

The energy that drives Synergy

March 14th, 2019

The Pune office of The Synergy Group, despite a conspicuous absence of proximity to the sea, has been doing wonderful work in adding value to the business and overall performance of the company. In this series of exclusive interviews with **Maritime Matrix Today**, the company's leading staff members discuss the roles they play and how it all contributes to their growth curve.



Synergy Group CEO, Capt Rajesh Unni's message:

"Diversity and inclusion are the biggest opportunities we have to help India reach its full potential. That was precisely why we chose Chennai over the other traditional ship management hubs, to start our shipmanagement operations in 2006.

Chennai is now a one-stop-shop for the maritime industry. I am sure Pune and Kochi would be no different a few years down the line. We need to do things differently in the short term, or else we won't be relevant in the long run. Diversity and inclusion of thought, skill, and culture are what makes Synergy more competitive and resilient.

I am very thankful to our teams in Pune and other locations, as they always strive to bring the best, and also nurture the same values and culture across the board."



Capt. M. Sairaj



Jeevan Gadre



Capt Sairaj along with Capt Katsuya Abe, President, Nissen Kaiun, & Asst Technical Manager Manas Ray, Synergy Group



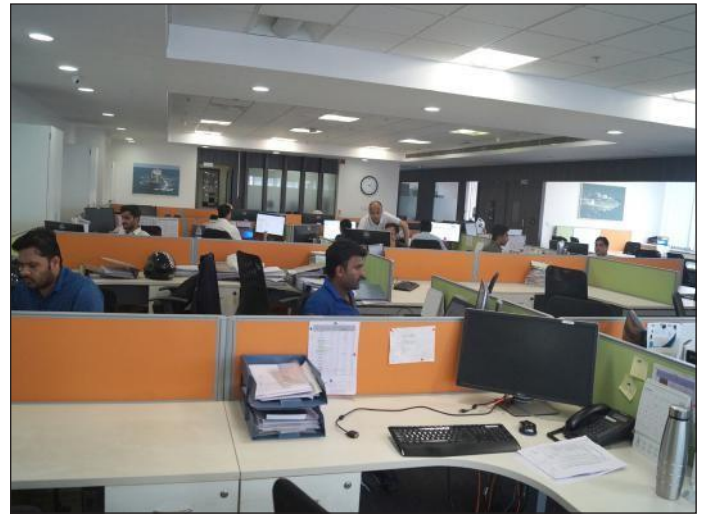
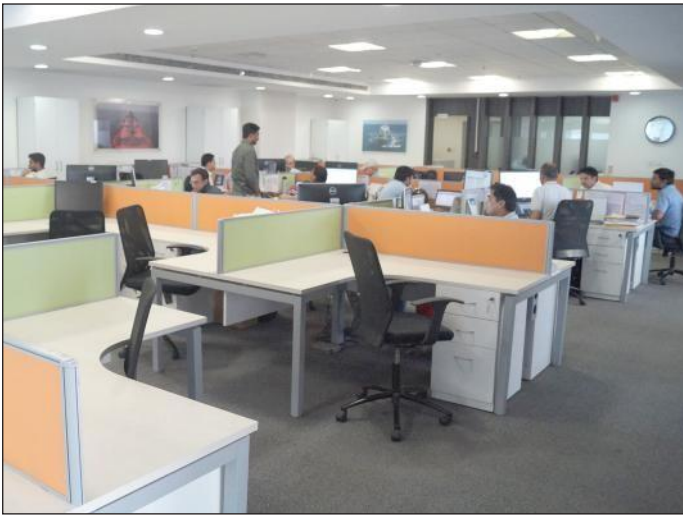
Capt Thomas Varghese



Capt AK Sarma



Capt Yazad Boomla



The Synergy Group, with over a decade of experience as a leading ship manager, offers end-to-end maritime solutions and services tailored to the specific requirements of clients. In-depth technical expertise and a diverse product portfolio enable Synergy to generate efficiency and productivity gains to enhance the customer experience for all its clients. Headquartered in the globally connected city-state of Singapore, Synergy has a strong presence with 12 offices across six key maritime centres. With over 225 vessels under management, Synergy supervises a diverse range of ships.

