

Thomas Kocherry

A Powerful Voice for Fishworkers

APARNA SUNDAR

A priest whose commitment to justice was a way of living his faith and working hard for the betterment of fishworkers, Thomas Kocherry was a firebrand among social workers on Kerala's coast for over three decades. His talent lay in translating ideas into a language that could inspire and mobilise, and move people to action. Rightly known for his courage and compassion, Tom, as he was popularly known, left behind a void that is not easy to fill.

Thomas Kocherry, legendary leader of the fishworkers, passed away on 3 May 2014, a week before his 74th birthday. A Catholic priest, lawyer, trade unionist, and environmentalist, he was for more than three decades central to the political mobilisation of India's eight million fisher people and their formation into a social movement which, along with other popular and environmental movements, fought for a "people-centred" development against the dominant model of top-down development.

Tom was born in 1940 as the fifth of 11 children in a Syrian Christian family in Changanassery in Kerala's Kottayam district. He attributed his social commitment to an early incident. One day, when giving him and his siblings spending money, his mother told them they could do whatever they wanted with it, even give it to a beggar, and that was precisely what his sister did. This simple act opened his eyes to a larger sense of family, and to the needs of those less fortunate than himself. His desire to serve and to work for justice that was not limited by the demands of family and career drew him to a religious life. After graduation, he joined the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptorists). During his seminary years, he read widely and was influenced by Marxist writings and liberation theology. He worked in city slums and in a refugee camp during the 1971 Bangladesh war.

On his ordination as a priest in 1971, Tom asked to be sent to a poor parish, and was sent to Poothura, a fishing village in Trivandrum district. From the start, he was clear that "a priest is not an institutional man. He is an ordinary lay person and Jesus was like that". He learned the hard work of fishing, pulling the shore seine along with other men. All through his seven years in Poothura, he would say mass in the morning and then go fishing. Used to parish priests with relatively well-appointed households, villagers recounted their

amazement with this priest who refused to wear a cassock and was to be seen in a simple dhoti, cooking and cleaning for himself and the other priests in the small Redemptorist community in the village. Those years in Poothura acquainted him intimately with the routines and rigours of a fishing life, and allowed him to speak of them with authority in later public campaigns.

The early 1970s were a time of growing ferment in the fishing villages of southern Kerala as elsewhere along India's coast. State-supported mechanisation and the growing demand for shrimp in export markets had led to the entry of business interests; artisanal fishers, facing competition from mechanised trawlers, and prevented by their indebtedness to merchants from benefiting from new markets, began to fear displacement. A small group of social workers and researchers, among them Nalini Nayak and John Kurien, later key figures in the fishworkers' movement, had been working in a village called Marianad since the late 1960s, helping establish marketing cooperatives as a way of breaking the hold of merchants. In Poothura and neighbouring villages, a group of Medical Mission sisters were also active, working among women and children to create greater social awareness. Tom became involved in organising local fishermen in their fight against a flawed government re-finance scheme. As protests against trawling grew, he worked with fisher youth such as Mercy Alexander and Joyachen Anthony to establish the Trivandrum District Fishermen's Union. Among its first successful battles was one led by fish-vending women for buses to take them to markets, since they were not allowed on public buses.

From Strength to Strength

By the mid-1970s, militant protests against trawling had grown in several states. In 1978, a National Forum for Catamaram and Country Boat Fishermen's Rights and Marine Wealth was set up to campaign for the regulation of trawling. In response to pressure from the forum, including the presentation of a Draft Marine Fishing Regulation Bill, several coastal states passed marine fishing regulation Acts. The struggle now turned to ensuring enforcement of these Acts in the face of opposition by the trawler lobby. In one such struggle

Aparna Sundar (aparna.sundar@gmail.com) worked with Thomas Kocherry in the early 1990s. She is currently with the Azim Premji University, Bangalore.

in 1984, Tom, along with sisters Alice and Philomene Mary, declared a fast unto death, gaining the movement national media attention. By then, Tom had also trained as a lawyer, and took up the movement's cases in the Kerala High Court. The national forum was registered as a trade union and later renamed the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF); eventually it represented unions and other organisations in nine coastal states. Elected chairperson in 1983, Tom held the position for a decade, continuing to be a strong steering force even after.

