

UNCOMMON PARTNERSHIPS

Introducing a new series: Profiles of Unusual Partnerships. Where two worlds, and two people come together, to create a bit of magic. The series will celebrate men and women who reach beyond their silos and engage with other professionals in a passionate way.

THE SURFER AND THE SPORTSMAN

MURTHY MEGAVAN & ARUN VASU

BY SHOBA NARAYAN

Here is the story of the unlikely friendship between two men, quite unlike each other, which morphed into an uncommon partnership, thanks to their common love for the wind and water.

Arun Vasu was getting into his shiny black Range Rover when Murthy Megavan stopped him with a question. For the last hour, the two men had been discussing Covelong Point, the surf school they operate together. Vasu is chairman and managing director of T.T. Logistics and Cargo Pvt. Ltd in Chennai. Murthy (as he prefers to be known) is an award-winning surfer, who runs the surf school in Kovalam, a fishing village in Tamil Nadu.

They are an odd couple. Vasu, in his khaki pants and ironed shirt, alongside Murthy, in his bright yellow T-shirt, shorts and striking *ribhutti* (sacred) dash on the forehead—he sometimes alternates this with sandalwood paste and *kumkum* powder. Vasu is restrained and pauses before speaking. Murthy is like a politician, grinning, sprinting, pointing fingers at crowds. What brings them together is the ocean and a love for water sports.

Founded in 2012 with seed capital from Vasu, Covelong Point is really “Murthy’s baby”, says Vasu. Today, some 40 students including expats from Japan, the UK, the US and Europe come regularly from Chennai, Puducherry and beyond, to learn surfing, stand-up paddling, kayaking, scuba diving and windsurfing from “Murthy and his boys”—Kovalam village youngsters he has trained to become surf instructors and award-winning surfers.

A week earlier, students from Stone Hill International School, Bengaluru, had come to Covelong Point for their annual school trip, mixing surfing lessons with volunteer activities in the village. Vasu, 49, wants to know how the students fared. Murthy, 37, hands him a sheet that lists the daily fare.

Vasu suggests that they target international schools. Murthy catches on immediately. “And they all will want to come during the week when our regulars cannot come,” he says.

Surfing is a weekend business for Covelong Point. Murthy is the hub around which its life revolves. He trains a whole range of water sports enthusiasts including the coastal security police. C. Sylendra Babu, additional director general of police (ADGP) of the Coastal Security Group of Tamil Nadu, was an early adopter.

A decorated police officer, Babu is an expert on cybercrime and a fitness fend to boot. The 30 marine commandos in his charge have all been trained—at among other places—Covelong Point. How did Murthy fare with the marine commandos? “Ah, Murthy,” replies Babu. “Murthy is our guru. He is our *Satguru*. As for Arun, he has done more for water sports than pretty much any corporate guy in Tamil Nadu.”

Babu is a competitive man. He sets goals and achieves them. Murthy, in contrast, doesn’t talk much about competing even though he has won surfing awards.

Vasu, at this point, seems to be competing with himself. “If I am able to windsurf at age 75, that will be good,” he says.

Vasu took to water sports at age 13. Former motor racer Jahan Dora Khushan Madan, known as J.D. Madan, describes how he encountered Vasu on the race track. “Arun immediately asked me if I wanted to try windsurfing,” he recalls. So they did, many times and in many places till Madan got terribly injured in a motor accident and was paralyzed from the waist down.

Madan recounts a trip to Dhanushkodi which, he says is “no-man’s-land” because of its proximity to Sri Lanka. Vasu, Madan and a German water sports enthusiast spent two days there, windsurfing on the shallow, crystal-clear aquamarine water with its amazing coastline.

AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP

“Arun is a son of the sea and he never panics under pressure. He is like Dhoni is to cricket,” says Rajeev Vijaykumar, founder of Team Tennis South, a tennis academy in Chennai. When I ask Vijaykumar if he is a water sports enthusiast as well, he replies, “Yes, I

am. You have to be if you want to be friends with Arun. It goes with the territory.”

