

Muraiduganduar Ali Manikfan

the man who loves nature from Minicoy

by Xavier Romero-Frías



Ali Manikfan found a new fish species while working with a marine biologist who was highly impressed with Ali Manikfan's capacity of observation and his deep and wide knowledge of marine life. The marine biologist named the fish *Abudefduf Manikfani*. Thanks to Ali Manikfan, a **Divehi family name** has made it to the **scientific classification of species**.

Sindbad's replica ship the Sohar was built using **ancient Divehi technology** with the expertise of Ali Manikfan. In 1981. The Irishman Tim Severin sailed the Sohar from Sohar in Oman to Canton in China.

Ali Manikfan, son of Musa Manikfan and Fatima Manika, was born in an aristocratic family in Minicoy Island (Maliku) on the 16th March 1938. His father was a pious man, known for his kindness and for keeping the island traditions.



Muraiduganduar Fatima Manika is the good-looking lady in the middle. She is carrying baby Ali Manikfan in this ethnographically significant photograph taken by a visiting anthropologist circa 1939

When his son was barely out of childhood Musa Manikfan sent him to the continent, to Cannanore (Kannur), for schooling. Minicoy has a small population and there were no conventional schools in the island.

But Ali Manikfan was not interested in formal education, so he left his studies and returned to Minicoy. He claimed that the way young people are educated was artificial and pointless. As he saw it, the formal studies were not rooted in the realities of life and were not preparing youngsters to face the time of their existence on earth in a way that would be productive and beneficial for their community.

The rules of nature were important for Ali Manikfan. According to him, getting wisdom by observing our natural environment is the best way to acquire knowledge. Thus his path in life was set and he began by studying on his own, going beyond formal teachings.

Fascinated by the abundance and diversity of languages in India, young Ali Manikfan set out to learn as many of them as possible. After Divehi (Mahl), his mother tongue, he started by learning English, Hindi and Malayalam, followed by Arabic, Latin, French, Russian, German, Sinhalese, Persian, Sanskrit, Tamil and Urdu. With the passing of the years, he ended up knowing 15 languages and excelling in many of them. Ali Manikfan searched always for the best way of getting educated, reading avidly.

Owing to his varied investigations and continuous writing and reading he became a wise, patient, and knowledgeable person already in his youth. Some of the fields Ali Manikfan chose to become learned early in life were unusual at the time, like marine biology, marine research, geography, astronomy, social science, traditional shipbuilding, education, fisheries, agriculture and horticulture. This atypical choice of fields was not without a purpose. Having grown in an island environment, where many goods have to be imported, his main emphasis was on self-sufficiency and all his studies lead to that goal in one way or the other.

Ali Manikfan thinks that there is something in the traditional island way of life that makes people more spartan and thoughtful in dealing with their environment. So his main interest was to search ways for improving this traditional knowledge and come closer to being self-sufficient. Like a good islander, Ali Manikfan dislikes waste. He thinks it is very important to find a use for everything and to treat the environment with humility and respect, not spoiling it for the others and preserving it for the next generation. Thus, he became an ecologist before the word ecology became widely known.

Love for the Sea

In 1956 he began working as a teacher and later he became a clerk for the Amin of Minicoy (the Amin is the Indian government's chief civil official on the Island). But his main interests were related to marine life, for the clear waters that surround the islands are teeming with all kinds of



The *Sohar* which was built with Ali Manikfan's expertise and Divehi boatbuilding techniques

fish and marine invertebrates. Thus, in the 1960's he began to work at the Fisheries Dept. in the laboratory.

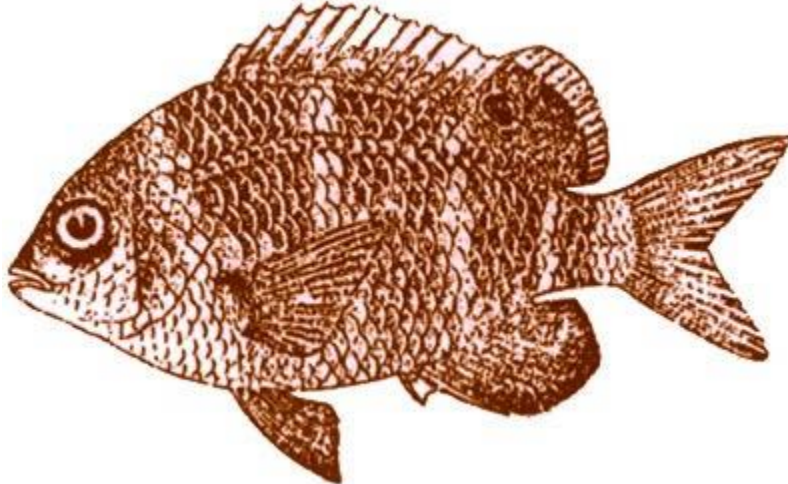
One day, Dr. S. Jones, an important marine biologist went to Lakshadweep to do research about the great variety of fishes and rare species that are found there. Ali Manikfan, who had been always fascinated by nature and ecology, had been doing investigations on his own, so he helped Dr. Jones a lot. His approach towards research attracted Dr. Jones. When Dr. Jones wrote the book *Fishes of the Laccadive Archipelago* he mentioned:

