

Resebrev Nr 70

25-28 februari 2002 & 23-25 februari 2009

MALDIVERNA

Två besök på den till synes paradisiska ö-republiken mitt ute i Indiska Oceanen med sju års mellanrum, första gången 2002 tillsammans med min SASNET-kollega Staffan Lindberg. Många möten med ministrar, akademiska företrädare och bekantas bekanta gav en god bild av situationen i landet.

Resan 2002 var del av en kontaktresa som även innefattade besök till universitet i Sri Lanka, Indien och Bangladesh, gå till fullständig rapport: <http://larseklund.in/Old.sasnet.lu.se-23.april/sasnet.lu.se/wwwroot/journey.html>

Andra besöket skedde 2009 så jag mellanlandade i Malé på väg till en SASNET-arrangerad konferens i Sri Lanka.





Male







Fisk-
marknaden





Livet på turistö, idel utländska gästarbetare





Biträdande utbildningsministern



Parlamentet



So different, so similar!

Between 25 February and 23 March 2002, Lars Eklund and Staffan Lindberg on an official SASNET tour made a rather fantastic journey into known and unknown terrain of South Asian academic institutions in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. The purpose was to network with researchers and institutions, and get to know under which conditions and with what expectations they function.

We snowballed on the basis of our own and other Swedish researchers' existing networks in South Asia. What difference could contacts and co-operation with Swedish researchers mean to them? Who could be possible partners in various projects and ventures?

Most people we met were social scientists, but often with contacts in other disciplines.

However, in the Maldives and Sri Lanka we met with many humanists and natural scientists.
The Maldives

Our first stop was Malé, capital of the Maldives – an Islamic republic consisting of 1 200 islands set in the Indian Ocean near to the Equator. Here we met with an extraordinary beautiful archipelago, whose existence though is acutely threatened due to the global green house effect. We met two ministers and several researchers during our two days visit, and they were all very positive towards SASNET.

The country has a long history of International trade, but it opened up to the World only recently, awakening from nearly 100 years of isolation. Therefore they welcome proposals for co-operation in the field of research. Primary education has reached to the 270 000 inhabitants, out of which almost 95 % are literate, and young people are going abroad to a great many countries for higher education. Till a few years ago no higher education was available in the Maldives, but now we learnt that the College for higher education is going to be upgraded to a university proper before 2005.

Besides tuna fishing, up market tourism is today the mainstay of the country's economy. We had the opportunity to visit one of the 80 tourist resort islands, this one located in the South Male atoll. Here we spent a day, snorkling the coral reefs, besides studying the leisurely life style of the mostly Western and Japanese tourists. Around 400 000 tourists visit the country every year, but the terror attacks in America on 11 September last year has drastically reduced the number of tourists coming also to the Maldives. The drop is nearly 50 p.c, and it is mainly the more well to do segments who stay away, whereas charter tourists continue to pour in. Government officials now dream of opening a tax free shopping mall at Malé for Indian tourists, realising that diving and snorkling may not be their first natural choice. Others, however, worry more about the effects the tourism may cause the environment and culture, and two of the three existing research institutes in the country want to develop research on changes in land use and marine biology. Swedish researchers are more than welcome in this effort.

Official meetings in the Maldives see:

<https://nordicsouthasianet.eu/sasnet/contact-journey%C2%96-maldives>

Read Lars' and Staffan's article on their Maldives 2002 visit, from SYDASIEN 02/2002.

Lars visit to Maldives 23-25 February 2009

Almost exactly seven years after the previous SASNET visit to Maldives, SASNET's deputy director Lars Eklund again arrived in the capital city of Male to find out what has happened with the higher education initiatives in the country since 2002.

The population of Male had since further grown. It was now estimated to be around 120 000 (out of a total population of 300 000 in the country). With the limited land area available on the island this means that a large number of high-rise concrete buildings, up to 14 storeys high, has now been erected. The narrow and previously so picturesque lanes are now often crowded with motorcycles and cars, which makes life as a pedestrian difficult. In order to plan for even more expansion of industries a new island has also been created next to Male's neighbouring airport island Huluhu.

The tourism industry continues to be the major source of income for Maldives (besides tuna fishing). Many new tourist resorts have been built especially in the atolls close to Male, and even though the international economic recession has had its negative effects with a shrinking number of tourists coming, still there is a constant flow of tourists from the airport to the resort islands with high-speed boats and hydroplanes (to the more distant atolls).

Political changes

Gayoom on wallMaldives continues to stand out as number 1 in South Asia when it comes to statistics comparing GDP and other development factors. This does however not give a completely true picture of the situation, since the development in the country is very uneven. Whereas people living in Male and who are connected to the tourism industry may have relatively high incomes and standards of living, the situation is much worse for many people living on far-off islands.

The political change in November 2008, when the former opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) took over as president, has been profound. In the elections Nasheed routed Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the former president who ruled the country in an authoritarian style during a period of 30 years. A total shift of leadership is now being carried out in ministries and departments. Posters depicting the old ruler are torn down from walls (photo to the right)

Among the first decisions that the new president has taken is to decentralise the administration of the country, that up till now has been totally Male concentrated. Seven administrative regions have been created, and the ambition is to spread out economic development to the whole country.