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To realize how far Murthy has come, you only need to listen to him. Murthy speaks beautiful Tamil, fluently using metaphors and maxims, describing economics as “*poruladharam*” and goals as “*kurik-ol*”. Unlike most city-bred Tamilians, Murthy can speak entire paragraphs without a word of English.

Here is the thing though: the life that Murthy has built now is anchored on a word that does not exist in his native tongue: there is no word in Tamil for surf. Murthy has figured out a concept and a career based on a sport that was beyond the imagination, let alone world-view, of the fisherfolk community that he grew up in.

His childhood was typical. The son of a fisherman, Murthy grew up in Kovalam village, about an hour outside Chennai. He would be woken up at 1:30am everyday to get on the catamaran, or fishing boat. “My grandfather taught me to count waves,” he says. “We would be in the middle of the ocean, watching for the right wave. Once it came, we had to wait. After three such waves was a calm and we would row furiously to the shore. Wait, row, wait, row, that was the drill.”

In this fashion, through countless days and nights, Murthy developed an intuitive feel for the waves, even though he didn’t realize or even know how that would help him in the future. He also became as comfortable within the water as a newborn is in the womb.

“Seasickness is an alien concept for Murthy,” says Vasu. “I grew up around water but even I cannot tolerate the sea like these guys.”

THE SEA AND SPORTS

Fishing at night was bruising, brutal work. Perhaps as a result, Murthy’s father, like many men in the village, turned to alcohol for diversion and respite.

When Murthy was in grade school, his parents split up. He grew up with his grandmother and studied till class VI.

“I wasn’t a good student,” he says. “But I loved the sea.”

It is a remark echoed by Vasu.

“I wasn’t a good student,” says Vasu. “But I was really into sports.”

During Vasu’s schooling in Chennai, first at Vidya Mandir and later at P.S. Senior Secondary School, he must have been the kind of kid that the other boys envied. The milieu that he grew up in, among ambitious, intelligent—and largely non-athletic—Tamil Brahmin boys was intense. Vasu was probably treated with a mixture of covert hate, scorn and envy, all masked with teenage sarcasm. Tall and lanky with light eyes and fair skin, Vasu is not just a sportsman; he was part of a rock band—with his brother. He was, in other words the dude who everyone wanted to be like.

“The first time I met him, I asked him if he was Indian. He looked like he looked like a white man,” says Murthy.

Vasu is a mix of both. His mother, Stina, is Swedish and his late father, T.T. Vasu, was an entrepreneur who ran the Madras Music Academy for over two decades. In the Carnatic music universe, T.T. Vasu was king. The family connection with the music began even earlier, with Vasu’s grandfather, T.T. Krishnamachari (or TTK as he was known), a minister under the Congress government. Today the main auditorium in the Music Academy that seats 1,600 is named after TTK, as is the road that was earlier called Mowbray’s Road. To grow up in Chennai as the grandson of TTK and the son of T.T. Vasu with what Murthy calls “English-*kaaran*” or English-man’s skin is both a burden and a bounty. Vasu wears this lightly.

He and his siblings—an elder brother and a younger sister—spent summers in his mother’s fam-



(Left) Murthy and Vasu surf together; (top) Murthy points for Vasu.

NATHAN G/MINT

ily home near Stockholm. “In Sweden, we stayed with my parents on an island,” says Stina Vasu, his mother. “Arun went fishing with my father. He loves outdoor life and would probably most of all like to live on an isolated island.”

SANITY IN WATER

Their Swedish family home was a barn and the children did all the chores in the house. “Thank God my mother made us spend time in Sweden. Otherwise, we would have ended up as spoiled brats,” says Vasu. Vasu serves as the Swedish Consul General, a dubious distinction as he describes it. “Between my businesses and consular work, I cannot wait to get out on the water on weekends. I need the water for my sanity,” he says.

