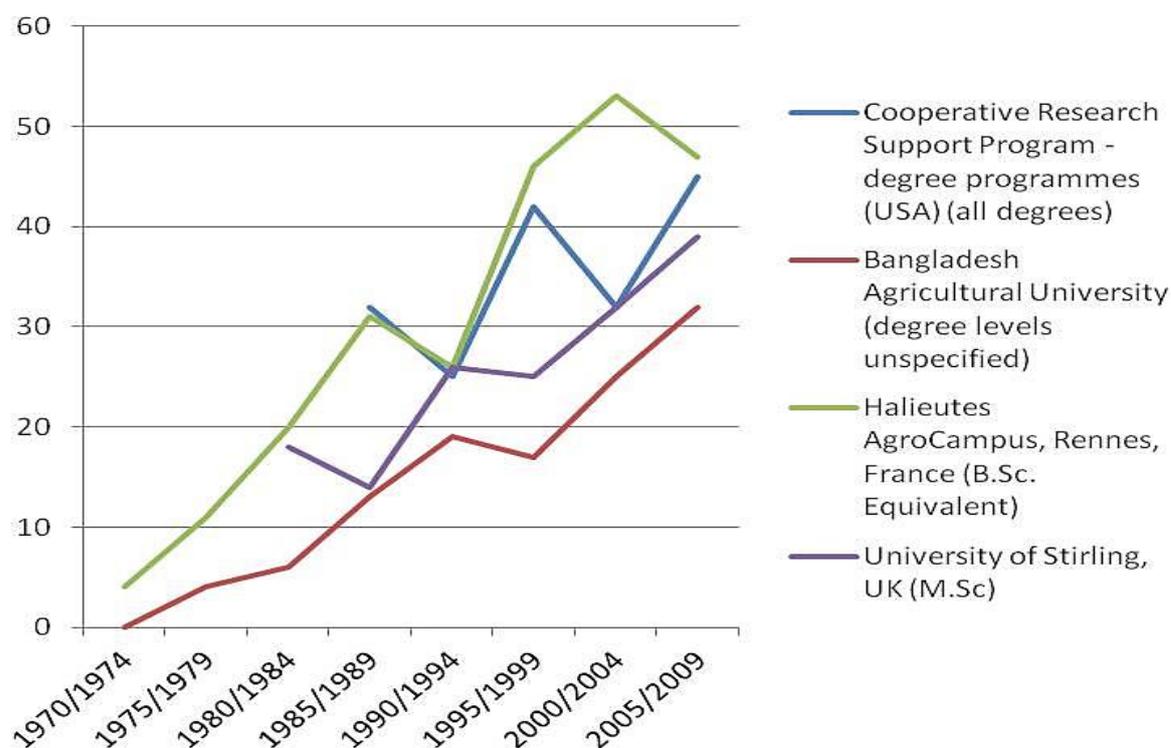


Fig. 1. Selected time series of female graduates in aquaculture programmes.
Source: Fig. 2 Williams et al. 2012.

Another sign of Nandeesh's stress on the importance of education was that he repeatedly recommended to the AFS GAF group that a "gender 101" course was desperately needed in fisheries and aquaculture education and for in-service training of fisheries officers. Although a few small courses have been run as parts of larger projects, however, major progress has not been achieved on this front, but the need persists.

The fourth paper is concerned with recording and keeping our progress on gender equality in clear and critical view. In *Now is the time to move the agenda forward* (Williams and Nandeesh 2012), at Nandeesh's urging, we covered more than an update on recent gender in aquaculture and fisheries events. He suggested we also provide a timeline of events to date, with links to outputs (proceedings, news reports) and review the performance of the Society with respect to gender equality on the Council. Nandeesh developed a table of the 11 women Councillors since the start of AFS, showing their terms. Two of them (Dr Claire Marte and Dr Ida Siason) had been presidents. He would be disappointed to note today that the number of women Councillors is not increasing, and he would be urging us that a new concerted effort is required to get more senior women to step up and nominate for the election.

Lessons learned from a visionary

Since I first interacted with Nandeeshha in 1996, I observed his total commitment to social justice. Social justice mattered above all else. Always conscious of the realities on the ground, he worked hard to apply it in practice in daily life. His mission for social justice shone through in his vision of bettering the lives of women in fisheries and aquaculture. At a practical level, it showed in actions such as promoting the building of the women's dormitory at the Tripura Fisheries College and donating his 2007 GAF2 award, plus many more personal actions that are the material for another publication.

Nandeeshha possessed strong self-respect but did not put himself first. His self-respect served as a solid base on which to build his strategies and tactics to fulfil his social justice mission. The donation of his 2007 award was not the first time he had done this. In other accounts of his life, we hope to document more of his generosity to people and institutions at important points in their development.

I would characterise his overall strategy as consisting of first getting a "toe in the door," and then ramping up action once an opening came. This step often required that he and his partners had to be prepared to take risks. He was a demanding collaborator, prompting his collaborators to push the boundaries, and try for more. A meeting with him frequently generated new ideas and inspirations, and more work for him and his collaborators.

He believed in the importance of going to the top influence-makers. For example, in the 1996 Women in Fisheries in Indo China conference, the formal events were presided over by Princess Norodom Marie Ranariddh, wife of the then Prime Minister of Cambodia, Prince Norodom Ranariddh. The most important part of Nandeeshha's strategy, however, was working with others at all levels, and getting key people engaged in furthering the action. I would count myself among the many "others" that were started on new paths and fields of endeavour by Nandeeshha's influence. Many middle level professionals proudly say "he was my teacher," and several retired senior leaders proudly say "he was my student."

All four of Nandeeshha's papers discussed above show his focus on the importance of institutions and their internal cultures in achieving gender equality. He realised that unless the well-meaning institutions grasped and acted on the need to grow cultures that were fully supportive of women as professionals, co-workers and office bearers, they would be struggling to deliver benefits to women in the field.

Finally, Nandeeshha did not rest on past achievements, but kept reminding us of where we had come from, what had been achieved and what more effort was needed. Also, true to his training as a biologist with a respect for hard data, he sought to assess progress with hard numbers, even if, as was the case with women students in aquaculture courses, it meant collecting this himself.

Conclusions

The Asian Fisheries Society would likely not have developed its strong track record in sponsoring women/gender in aquaculture and fisheries symposia and other awareness raising actions if not for the efforts of Dr M.C. Nandeesh. We cannot say definitively that AFS would never have started giving serious attention to gender equality, but we can say that its actions would have started much later than they did, and thus would not have progressed so far without him. And time is important in closing the gap between the benefits of women and men.

Dr Nandeesh was a visionary committed to social justice, and with an intuitive understanding of how to motivate others to act and bring about institutional change. He changed the course of my professional life and that of many others. I echo these words from Rajeswari Dayal B. his loving wife: “so though Nandeesh is not with us physically, his thoughts and deeds are there to guide us through these difficult times.”

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