This very book bears testimony to the part played by Mr. Ali Manikfan of Minicoy Island. He collected the maximum number of species and ascertained their local names. Ali Manikfan is a very knowledgeable person and his dedication to the research of marine species is total. He has the best qualities of a scientist in him. This young man has been such a great help and encouragement for me in my studies that I am greatly indebted to him.

As a result of Dr. Jones' gratitude, young Ali Manikfan was appointed field assistant of the CMFRI (Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute of India) and was sent to Mandapam, Tamil Nadu where the Institute's headquarters were formerly located. His main job then was to collect and identify marine specimens.

Ali Manikfan found a new fish species while working with Dr. Jones, who impressed with Ali Manikfan's capacity of observation and his deep and wide knowledge about marine life, gave this fish Manikfan's name, *Abudefduf manikfani*, in order to perpetuate his memory. Thanks to Ali Manikfan a Divehi family name has made it to the scientific classification of species.

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Abudefduf manikfani Jones and Kumaran
Abudefduf manikfani Jones and Kumaran, J. Mar. boil.
Ass. India, 10, 324, fif.5, 1968.

Environmentally friendly Agriculture

While living in Southern Tamil Nadu, Ali Manikfan realized how privileged the coral islands of the Arabian Sea were. In Minicoy it rained often and vegetation was lush, but here in the semi-desertic area of Tamil Nadu where he lived now, there was almost no rainfall and agriculture presented heavy problems. Almost every plant growing naturally in that place seemed to be thorny or bitter. Intrigued by the agricultural possibilities of arid areas, Ali Manikfan bought a plot in the village of Vedalai in order to study and make research in agriculture. This research he undertook became so important for him that in the year 1980, while he was the CMFRI's museum assistant, he quit the job on his own decision. He wanted to dedicate himself full-time to agricultural research and he is busy with it until now.

Ali Manikfan's plot in Vedalai was in an arid region, the Ramanathapuram District in the coast of Tamil Nadu. He built a house and stayed there with his family. In his opinion houses built with materials that are naturally available in the region are more environmentally friendly.

His agricultural methods take nature in consideration, preserving existing tree clumps, letting some areas with the natural vegetation and growing crops that would need little maintenance and no wastage of water and pesticides.



Palmyra grove within Ali Manikfan's *Do Nothing Farm* near Valioor
Tamil Nadu, India

His respect for the natural landscape is so great that he tried to interfere with it as little as possible. He admires the Palmyra tree, so common in the Tamil landscape. He says that it can grow in very arid areas, but that it provides many useful things: good wood, strong and durable fan-shaped leaves, palm-sap to make sugar, fruits that taste different at every stage, among other things. He laments that Tamil people are not valuing this strong and hardy tree now. It

doesn't grow easily and it takes many years to produce fruit. Ali Manikfan tried to grow Palmyra trees in Minicoy, but he didn't succeed.

Nowadays Ali Manikfan has 13 acres of land in Valioor (Tirunelveli Dist.). He produces his own electricity and tries to grow crops that are adapted to the semi-desertic climate. He names this place 'Do Nothing Farm'.

He says that trees should be left to look for water with their roots. At the beginning the yield may be low, but patience is very important in agriculture.

Ali Manikfan claims that the abuse of artificial irrigation, pesticides and fertilizers produce fruits that are less healthy. He is satisfied with the results of his research. His gardens produce more natural fruits at less cost.

Calender

Ali Manikfan devised a lunar calendar for worldwide use. After discussing with astronomers he became convinced that Muslim shouldn't use different sets of lunar calendars. He is a member of the Indian Hijra Committee and he tries to find a way to make all Muslims accept a unified Hijra calendar.

Technology

Ali Manikfan is not the type of fanatic ecologist that is only interested in nature. He is also fascinated by technology and likes bicycles, cars, shipbuilding and electric machines, so he tries to learn more about those things whenever he can. Sometimes he has revolutionary opinions which are not generally understood.

Living in an isolated spot Ali Manikfan was tired of waiting for an electricity connection. He refused to bribe corrupt officials, so he thought about producing his own electricity.

He designed windmills and experimented with them. He doesn't like to cut trees, so he used palms whose tops were spoiled and a car dynamo, and he managed to charge a car battery, so he began getting electricity. This was a proof of his will-power and interest in self-reliance.