In 1989, the NFF organised the historic Kanyakumari march with the slogan "Protect Waters, Protect Life", marking its awareness that struggles for livelihood and ecological protection were inseparable. In 1994, the NFF launched a national campaign against the Indian government's plan to license foreign fleets in joint ventures for deep sea fishing. Under Tom's leadership, which included two fasts unto death to press its demands, the campaign built support from political parties across ideological lines, central trade unions, and the media, and succeeded in getting the policy rescinded. In subsequent years, the NFF fought against intensive industrial aquaculture, and for implementation of the coastal zone regulation. In 1998, a World Forum of Fisher People was established, with Tom as its first coordinator. The NFF is a remarkable instance of a social movement, framing issues of livelihood and work in terms of social justice, a gendered approach to organising and leadership, the protection of the commons, food sovereignty, appropriate technology and energy efficiency, environmental sustainability, and holistic and inclusive development. This perspective led it to join other "new social movements" in founding the National Alliance of People's Movements in 1989, and other organisations of informal sector workers to found the National Centre for Labour.

In the course of 30 years, the NFF has had some strong leaders, including two stalwarts it lost recently – Matanha Saldanha and Harekrishna Debnath – but to the general public, Tom was its best-known face. He won awards and recognition for his work, including the Pew Foundation Award for Marine Protection

Activity, which he rejected on the grounds that the foundation was funded by Sun Oil, a major marine polluter; Norway's Sophie Prize for environment and development along with leading environmentalist Herman Daly; and the United Nations' Earth Trustee Award.

Man of the People

While not necessarily the primary ideology of the movement, Tom's talent lay in translating ideas into a language that could inspire and mobilise, and move people to action. He could address schoolchildren and university intellectuals, village women, business people and professionals, and draw them to the cause. His booming voice and towering physique lent power at a rally, but it was his political acumen, willingness to take risks and responsibility, and complete identification with the movement that established him as a leader. He was also an organisation builder who paid attention to every detail. If at one moment he was strategising a campaign, at another he would be sitting drawing lines in an account book or membership register. Women activists recall how he encouraged them to speak at public meetings and taught them much about the minutiae of local organising, from recruiting new members to writing slogans and obtaining police permission.

Tom was not always an easy person to work with; his increasing inability to tolerate criticism or dissent, and impatience with quieter modes of organising led to the alienation of many who were initially close to him and to divisions within the movement, although many of these also stemmed from the shift in the Kerala movement from class politics to the assertion of caste and community. Some of this alienation took the ugly form of allegations of financial impropriety, against which he defended himself successfully in court. His personal austerity was transparent, and there was little separation between his public and private life. Philomene Mary, the accountant for the NFF and World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), noted that he did not even have a bank account in his name. In the Valiathura house that served as the office of the Trivandrum and Kerala Fishworkers' Unions, the NFF and the WFF people, the chairperson of

the latter two, Tom, was also the chief cook and bathroom cleaner.

At the heart of Tom's politics was his spirituality. His commitment to justice was a way of living his faith. In his recent book *Faith in Jesus: A Passionate Call for Liberation*, he read Jesus' life as a story of slavery and emancipation, institutionalisation and dissent, and drew on it to discuss globalisation and capitalism. In another context, he spoke of the Christians in the catacombs as the Maoists of their day. For him, a restructured UN Security Council was a step towards the kingdom of god. He wrote,

I still long the day will come soon, heaven and earth meet, god and humans meet, politics, economics, religions all meet, a new restructured UN and Security Council, for the security of the planet and the entire humanity.

A fierce critic of many aspects of the institutional church and hierarchy, such as its resistance to the ordination of women, he was often irreverent, as in the jokes he told, and entirely ecumenical in his practice.

In 2009, Tom suffered a massive heart attack in Australia where he had gone at the invitation of Indian students organising themselves against racist attacks. Advised against travel and exertion, he retired to the Redemptorist community he had helped establish in Manavalakurichy village in Kanyakumari. This enforced rest gave him time to pray with local villagers, enjoy the company of neighbouring children, and chat with his *thathas'* (grandfathers) group. He cooked and gardened, and welcomed guests with great hospitality. But he remained greatly involved with the movement against the Koodankulam nuclear plant in the neighbouring district, speaking and writing incessantly against nuclear energy and moved by the self-mobilisation of the villagers to reflect on the role of leadership in movements. He continued to guide the NFF and WFF. And he remained passionately engaged with politics, reading several newspapers daily in English and Malayalam, writing and teaching. At 3.45 am on 3 May, only a few hours before he died in his sleep, his email list received the latest version of his article on Narendra Modi, his "development model", and majority communalism.

At a time when people of compassion and courage are needed more than ever, Tom's loss will be greatly felt.