The hallmark of the Synergy Group is its through-life approach to asset management along with maritime solutions which are custom-designed to client requirements. The company has set up an office in Pune, which may come as a surprise since the city is land-locked and its closest access to the sea is through Mumbai, about 200kms away. However, there has been a lot of thinking that has been invested into this decision, and interviews with the senior personnel of the company highlight the reasoning behind this step and the future strategies for growth and expansion.

“We empower our people with courage, freedom, and confidence”

At the core of any ship management business is a strong commitment to a safety culture. In this interview, **Captain M. Sairaj**, Managing Director, Synergy Navis Marine (P) Ltd outlines the factors that make the company highly preferred for its efficient and safe cargo management.

Please brief us about your time at sea and your transition ashore.

There has never been a dull moment at work in the last 25 years, from being a deck cadet to leading a ship management team at Synergy. I have thoroughly enjoyed the last decade, being part of Synergy's journey from an adventurous start-up in Chennai to being named amongst Lloyd's List of top 10 ship managers in December 2018.

I started my career with Univan Ship Management in 1992, around the same time when the ship management industry was being established in Hong Kong. I remained with Univan until 2006 and after that sailed with MSC Ship Management.

I joined Synergy Maritime (P) Ltd, Chennai, as a QHSE Superintendent in 2008, and was also the crewing manager for two years before joining the Synergy Singapore team as the DPA and head of HSEQ-Ops in 2011. I was then tasked with setting up Synergy's ship management company at Pune in 2014. We started with the management of bulk carriers and then took over chemical tankers in 2015. I now lead a ship management team that manages about 20 vessels, mostly parcel chemical tankers and oil tankers. Last year I completed a PG Diploma in Maritime Law from the World Maritime University. And besides my love for the shipping industry, I like to spend time with my family, do meditation and yoga, indulge in long distance running, travel and volunteer for social causes.

Synergy has a solid safety culture. What drives this commitment to safety?

Chemical tankers are challenging ships to operate. These are very high-capital assets that carry hazardous cargo around the world. This industry cannot afford any tolerance for an incident in a cargo carrier. We need very highly motivated people who take pride in the fantastic work they do. At Synergy, our core values are our guiding lights and the skills of our seafarers are an asset that we treasure. Empathy is a value system we hold close to our hearts. Our experiences

of life onboard ships nurture empathy for our seafarers, their work environment, and the challenges they face onboard. Synergy is proud of its high seafarer retention rates, which is a reflection of the beautiful rapport we share with our seafarers.

The fulcrum of our safety management system rests on three elements – people, processes, and equipment. The success is in managing the interaction between these three elements. Our founder and CEO Captain Rajesh Unni has always led by example and inspired, encouraged, and recognised contributions from every Synergian. We have created a workplace where the value of a dissenting opinion is respected. We empower our people with courage, freedom, and confidence to take the right decisions.

What according to you are some of the challenges and opportunities at SNPL?

The core challenge has been to establish this office as a tanker operator. It requires tremendous effort to set up a robust safety management system. Oil majors audit tanker ship managers according to the TMSA standards. We have done well in the past three years and have been audited by Shell, IMT, and BP. All the audits found us compliant with good ratings as per the TMSA standards. The increasing demand for chemicals across the globe is projected to drive the growth of the IMO 2 fleet type segment of the chemical tankers' market. We manage Type 2 chemical tankers, and they carry a variety of chemicals including vegetable oils and fats, alcohols, alkanes, benzene, and toluene. Our ships are operated by reputed charterers in the chemical tanker industry such as FCC, Chembulk, and Odfjell.