Sometimes, Vasu brings his three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Ziya to experience the surf. But Murthy wasn’t just surfing; he was teaching the other village boys to surf as well. Along the way, he won competitions and awards. More boards came.

Visiting German tourists handed their old surfboards to Murthy. By the time Yotam showed up in 2005, Murthy had 10 boards. Yotam made a documentary about Murthy which went viral. And so it grew. Whenever Murthy got new hand-down boards from foreigners, he would give his old stash to the village boys. “Why is Murthy special?” asks Karuna Anamath, a PR professional who learned surfing from Murthy. “He is confident, a patient teacher and he is selfless—a giver by nature.”

During the Chennai floods of 2015, the surf school suspended activities and got fully involved in relief activities. Whenever the local authorities needed help, the surfer boys went. “Murthy is the go-to person if something goes wrong in the water,” says Nawaz Jabbar, a Chennai businessman who has learned and surfed at Covelong Point. “Murthy and his boys are extremely talented when it comes to solving problems. They won’t take ‘No’ for an answer.”

“Three men changed my life,” says Murthy. “One is Arun sir, the second is Yotam, who made a film about

me, and the third is the Surfing Swami.”

Yotam Agam is an Israeli musician and surfer. The Surfing Swami is an American, Jack Hehner, who came to Kovalam in 2001 when Murthy was barely 20. When he saw Murthy surfing on a door, Hehner offered his surfboard—not as a gift but for Murthy to borrow for a couple of days. Within hours, Murthy had mastered the surfboard. “The people in my village would make fun of me,” he said in his TED talk. “They would say—who is this guy who is lying on the sea on a board.”

A GIVER BY NATURE

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Jabbar recounts an incident when the volleyball

net on the beach got torn. One of the boys from the village, Sekhar, a champion paddle-boarder, climbed up on a ladder with a rope and started making what Jabbar thought was a “nest”. He unfurled a few minutes later. As it turned out, Sekhar was creating a volleyball net using fishing net techniques that he had learned. The clichéd word for this is of course, *jugaad*. The serendipitous difference is that they are operating in an environment where rich city slickers are able to appreciate their skills. The water, in that sense, is a level playing field. As Murthy says,

“Amongst the waves, everyone is equal. Just because you are the CMD (chairman and managing director) of the TTK Group doesn’t mean that you will get a special wave.”

THE BEGINNINGS—AND NOW

When Vasu met Murthy through Yotam, he was blown away. “Murthy had a plan of how to transform his village using surfing. He felt that surfing had given him a lot and he wanted to make a difference,” says Vasu. “What I liked was that his plan wasn’t about him, it was about the community.”

Murthy wanted to open a surf school. Vasu agreed to fund it for a year. Then, they would see. “That was in 2011.

Located an hour outside Chennai in a clean stretch of beach in the heart of Kovalam village, Covelong Point is steps away from the lashing waves of the Bay of Bengal along the Coromandal Coast. The surf school began in 2012 in a rented house down the street. A year after its founding, Vasu bought a fading mansion on the seafloor for Rs.31 crore. They spruced it up over the years. Today, the bungalow hosts a surf school, an Italian restaurant with homemade pasta (made from scratch and laid out to dry in long strings on the roof), and a small bed-and-break-

fast with five rooms.

Murthy is in charge of the surf school but has a say in all other matters as well. In this meeting, he wants to talk about the housekeeper.

“I know that you think long term with your employees and want to give them PF (provident fund) and other stuff,” he tells Vasu in that plaintive, marginally accusing voice, common in Chennai. “But all of that does not work out here with fisherfolk.”

“Okay, so what do you propose,” asks Vasu. “I have found two ladies who will work in shifts: one from 7am to 3pm and the other from 3pm to 10pm. Each will get Rs5,000, which will cost us less than the Rs11,000 that we are paying now for one person,” says Murthy.

