

SPORTS  
**MESSIAH ON  
ON WATER**  
MURTHY MEGAVAN



The dawn sun turns the waters of the Bay of Bengal into molten silver. Early rays warm a group of busy men on the Kovalam beach who are picking up detritus left behind by visitors and washed up by the waves. In minutes the beach is sparkling clean and inviting.

At the helm of this group is the diminutive, powerfully built figure of Murthy Megavan, the 36-year old Co-Founder and inspiration behind Covelong Point Surfing School. His modest manner belies the powerful force he has been behind unimaginable achievements on this piece of coastline between Muttukadu and Mahabalipuram.

“The sea has always been a part of me”, he says with his winning smile. He speaks of his earliest memory of the ocean, going fishing with his chithappa. A kattumaram in those days consisted of just six planks, lashed together. They had just come in with the catch and young Murthy was still on board while the others had got off on the shore. A huge wave turned the kattumaram over and he went under with it. His leg, up to his thigh, was stuck in the gap between the planks so he was trapped upside down underwater. By some miracle his uncle turned around at that moment and saw him. He ran over to rescue Murthy before he drowned or smashed against the shore by the next wave. “I was not scared though”, he says as a matter of fact.

Abandoned by his father very early, he and his older sister were raised by their grandparents even as his mother lived in the city to try and make a living. “Growing up in the fishing community was happy but tough”, he muses. “We never went hungry, my grandfather and uncles were skilled fishermen, but it was tough without my parents.” Disenchanted with school, he dropped out while in class six and took to fishing full time. “I was a pucca fisherman”, he says. “I knew where all the rock outcrops and good fishing spots were in the sea and was an expert at catching lobsters!”

His inherent nature has always been one of giving and helping. He soon started working for a local NGO, The Banyan, which helps people with mental illnesses. In between his work he always found time for the sea. He would go out fishing, body surf with friends using wood planks or just sit on the shore.

It was on one such occasion in 2001 while he sat on the beach that he saw a strange sight. Some foreigners dressed in orange (Hare Krishna devotees, he later understood), were moving on the waves using some special sort of boards. He watched for a while, fascinated. One of them, an extremely tall man (Surfing Swami, as Murthy now refers to him), came ashore to rest. Murthy seized the opportunity and asked him, in broken English and gestures, if he may borrow his surf board. The board was 9 feet and Murthy is a short man. Surfing Swami watched, amused, as Murthy dragged the board out to the sea, paddled out on it as he had seen the others do, and on his very first try, caught a wave and managed to stand up on the board. Then he did it again and again. Surfing Swami was impressed and asked where he had learned to surf. “This is my first time”, said Murthy, to his surprise. Surfing Swami did not know he had just witnessed the first step in what was to be a great love story between Murthy and surfing.

Murthy continued to try surfing on inexpertly crafted wood boards until one day he heard that an Australian had given a short surf board to one of the local boys as a gift. The boy did not know the value of the board. Murthy was quick to buy it off him for Rs. 1500. He got a mouthful from his big sister for squandering such a large sum of money on a silly board but Murthy was unrepentant.

The board had no leash so he improvised with a rope and started surfing in earnest. As he taught himself he says he had a funny style in his early days. Over the next few



years he improved and learned more from visiting surfers who would come to the Kovalam beach. He started to build friendships with many of them. One such surfer was Yotam, an Israeli who had a studio in Chennai.

When Murthy borrowed Yotam’s large board and expertly surfed five consecutive waves he drew applause from the watching crowd. Yotam gifted that board to a delighted Murthy. Yotam continued to follow Murthy’s progress and discovered that each time he came back Murthy had one more local boy learning. This inspired Yotam to make a fundraising video to tell Murthy’s story and to help get support for local surfers.

Now there was no stopping Murthy and his local boys. In 2011, Murthy and three others from Kovalam entered the first International Surfing Competition in Mahabalipuram. He beat many experienced competitors and worked his way to the final where he emerged runner-up to a Spanish surfer. His story made it to the local newspapers and caught the notice of many.

It was at this time that a mutual friend introduced Yotam to Arun Vasu, the CMD of TT Group who loved water sports. Yotam told Arun about Murthy who had the dream of starting a surf school.

“When I met Murthy for the first time it took me just ten minutes with him and I was convinced I needed to sponsor the Covelong Project”, says Arun. “He was genuine, spoke from the heart and had a dream. He never once spoke about making money. Surfing had given him a purpose and direction in life and he wanted to share this with all the youngsters with the village to keep them away from bad habits. This touched me. I have guided and helped him over the years but to be honest I have learned a great deal from him as well.”