Opportunities stem from the fact that third-party managers still have only a small part of the overall shipping pie – estimates vary from about 15% to 22% at the most. For the third-party management sector, there should be positive developments in the offing, as quality demands and regulations increase, especially on emissions. More owners are likely to say that it makes sense to outsource to cope with this trend. Third-party ship managers, and certainly those like Synergy Group at the quality end of the scale, are very much the standard-bearers of the industry. Gone are the days of cost-cutting. A ship manager is only as good, or as bad, as the ship that has just been cleared, or rejected, by the oil major vetting procedure. Luckily, we have a robust company culture within the Synergy Group and so we have a great foundation to achieve further success.

Where do you foresee India on the global shipping map?

With increasing connectivity in terms of air travel and the internet as well as improved infrastructure, increasingly conducive business environment and above all, good talent, India will become a preferred destination for ship management companies. Synergy was the first company to shift ship management services from Singapore to Chennai and then start

operations in Tier II metros like Pune and Kochi. Other prominent ship managers have followed the Synergy-way to establish ship management offices in Chennai, Mumbai, and Delhi. The Indian maritime community has an opportunity to develop India as a preferred destination for the shipping business.

“Higher expectations lead to an increase in performance”

With his strong belief that the shipping industry can become incident-free if the right procedures and systems are followed, **Jeevan Gadre**, Director (Technical), Synergy Navis Marine (P) Ltd feels that the right work culture is what matters the most.

Having worked with an ownership company earlier and now with the Synergy Group based in India, what are the differences in the work culture that you have experienced?

I did serve a large European pure product tanker company for the first ten years of my job ashore. Although the core function remains unchanged, the challenges are different. It was a difficult decision to make the switch to a third-party ship management company. With the wisdom of hindsight and after having been with Synergy for five years now, I think it was the best career move I made. What is uniquely challenging is the cost versus quality dilemma in varying difficult situations, which tends to bring out the best out of a professional.

Over the past few years, what new beliefs have improved your professional life?

I believe we can operate our vessels with zero injuries, zero spills, and zero incidents even in the most high-risk conditions if we work as a team and do the right things all the time. American inventor Charles Kettering, once said, “High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectation.” Higher expectations lead to an increase in performance, making it highly likely to achieve the desired results. That’s one belief or habit which has helped improve my professional life.

If you had to pinpoint one defining challenge for shipping over the next ten years, what would it be?

The biggest challenge, in my opinion, is environmental protection. In recent times, environmental requirements and regulations have increased considerably. There are several other regulations which are in political debate and rightly so. CO2 reduction, ballast water management, and

green ship recycling would continue to be the most defining challenges in the next decade.

“The basic objective is to ensure incident-free operations”

Chemical tankers require special safety considerations as well as imparting the right training to the crew and officers. **Captain Thomas Varghese**, Operations Manager – Chemical Tankers, Synergy Group, elaborates about the various aspects related to the management of such tankers.

What are the important elements and drivers for effective management of chemical tankers?

The chemical tanker industry is a very niche industry. The experience and specific skill-sets of the ship staff and the shore staff are essential elements to ensure efficient operations. There is a progressive growth in the chemical tanker industry which is visible by means of an increase in supply of vessels and indeed this is correlated to demand from the consumer segments. As the market grows, new tonnages will enter the market. We, at Synergy, started parcel chemical tanker management in the year 2015.

We identified and worked on three key elements which are the drivers for successful management of such vessels, namely:

- **People:** Skilled and experienced staff, both aboard ships and on shore.
- **Process:** Efficient processes which are reviewed regularly to maintain operational efficiency.
- **Equipment:** Regular inspection and maintenance with timely supplies in a cost-effective manner.

Could you share details about training modules and challenges?

There is a popular saying: necessity is the mother of invention. This applies to our sector. The training has evolved to suit the changing consumer demands. As new chemicals are produced and carried as cargo for transportation, the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) lays down specific requirements for carriage as per regular reviews of the hazards involved. This in itself is a challenge since it creates a need to develop specific training modules. The fundamental objective is to ensure incident-free operations.

