

"In the olden days our catch was an unvarying regimen of skip-jacks, tuna and bonito's. Dry fish was the only thing we knew to make out of them and Sri Lanka, our only market. Nowadays, in contrast, the variety of our catch is as varied as the variety of marine life and our fish products almost as much. The world is our market.

"As everyone knows, the Maldives sits astride one of the major fishing grounds of the world. But lacking the know-how and advanced boats and fishing gear, we stuck to the age old pole and line while the foreign poachers who swarmed our seas hauled away the lucrative big game. But now we could hold our ground against any other fishing nation. Our handliners have crowded the foreigners out of our seas, and our trawlers give them stiff competition on the fishing grounds farther afield. The Maldives is fast becoming the leading fishing nation of the world, ton of catch per head of population wise, I mean.

"That predominance has paid handsome dividends, as far as we fishermen are concerned by way of improving our standard of living. Way back in the 1970s, we formed the poorest sector of the population. We led a hand-to-mouth existence even at best of times. Come bad times, we simply starved. That is if we couldn't augment the dwindling food supply with a bit of subsistence agricultural production in time. Malnutrition and disease took a terrible toll of our children. Since we could not afford schools, the surviving ones grew up in ignorance, condemned to tread eternally the footsteps of their fathers. On the contrary, they now enjoy the benefit of education at least up to the compulsory secondary school level. They can now hold their heads high and need not be ashamed to admit that their fathers are fisher folks. For we aren't looked down on as we once were. Nor are we any longer the poor cousins of the national professional family. Our basic pay is attractive enough; as a further incentive, we are awarded 10% of the catch. Besides, we're entitled to pension, free health care, biannual bonus, and annual paid vacation. Fishing isn't any more the life of tears and toil it used to be; it's now a pleasurable, rewarding vocation".



when I began my fishing career aboard a sail dhoni. You've seen dhonis, haven't you?".

He had seen them of course, not though the original sail type but their modern off springs with cabins, a type known as yatch-dhonis used as ferry then and still extant.

"It was a terribly difficult life we lead then, though we did not realize it. It took us an hour to rig a dhoni for the sailing out. We have to shorten the sail if the wind rose and pull out the oars if becalmed. Not being equiped for the long haul, we left by dawn and returned by dusk. In the intervening hours, we were at the mercy of the elements. There wasn't a cabin to shelter in, a berth to lie down, or a kitchen to cook. Shipboard life was primitive to say the least. Even so I miss the sheer roughness of it all. While any chicken could acclimatise to these automated boats, only the toughest did to dhonis. Whereas it would scare the hell out of you boys to brave heavy seas aboard, Dhonis when, being undecked, they were in danger of getting waterlogged and sunk. But these new boats being all one piece and reinforced with watertight bulkheads to boot", laughed the skipper, "you couldn't sink them if you want to".

"Even as our boats have grown more sophisticated, so have our methods of tracking and catching fish. Without the benefit of sonars which track fish from miles around, fishing was then pure chance. In other words, you caught only if you ran into fish, if not you returned home empty handed. As for the method of catching fish, that too has changed. Though there's nothing manual about it, still the name handliner persists, a relic of the times when fish used to be hauled by brute strength using pole and line. But that was before the advent of the auto anglers that you find aboard any modern handliner. Doing that ten times faster than the fastest fishing chief, they have on the hand rendered the job of fishing chiefs obsolete & nearly quartered the size of the crews on the other. Having 50 auto anglers like we do, for example, is equivalent to having 500 fishing chiefs on board!

"Naturally, our catches have grown proportionately. It sounds so very funny now but in the olden days we reckoned a catch of a mere 600 fish a good catch, one of 1000 a super catch, both worthy of celebration, the one by tying a cross stick on the bow, the other by hoisting a flag on the stern. Both customs are dead now. For we don't count our fish any more in hundreds. Hundreds of tons is more like it!

Fishermen's sole business these days is to fish and transfer the cargo over to the mother vessels after, in our case Pioneer 10, a 5000 ton factory ship. Strictly speaking, we're now fishermen and nothing else. That sounds an obvious thing to say these days. But it wasn't so obvious those days when we dried the fish and marketed it in addition to catching it and the bait too, another chore on which we wasted the best part of the day. Left to natural breeding, bait was scarce most of the time, even at times when the seas are foaming with fish. But now of course, lack of bait is none of our worries even though we don't net the bait ourselves. Instead we buy them from any of these firms specializing in the breeding, rearing, and harvesting of bait. Muguran, rehi, bodhi, nilamehi, miyaren, bureki, you name it. The firms will supply it.

## THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

I. H. Maniku

Skipper Razee, a sunburned man in T-shirt and shorts was glowing with pride as he boarded his eighty feet, fibre glass handliner, Pioneer 50. His second officer Saleem followed him aboard. He was twenty-one years old and, fresh out of the Fisheries College, Male'. He has just joined the Pioneer Fishing, nation's biggest fishing company and owners of Pioneer-50. In four to five years' time he would become what Razee is now, a skipper, an event he anticipated eagerly.

"We leave at 0500 tomorrow", said the skipper. We still have a few bugs to iron out. Any new boat like our boat will".

That was what Saleem had been told a little while ago in the head office at Male' too.

At the gangway, they were hailed by the ship's crew, seven in all. The skipper introduced Saleem to them before leading him topside to the bridge. From this vantage point on the lee of Dhunidu, Saleem surveyed the outer harbour crowded with cargo ships, trawlers, and handliners. It was a perfect day for sailing. The sky was clear and the sea sparkling. And there was a good breeze. Saleem was impatient to begin his fishing career. Saleem felt instantly at home.

The skipper eyed the boat from bow to stern and beamed!

"Isn't she a beauty"?

Saleem agreed. Built at the MTTC Shipyard at a cost of Rf. 2 million, she was the dream of every fisherman. Everything you need in a modern handliner is there, in the wheelroom: radar, sonar, direction finder, depth finder, SSB radio, charts on a table, a comfortable bunk, and a VCR.

He was now ushered into the wheelroom.

"You officers' as well as the crew's cabins are directly below on the main deck. And they're just as comfortable", the skipper paused. "Now what will you have? Coke? Seven Up, Orange Crush?"

"A coke".

Skipper walked out to the bridge and shouted.  
"Two cold cokes, Aziz".

Aziz came in with the cokes. They set down to enjoy them, the skipper on his bunk, Saleem on the stool by the table. Between gulps of coke the skipper rattled out such details as the boat's gross and net tonnage, the power of her engines, the capacity of her deep freezers, her cruising speed. He flung out of board the empty can, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and began to speak.

"Who could imagine the shape of things to come, forty years ago