Vasu listens. Murthy tells him that the prospective employees are waiting inside to meet with him. On cue, two women walk out. With pleasant smiling faces, they are clad in nylon saris with jasmine strings in their hair. Vasu moves away to interview them.

OVERCOMING LOCAL RESENTMENT

“One of these women is the daughter of the main guy, who created so much trouble for us when all that *galatta* (quarrels) happened,” Murthy tells me. “Look at us now—how far we have come. Now they want us to employ their daughters.”

The “*galatta*” that Murthy is talking about happened six months after they started Covelong Point. The fisherfolk complained about surfboards coming in the way of fishing boats, accidents, compensation, and whether bikini-clad girl-students would corrupt the traditional values among the villagers.

Vasu and Murthy tried to allay these doubts and fears by employing local young boys and explaining

things to the community. It worked and didn’t. Simmering resentment continued. There was vandalism; locks being broken and stuff being removed. Vasu filed a police complaint.

Things came to a head on 5 June 2013 when a group of men showed up at the school and threatened to shut it down unless they were given Rs10 lakh. Vasu and Murthy decided against paying. They called a public meeting. 200 people showed up. Vasu stood on a makeshift dais in the blistering heat and answered questions. None of it worked. So Murthy and Vasu brought in the troops, or rather the cowboy, which in this case was their old friend, ADGP Babu. “When the fisherfolk learned that 50 of our marine commandos were going to train at Covelong Point, they realized that these guys were in it for the long haul. So they backed off,” says Babu.

The relationship between Vasu and Murthy is casual. They talk for equal lengths of time, which is a good way to measure a powerplay in a relationship. And yet, Vasu is clearly the elder brother; the one who shows the way; the one who anchors Murthy’s passions.

When one of his protégés opened a rival surf school, Murthy was livid. He felt insulted and betrayed. Vasu kept telling him that competition was good. The market was large enough to sustain two, three, 10 surf schools. Three surfing schools operate in Kovalam, including Covelong Point. Murthy views them with avuncular interest.

As Covelong Point grew, so did Murthy. He married his childhood sweetheart, Sarala, and they have two boys. She works in the surf school. “She’s our boss,” says Vasu, nodding at the smiling woman. Other boys from the village have been recruited. Today, some six village boys in their 20s are instructors. One of them, with blonde-speckled hair is Dha-

rani Kumar, who is representing the school at a competition in the Andamans. He is a favorite among the girls, says Vasu, imitating how foreign girls pronounce his name. “Dha-raaa-rii,” coos Vasu. An embarrassed Kumar grins.

FOREIGN STUDENTS

Two English girls wander through the beachside bungalow that houses the school, clad in bikini shorts and loose T-shirts.

“They don’t want to go back to England,” says Murthy. “I don’t know why. Maybe the weather is bad. So they offered to help here for free in exchange for which they can stay here. Went and got their visas extended and everything.”

“Most girls feel safe here,” adds Vasu. “These surfer boys are used to girls in swimsuits. They don’t stare. They are used to teaching foreign girls all day.”

“How does Murthy, who self-confessedly doesn’t speak English, teach foreigners, particularly the Japanese who form his core clientele on weekends?”

Murthy gives one of his frequent grins. He has perfect teeth and a wide confident smile. “Even the Japanese don’t know English. So you have to talk like them...” Murthy switches to perfect imitation of the Japanese cadence. “Oh ho ho, too good la. Good wave, good wave. Use hands...”

The words become indecipherable as his English vocabulary empties, but the tone, sounds and hoots of giggles combined with arm action convey exactly what he wants the student to learn.

When I tell Murthy and Vasu that I want to write about the “friendship” between them, Murthy grins. “It is not a friendship,” he says. “Arun sir is helping us, nothing at all.”

Vasu, as seems typical in their relationship, says nothing at first.