At Synergy, we believe continuous and improvised crew training is one of the key elements for successful management of chemical tanker operation. Good facility for crew training is essential to cater to this

need. We don't believe in lecture-based modules. Our preference is for a combination of theory and simulated processes of tanker operation. Our faculty is appointed in accordance with the demands of the curriculum so that all the industry guidelines are followed. Further, we send our experienced superintendents and port captains to carry out dynamic audits of cargo operations where they observe various patterns while the operation is in progress.

Gaps identified during the onboard audit are corrected by way of issuing requisite training to the crew onboard itself after completion of the audit. Our first focus was on developing inhouse training for chemical tanker operations at our MOL-Synergy Training Centre. If you review the various chemical tanker incident investigation reports, you may find a lack of knowledge and awareness are the underlying causes for any incident. It is essential at times to get back to the basics of operations, which can be done at a multinational level irrespective of the cultural differences between the ship staff.

How would you explain to an amateur mariner things like time charter, building and managing the fleet, yard deliveries, and inspections?

In a time charter hire contract, control of the ship is passed from the ship owner to the charterer for a fixed rent for the duration of the contract. Variable costs such as bunker costs, port charges, canal dues, etc are borne by the charterer, while fixed costs such as wages, insurance and debt service remain with the owner. The rent is payable per period – monthly, for example, and is fixed for the duration of the contract. The length of time charter contracts varies from one year to ten years or more. The fixed rent payable to the owner is known as the time charter (or period) rate for the duration of the contract. The time charter will typically vary with the duration of the contract.

The relation between spot or voyage freight rates and time charter or period rates, which differ only in duration, is called the term structure of freight rates. For building and managing a fleet, creating standard processes is mandatory. When the ship or shore staff changes, the transition should be easily completed without any hiccups by following standard operating procedures. Every single aspect for vessel takeover, during management of change, is elaborated in the MOC task sheet. Talking about yard deliveries, we have taken more than 14 yard deliveries in the Pune fleet in three years. With every takeover, there is a learning curve which needs to be incorporated into the system to ensure compliance for the next takeover. There are challenges of course, but diligence from the shore staff does help in manoeuvring fleet operations in a correct way.

“Seafarers face a real challenge in ensuring compliance”

With shipping regulations changing from time to time, those in charge of ensuring compliance have a tough task on their hands. In this interview, **Captain Anoj Kumar Sarma**, Marine Manager, DPA, CSO, ECO, Synergy Navis Marine (P) Ltd, talks about the challenges and the thrills of managing such a job.

What is your work profile and how would you describe your typical day at work?

At Synergy, I have held appointments as DPA, CSO and ECO. With the expanding fleet of tankers at Synergy Pune, the DPA responsibilities have been reallocated. I oversee all the environment and security-related aspects and ensure that regulatory compliance is maintained at all times. My office hours are usually spent keeping a close watch on the fleet and an even closer watch on the mailbox. Close and prompt communication is the key to ensuring that everything remains on track. As ship managers, we need to assess the risk almost continuously and keep pre-empting situations from arising.

With the uncontrolled expansion of the regulatory and inspection regimes internationally and locally, seafarers face a real challenge in ensuring compliance in this industry which is dynamic and ever-changing. Our endeavour is to support our masters and seafarers, while they are neck-deep handling operational matters, to ensure that our principals' assets are always protected and commercial viability and competition maintained in all respects.

What aspect of your current role excites you the most and why?

As far as the environment is concerned, we all know that the issue has been taking top focus in forums worldwide. We as a company are doing our bit towards ensuring that we protect the environment and prolong its existence by whatever duration we can, with the hope that our future generations are not deprived of clean air and even cleaner oceans. Monitoring the security of our seafarers and vessels is the other aspect of my responsibility. I have transited the HRA for years during the peak of the piracy activity off Somalia and I know how concerned ship staff and families are during such transits. We, at Synergy, do all that is needed to ensure that the transits are adequately protected, continuously monitored, and completed without any untoward incident.

