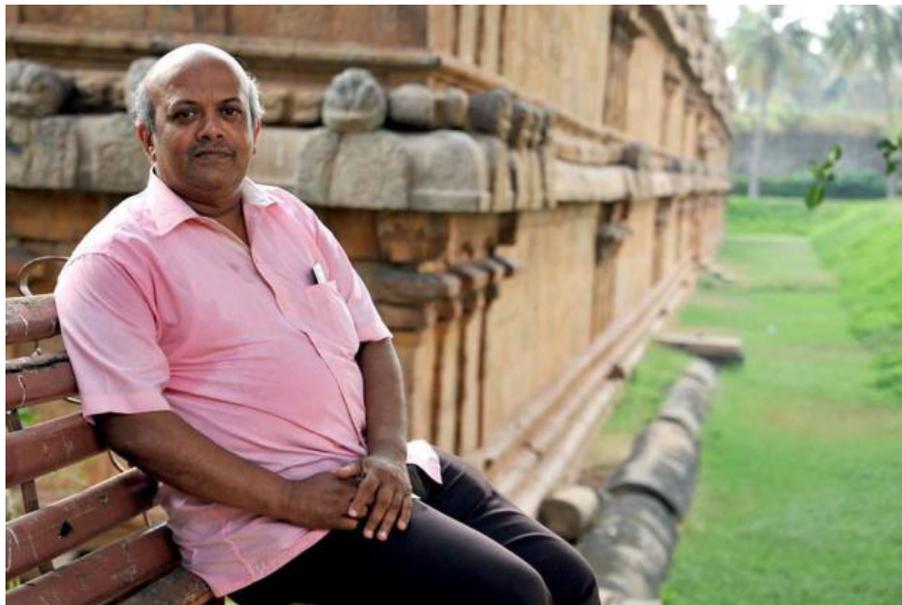


## Sailing in search of history

• [A. Shrikumar](#)



TRAILING THE TURTLES: Historian Orissa Balu. Photo: Special Arrangement

Historian Sivagnanam Balasubramani, popularly known as Orissa Balu, deciphers the sea trade routes used by ancient Tamil sailors through his research on sea turtles

*'Thirai kadal odiyum thiraviam thedu'* (Seek your fortune even by venturing overseas) -- **Tamil poet Avvaiyar.**

The Sangam literature is a rich repository of information on the ancient Tamil way of living. Amidst its chapters that vividly describe the beauty of nature, lifestyle and social structure of the old Tamil country, the *Purananuru* elicits the flourishing sea trade of those times. From ships, sea routes, daring maritime voyages to the merchandise that were traded and the expertise of the Tamil seafarers, it talks in detail of the mighty ocean and the strong bond the people shared with it.

For the past two decades, historian Orissa Balu, has been collecting real-life evidences and remnants from across the coast of Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in the world, correlating them with the references in Sangam literature. "The land expanse mentioned in the literary works is a much larger area than the present day Tamil Nadu state. Our ancestors had maintained trade links from Europe in the west to the Far East," says Balu. "Excavations at Adichanalur have yielded skeletons of people belonging to five different races. It's an indication that we have been a centre of international trade, paving way for exchange of culture and language."

According to Balu, the root of the word 'Tamilar' comes from 'Dramilar', which in turn is a derivative of '*Thirai Meelar*' – an expression to denote sea farers. "It was considered a science to be able to return from the sea. The Tamil seafarers had an advanced idea of direction, geography and weather. They were able to come back to their home turf after sea voyages spanning months and years covering millions of nautical miles. The word '*Thirai Meelar*' is mentioned repeatedly in works like *Manimekalai* and *Silapathikaram*."

Sea faring was such a thriving industry that the Tamil society is said to have had over 20 different communities working for sea trade. Literature talks about the *Vathiriyars* (people who weaved the sail), *Odavis* (men who built ships), *Kuliyalis* (Surfers) and *Mugavaiyars* (divers who fished pearl from the deep sea bed).

Balu who has done an extensive study on the '*Paimara Kappal*' (sail boat), the indigenous vessel of ancient Tamils, says, "The sail cloth used in the Sangam age was 20 metres in width, 10 metres in height and could withstand a wind velocity of 250km/hr. It's notable that even the women were experts in sailing and pearl fishing. Even today, we can find women diving into the sea in search of pearls along the coast of Tuticorin."

He adds, "The mechanism of building the boat was unique as they used nearly 42 kinds of wood including the *Karunkali* wood for the central pole that withstood lightning. Today, the coastal Muslim community practices the age-old boat building technique. There are hardly 25 sail boats and five families of boat builders left in Kayalpatnam and Keezhakarai."

The Sangam literature also documents the presence of over 20,000 islands in the Indo-Pacific Ocean, says Balu. 'Muziris Papyrus is a

document on the evolved sea trade of Tamils. It shows how advanced and strategically planned were the supply chain network and management policies of Tamil traders.” Balu postulates that ancient Tamil seafarers followed sea turtles and thus chalked maritime trade routes. For over 21 years, he has been doing research on sea turtles, mapping their migration routes.

“The turtle has the ability of returning to its home turf even after migrating thousands of miles in the sea. They float along sea currents and don’t swim in the ocean. The technique used by Tamil sailors must have been inspired from this,” he says. “There’s a proper documentation of the life cycle of sea turtles in Sangam literature.”

Balu is researching on the migration routes of Olive Ridleys, Green Turtles and Leatherbacks which visit the Tamil Nadu coast.

“My idea is to use historical facts for sustainable living in the present times,” says Balu, who runs the Integrated Ocean Culture Research Foundation, based in Chennai. “We have people from over 72 sea-related fields researching on various subjects. We have created a link between the stakeholders of the sea, from marine engineers and ship builders to fishermen.” Orissa Balu delivered a lecture at a programme organised by INATCH Madurai Chapter.

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