This meeting between Arun and Murthy resulted in the creation of the Covelong Point Surf Project in 2012. Murthy quit his job with the NGO and joined this effort full-time, supported by the TT Group. A small, rented house on the beach saw the humble beginnings of what is a thriving enterprise

today with surfing and other water sports including SCUBA, a top-quality restaurant that employs only local staff and even a few rooms for people to stay overnight.

Murthy's journey has had its share of challenges as well. The biggest one came in 2013 from a group of community members who cornered Murthy and demanded he pay a significant sum of money to the village. From the visiting foreigners, the equipment and media attention, some envious villages had decided that they needed to share in the vast amounts of money they presumed Murthy to be making. Murthy protested that he was not making that sort of money and the explained to them point blank that he had taken nothing from the village, in fact only given back in terms of jobs and inflow of tourists to the area to visit the well-maintained beach. It took time, persuasion from Arun and the police DSP as well as ever-increasing involvement of community members in the surfing, to heal and build relationships.

The ocean is never without perils. Since the surfing school started, Murthy and the boys have received formal training as surf instructors and have been certified. "It is very important that surfers respect the power of the ocean and learn about the details of where they are surfing. We give them extensive instruction and practice on the beach before they even step in the water", he says. Words like 'tide', 'wind direction', 'swell' and 'riptide' roll easily off their tongues now.

When you talk to Murthy about the boys who work as surf instructors and ask why they would rather do this than fish or work in an office – one of them has an engineering degree – he says, "Fishing just gets you fish". "In the time they were not fishing they would have been tempted to drink, play card games, gamble and get into trouble. Here they not only get an income and employee benefits, they are also doing what they love. My rules are very simple – when you are a surf



instructor you have to respect your body – there is absolutely no drinking or smoking."

While there are a growing number of girls who come from Chennai to surf, he is sad that no girls comes from the local fishing community. The clothing that needs to be worn to surf may be a deterrent, he feels. The parents are also concerned about the girls getting too dark in the sun and spoiling their chances of a good marriage match. There is much work to be done to shift social norms around this.

Meanwhile, many of the boys have competed in international tournaments and won not just accolades but also prize money. The prize money is theirs to keep but Arun and Murthy only ask that a portion of it goes to support the education of a child from the fishing community. The boys may not have been to Annanagar or Aminjikarai but they have

been to Fiji, Abhu Dhabi, Sri Lanka, Andamans. They have learned to speak English, interact with so many different kinds of people in a respectful way, met so many celebrities and film artists. "When they come to surf they are our students and we are their instructors. They respect us and treat us like friends", says Murthy.

Palani and Dharani, two of the main instructors who work with Murthy, are full of praise for him and how he encouraged them. "We can now travel by ourselves and can hold our own in international competitions where we represent India", says Palani. All these opportunities come from working here.

Our beaches and our sea is the greatest treasure we have as a state (Tamil Nadu) and as a city (Chennai). Beach cleanliness and water safety are very big concerns

for Murthy and his team. He feels cleanliness should be each local panchayat's responsibility but there is also a great need to create awareness among the city residents who visit the beach on evenings and weekends, leaving trash in their wake even when there are bins available. "I get so angry I sometimes wish I could dump the rubbish back on their heads!" he fumes.

Then he speaks of water safety and how there are so many drownings off the main, public beaches on the Tamil Nadu coast every year. There have been practically no drownings on the Kovalam beach thanks to the Murthy and his team's vigilance. His advice to the government is to hire members of the local fishing communities as life guards and give them a watch tower and rescue equipment. No one knows the ocean as they do and they will be glad to have a steady job. In the recent Chennai floods of 2015 it was the city's fishermen who proved to be the heroes of Chennai. Murthy and his team were busy to the point of exhaustion – rescuing people from flooded schools and homes. Why not support them to help our community even in normal times?

More than 45 people from the local villages now surf at Kovalam. The Chennai surfers and visitors are all praise for Murthy and his team's excellent instruction, relentless encouragement and positivity towards those for whom this is a big, scary, bold adventure. Asked what his philosophy in life is, "Dream, believe, achieve", he says without hesitation. "Love what you do and support others. Have integrity and be fair."

For championing a new and wonderful sport like surfing on the coast near Chennai, for nurturing youngsters from the local fishing community and helping them reach higher, for caring deeply about the coastline, the sea and the local communities, Murthy Megavan is a true Chennai Champion.

*Uttara Bharat Kumar*