What if you were asked to start sailing as a master?

After almost eight years ashore, I still enjoy my trips to vessels, especially when I sail to conduct dynamic navigation and sailing EMS audits. I enjoy ship-handling and having sailed on small feeders to very large container vessels, I have always looked at it as a challenge to manoeuvre vessels into tight anchorages, berth and sail without assistance of tugs and route the vessel across oceans, boisterous seas and through ice, complying with liner trade arrival deadlines to ensure just-in-time delivery. That feeling of standing on the bridge, in command, and feeling that fresh sea breeze on your face and filling up your uniform shirt as the epaulettes slap up and down on your shoulders cannot be explained in words. With Synergy Group managing 20,000 TEU vessels, I would definitely take on the sailing assignment without batting an eyelid. Whether my family would accede to my decision is a matter we can discuss another day!

“I think of my role as more of a force multiplier”

Being in charge of a single ship while sailing on the high seas and monitoring the performance of several vessels at the same time from ashore are two hugely challenging aspects of the shipping industry. **Captain Yazad Boomla**, Marine Superintendent, Synergy Navis Marine (P) Ltd provides an overview.

As an experienced chemical tanker professional, how do you put your seafaring skills into action ashore?

Even though the job profile is now to work from ashore, the ultimate goal is still to run all ships under our organisation in a safe and efficient manner. So, while the captain of a ship may have to worry about only his own vessel's performance, as a superintendent ashore you have to be concerned with the activities and performance of several such vessels at a time. Every seafarer is trained to the same competency standard in line with his or her certification. However, when it comes to drawing from experience, each captain or chief officer or any other sailor may be somewhat limited by what he or she has done in the past or undergone on a ship. That is where I step in as a superintendent.

I think of my role as more of a 'force multiplier' when it comes to adding value to the organisation.

Working ashore means getting exposed to problems every single day while manning different ships in the fleet. The exposure to various problems adds to the knowledge bank at a much higher expedited pace; which in turn is useful when supplementing to the already considerable experience that our onboard team brings to the table. The goal is to ensure we constantly bring added value to the problem-solving abilities of our staff onboard the vessels.

How do you tackle incidents and situations that are different in comparison to your sailing job?

Being ashore definitely broadens your horizon and gives a broader perspective of the overall industry. However, the one stark difference I experienced is the lack of direct oversight that you might experience as opposed to the hands-on control that is possible when onboard the ship as a master. Diplomacy in certain situations and tactful handling were always the tools that would come handy to a master's job onboard. However, being ashore, you fast realise that deft handling of sailing staff and being empathetic to their troubles (onboard) plays a more significant role in ensuring the best efficiencies and positive outcomes.

The day you start working ashore, it is not very long before you realise your limitations in terms of the degree of control you can exercise over situations that may be occurring thousands of miles and several time zones away from you. It is at that time that the relationships and great working equations that are carefully cultivated with shipboard staff, particularly senior staff, are paramount. Remember, that on a bad day, the ship staff are not only your eyes and ears, but they are your hands as well!

What are you doing differently with Synergy? And what is the difference that Synergy has made to your life?

Having worked with several organisations earlier, the difference with Synergy as an organisation was the overwhelming presence of empathy at every level of the organisation – whether that is concerned with the trials and tribulations of our sailing staff or whether they are the personal problems of the people working in our offices. The ethos of the company is based around the adage that the 'the whole is the sum of its parts' and hence the more you work with Synergy, the more you learn to imbibe the core values within your working ethics as well within your personality. Synergy has shown me that great business need not always be at the cost of one's ideals and one can achieve great heights professionally while simultaneously keeping in touch with your roots. Synergy teaches you to take each new day with positivity, humility and above all with humanity in everything you do.

MMT