He also built a refrigerator that worked with the kitchen heat. He used simple materials, like pipes, a box and sawdust.



Ali Manikfan's Meeqatul Qibla and Islamic Calendar

"We must have a universal date line, for the Islamic world to calculate the dates of the Islamic calendar, which is based on the movement of the Moon. (Qur'an 2:189)."

Afterwards he built a roller-driven motorcycle out of a bicycle with an attached old power sprayer motor. It was started by pedalling until the motor got going. He went with his son Musa from Tamil Nadu to New Delhi, doing an average of 60 to 70 Km a day. Though its maximum speed is only 35Km/h, Ali Manikfan claims it's far cheaper and efficient than a petrol-driven two-wheeler.

Sohar

In 1981 the Irish adventurer Tim Severin wanted to build a replica of the ships that sailed the spice route 1,200 years ago. When he was looking for a reliable supervisor, Dr. Jones recommended Ali Manikfan to Tim Severin. Thus Ali Manikfan was given the responsibility of making the ancient Arab trading ship a reality. Ali Manikfan took this mission as a challenge and went to Oman to direct the team of carpenters. It took one year to build the 27 metres long ship and four tons of coir were needed to sew the planks of its hull, in the same way that ancient Maldivians had built ships.



Sindbad the Sailor's replica ship the Sohar
The design was found in a 16th century Portuguese document and was built to ancient Maldivian naval architectural specifications in Oman under the supervision of Ali Manikfan

This ship sailed over 9,600 km from Oman to China and its 8-month long journey is described in Severin's book 'The Sindbad Voyage.' Nowadays the 'Sohar' is on display at a Museum in Oman.

Water Management

Ali Manikfan always was very interested in island formation. He studied the way the coral islands have a capacity to hold fresh water. He claims that the vevu (tanks) and ponds that were formerly found in the Maldives and Lakshadweep, were necessary to provide a back-flow to replenish the water table during the seasons of abundant rain. He says that not a single drop of

water is wasted in the world; the water is evaporating and coming back in a cycle and ancient islanders had developed ways of replenishing the water table. Unfortunately the vevu baths and most ponds were filled with earth during Mohamed Amin Didi's rule in the 1940's in the Maldives.

Ali Manikfan says that humans are destroying nature with their actions; that ecology is not taken seriously. Action should be taken in the ecological areas, not words. The water-holding places in the world are shrinking and the garbage dumps and areas poisoned with effluents are growing. The natural flow of rivers is disrupted by dam-building and rivers become open sewers. He thinks that despite so much talk about progress, people have little knowledge of ecology and how to use the resources of the land and the sea in a positive and sustainable way.

Character and Family

Ali Manikfan is a truly godly person. He wishes that Muslims would have a more spiritual view of their religion, looking inwardly and directing one's efforts towards making a better person out of oneself. He is skeptical of the present religious-political movements, which often indulge in violence and which are more for the show rather than for improving one's character.

The whole world is a University for him. He looks at God's creation with awe and respect and is fascinated by it. Always willing to learn, among the traditional fields of education, he has studied the Qura'n, Ayurvedic medicine, and traditional healing. Ali Manikfan never throws away any information, but stores it in his prodigious memory.

He sleeps little and eats little. He is not arrogant and never puts distance between anyone and himself. He is simple and kind to everyone, enjoying both jokes and serious talk. He won't spend time in useless things, for he never wastes his time.

I asked Ali Manikfan's daughter Aisha Manika what was in her father's opinion a waste of time. She replied: *"Watching television. He says that one should watch as little television as possible."* Her father limits his television viewing mainly to the news. Soap operas and TV serials he especially considers an utter waste of precious time that could be better spent in other ways, for example reading books or talking to friends.

Being of a godly disposition Ali Manikfan kept always being a humble person, never caring to show off his knowledge.

This humility that comes spontaneously to him has been misinterpreted by some people who have underestimated him and didn't know the size of the man. Only the people who know him closer will know how to value him properly. But he keeps being a normal person, enjoying living a simple life and being always very kind and considerate to others.

Ali Manikfan has one son and three daughters. His son is a merchant sailor, like many Maldivians and Minicoians. All his three daughters are teachers, and exactly like their father, the three girls studied on their own, finding their way among the many possible fields of study. One

of his daughters, Amina Manika shares his interest in ecological agriculture. She is also very interested in languages and human behaviour.



Ali Manikfan with two of his daughters, Aisha Manika and Amina Manika at his farm near Valioor. These two women have followed their father's steps.
The child is Ali Mankfan's granddaughter Jamila Manika.

When I ask him whether he would like to return to Minicoy, he smiles and says that Maliku is a nice place, but that life is a bit too narrow there, that there is too much gossip. He enjoys living in his farm, producing his own food. His message is that one should be as self-sufficient as possible.

Originally published in Maldives Royal Family Website in 2008