

Bearded, Jovial, Committed

Gunnar Album (1965 – 2014)

In the passing of Gunnar Album, we have lost a soul who transcended nationality, class, gender and age, in the pursuit of rights for small-scale fisheries

I got to know about the existence of a person named Gunnar Album in the early 1990s, through one of Norway's firebrand social and environmental activists of that time, Bente Asjord, who soon went on to marry Gunnar. They made a very forceful team, working on the issues of marginalization of small-scale fishers of northern Norway.

Between 1990 and 2014, Gunnar worked extensively on fisheries issues in Norway, Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka and India. Wherever he went, he surrounded himself with close friends. I was so fortunate to be in that list.

We were in touch in the last months of his life, sharing notes about our common malady—cancer. I was cured. He did not make it. So, what can one say when such a fine human being, so full of life and commitment, is snatched away from us prematurely by death?

Gunnar visited India after his marriage and we became good friends. We soon realized that we had many common interests and concerns—in particular our search to develop strategies for greater dialogue and for a more consensual approach between the different interest groups in the fisheries sector.

The adversarial approach, we both felt, did have its merits in raising the profile of the small-scale fishers in the context of the overall fish economy. However, beyond a point, it was necessary to seek partners and search for common ground to establish a minimum agenda for the sustainable management of the fishery which

would result in the greatest common good.

Being Norwegian, Gunnar was very keen to carefully study in greater detail the real role and impact of the Indo-Norwegian Project for Fisheries Development (INP) which commenced in the erstwhile State of Travancore (now Kerala) in 1951. I had done considerable research on this project and its impact on the fish economy of Kerala which I shared with Gunnar.

As the world's first 'development

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project', there was much to learn from its successes and failures. We visited the villages where the project was located and were amazed by the very divergent opinions about its impact.

Since Gunnar was very close to the small-scale fishers of Norway, he was fully aware of the history of the changes which had taken place in their collective lives between 1930 and 1990. The small fishers had opposed trawling in Norwegian coastal waters (but the INP took the lead in introducing trawling in Kerala!).

Collective action

They had taken collective action to get out of the bondage of exploitative merchants. With the

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support of their labour government, they obtained the legal right to the first sale of their fish.

The concurrent setting up of the Fish Sales Organization gave them the apparatus to negotiate with the merchants and fix minimum floor prices for their fish each season. This was later followed by the legal reforms, which required that

their Norwegian counterparts if they wished to achieve greater control over their lives and ensure sustainability of the fishery resources.

Together, Gunnar and I decided to take this matter up with the different interest groups in the fisheries sector of Kerala. Herein began a lesser known initiative in Kerala's fisheries which very nearly succeeded.

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Gunnar Album worked extensively on fisheries issues in Norway, Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka and India

only those who actually fish have the right to own fishing assets. This ensured that the coastal waters became the 'community property' of this group of labouring fishers and prevented overcapitalization which always leads to resource destruction in 'open-access' coastal waters.

I was a great fan of these two Norwegian fishery institutional reforms—rules, laws and norms—and sincerely believed that this was the way forward to ensure that small-scale fishers in any country should proceed along the path of

Gunnar worked for the Norwegian Fund for Nature (called NNV) in the late 1990s. He proposed to them a project which would consist of a training programme in fisheries management and a field visit for representatives of different sectors of Kerala's fisheries.

Reforms

They would visit Norway to study the history and development of these two institutional reforms—the right of first sale and the fishing assets to the fisher. The project was to be

jointly conducted with the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum, India, where I was a faculty member. It was funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad).

In 1997, a delegation from Kerala, consisting of representative of all the 'stakeholders' of the fisheries sector of Kerala, proceeded to Norway. This was after a three-day preparatory workshop which was inaugurated by K N Raj, the founder of CDS and one of India's leading economists.

In attendance from Norway was the Director General of the country's Ministry of Fisheries—Johan Williams—and Gunnar Album. The Kerala group had representatives from among the fishery bureaucracy; state parliamentarians from different political parties; representatives of the artisanal fishers; representatives of the trawler owners; members of the fish-processing unions; fishery scientists and researchers; representatives of the fisheries welfare boards and the co-operative association.

While in Kerala, these persons were generally at different ends of the negotiating table and had adversarial interests to protect.

The joint visit to Norway permitted them to see common ground and shared interests—as well as a new-found camaraderie. This helped to frame a new agenda for fisheries development and management back home in Kerala.

On their return, the group made a representation to the then Left Democratic Front government in power to set up an 'Aquarian Reforms Committee' (ARC). The ARC was to look into the manner in which the institutional reforms, which made Norwegian fishers attain a wholesome level of socioeconomic and cultural development, could be implemented in appropriate fashion in Kerala's fisheries.

The ARC held a series of public hearings across the state, gathering the views of all the different stakeholders before formulating the rough drafts of the legislation. The draft report of the Committee was widely discussed and Kerala was so close to achieving

a revolution in its fisheries sector. However, this was not to be, as the then government, committed to aquarian reforms, was facing an election in 2001—and lost.

Gunnar's role in this novel and pathbreaking initiative will be always remembered. Many of the members of the group who went to Norway recently met together in Kerala to pay tribute to this delightful, warm-hearted and wonderful young man who was snatched away from us so prematurely.

Gunnar's friendship and concern for other people transcended nationality, class, gender and age. He was loved by one and all. He had a special way with people. This tall, bearded, jovial and committed friend of the fisher will always remain in the hearts and minds of those who had the good fortune to have met him.

In my opinion, there is a larger message he left for us to follow: there is merit in careful study, struggle and dialogue as the combination of processes which will make for a wholesome and sustainable future towards management of natural resources with people at the centre of this journey.

Gunnar, we will strive diligently to achieve this! 

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