The truth is a bit more nuanced. Sure, Vasu helped fund the surf school that Murthy runs. But he is also getting something in the bargain. In the sanitized corporate world that Vasu inhabits, words are short of emotions; logic triumphs passion; and life is lived most in the head rather than the heart. In Kovalam, it is the opposite. Getting to know fisherfolk is a visceral, immediate, urgent exercise, based on guts, passion and feelings.

Visionary company CEOs view corporate social responsibility as not a necessary but an opportunity; not as a rigid rule but rather, a redemption, a way to access worlds that they do not know; that can teach them something. Interacting with folks like Murthy who carry the music of the sea on their tongue and the salt of the earth in their attitude is a refreshing change for anyone used to sitting in offices all day but most particularly for a person like Vasu, who began his love affair with the sea at age 13. So sure, Murthy needs him. But in half or not equal measure, he needs Murthy—to keep him straight; to keep him grounded to the sea that is the source of his sustenance, to keep him real.

“These boys are like family,” says Vasu. “I expect them to work because I want the surf school to be independent of me. But I have learned a lot from them. I have learned that people in a fishing village think differently but that is not necessarily a bad thing or a wrong thing. It is very satisfying.”

SURF, YOGA AND MUSIC

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Where it all comes to fruition is at Covelong Point’s annual Surf Yoga and Music festival—yes, they piled it all in: the surf, the spirituality, the new-age yoga stuff. Last year, there were 15,000 people from Chennai and beyond. South African cricketer, Jonty Rhodes signed on as a brand ambassador but for Murthy, the fact that he has Tamil film actors like Arya, Jeeva, and cricketers Murali Vijay and Dinesh Karthik on his speed dial is more of a kick. “If I call, they all will call back in five minutes,” he says with pride.

All is not hunky dory. Like with every business, there are constant niggles and issues. The school is housed in Vasu’s seaside bungalow but the school’s expenses and income all belong to Murthy. Between the security, the fee for the instructors and other expenses, the outflow is about Rs1 lakh a month, says Murthy. The income depends on the season. There is competition up and down the coast. They are breaking even, however. Thanks to Vasu’s prodding, Murthy is building a homestay above his mother-in-law’s house that he has named “Do Good Casa.” From its roof, the entire fishing village and its boats are visible. “Yotam sir will stay here when he comes,” says Murthy.

He asks me to hop onto his scooter. We drive at dizzying speed through the tiny bylanes of Kovalam village. A woman sitting by the gutter and washing vessels washes. Her son is a surfer who was featured in a Samsung commercial, says Murthy. He introduces his mother-in-law, a quiet smiling woman. “She makes great pickles. I think she should get into the pickle business,” says Murthy. His father-in-law is still a fisherman but also an alcoholic. His wife, Sarala, helps out at Covelong Point. They have two growing boys.

IT’S A LARGE WORLD

For Vasu, it is an intense, persistent engagement. “There are weekends when I walk into Covelong Point and I just want to get into the water and do my thing,” says Vasu. “I’ve had a long week at the office and I really don’t want to talk to Murthy or Sekhar, and listen to the latest problem with the staff or the village or how a new surf school has opened.” But he does, either before getting into the water or after.

Murthy is deferential to Vasu but not obsequious. “There is a lightness to Murthy that is magnetic. People want to hang out with him.

I stand here because of Murthy *anna*,” says Sekhar, who is being felled by Covelong Point for a global stand-up paddling competition in Denmark next September.

I wonder if Murthy is envious that it is Sekhar, not him, who is getting the global slots, the training, equipment and airfare, which are all paid for by Vasu. “Oh, I clear it all with Murthy first,” says Vasu. “We jointly decide who to send for what competition.”

Murthy grins. “The world is large. I dream that I should start a school and I have. My next dream is that a boy from our village should participate in an international competition and draw attention to his family, our fishing village and to make India proud.”

Vasu, for now, is just that of dream. www.covelongpoint.com
Covelong Point’s Surf Festival is on 25-27 August. Details at <http://www.covelongpoint.com/festival/>