Flooding or not?

Male skylineInternationally, Maldives has in recent years mostly appeared in the news while discussing the effects of climate change. Ex-president Gayoom has made several appeals to the world for assistance because of the presumed threat of a coming total flooding of the islands, and even asked for resettlement of the entire Maldivian population to other countries such as Australia. As late as in early February 2009, he participated in the 9th annual Delhi Sustainable Development Summit (organised by The Energy and Resources Institute, TERI) and made an emotional speech on the issue. More information.

The new president has also engaged himself strongly in the issue. Recently Mohamed Nasheed wrote an article with a similar content that was published in international media, including the New York Times.

The theory of an imminent threat of total flooding of the Maldives is however not undisputed. The Swedish researcher Nils-Axel Mörner, Professor Emeritus at the now closed-down Unit of Paleogeophysics and Geodynamics at Stockholm University, has contested the theory on scientific grounds, claiming that the Indian Ocean is characterised by special features of sea

level changes, different from other parts of the world. During the period 1999–2003 Prof. Mörner was president for the INQUA (International Association of Quaternary Research) Commission on Sea Level Changes and Coastal Evolution, with a sub-commission devoted to the Indian Ocean. A research programme carried out in the Maldives with local and international researchers gave some spectacular finds, showing that absolutely no sea level rise has taken place in Maldives during recent years (and at the same time they showed that the sea level in Maldives has shifted considerably over time – during the 14th Century A.D. it was for example one metre higher than today without causing any catastrophe). In June 2004, Prof. Mörner published his research results in an article titled "The Maldives Project: a future free from sea-level flooding" in the Contemporary South Asia magazine. However, the Maldivian government did not react positively to these findings since they went against the official policy, even though the facts presented seem to be beyond dispute and are confirmed in private by individual Maldivian researchers.

Higher education

During the 2002 SASNET visit to Maldives, Staffan and Lars met with Dr. Hassan Hameed, who was (and still is) Rector of Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE), set up in 1998. Dr. Hameed then informed us that MCHE was supposed to be transformed into a university proper before the year 2005.

Maniku Since then no news have appeared regarding this transformation, so this was of course the key issue to discuss with the new Minister of State for Education, Dr. Ahmed Ali Maniku (photo to the left), at his office in the Ghazee Building in central Male, early on Sunday morning, February 8. Since Maldives is an Islamic country, the weekly holiday is Friday and Saturday, whereas Sunday is the first day of the working week.

The Minister Dr. Maniku has served as Vice Rector for MCHE, but the recent past years he has completed a PhD in Higher Education Policy at Massey University in New Zealand. He returned to Maldives in 2008, and took charge of the Ministry of Education after the presidential elections in November. His quick career is quite characteristic for Maldives, where there has been an acute shortage of trained teachers/researchers with a PhD due to the fact that PhD training till now has had to be carried out abroad.

Dr. Maniku explained that the new government has made it a priority to finally make sure that MCHE is transformed into a university proper. When he was installed in his office, President Nasheed promised that this would come true within 100 days, but Dr. Maniku now informed that the process in fact will take some more time. There are still some academic and administrative criteria and guidelines to fulfil before a final bill can be presented to the parliament. It is however almost certain that Maldives will get a decision to start its first university during 2009. British universities act as role models for the coming Maldivian university.

In 2002 MCHE consisted of eight faculties. They have now become nine, with the recent addition of a Faculty of Arts, including language studies, journalism and political science. The introduction of the latter subjects may be seen as a positive policy change due to the new political situation prevailing in the country after the November elections. Ex-president Gayoom did not tolerate free media or any political dissent in the country.

MCHE The nine faculties were as follows:

- Arts -
- Centre for Open Learning (COL) -

- Education
- Engineering Technology
- Health sciences
- Hotel and catering services
- Management and Computer Studies
- Maritime training centre
- Shareeah and Law

Dr. Maniku also informed that a reshuffle to be made regarding the independent College for Islamic Studies. This establishment today covers students both at school and college level. But during 2009, it will be integrated in the new university as a faculty. The school level students will be transferred to the general Maldivian schooling system.

Currently 4 000 – 4 500 students study at long-term Bachelor programmes, whereas an additional 1 500 – 2 000 students go for short-term courses. Many of the short-term courses are in fact vocational training programmes. Dr. Maniku told that the government aims to differentiate these programmes from the university courses. The vocational programmes should instead be carried out by a new polytechnic institute, administered separately from the university.

Till now there are also three independent research institutes in Maldives, the Environment Research Centre attached to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Housing & Environment, the Marine Research Centre attached to the Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Marine Resources; and a National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research.

In 2002, we visited both the Environment Research Centre and the Marine Research Centre (read the SASNET reports).

Now Dr. Maniku informed that these three research institutes may also be integrated into the coming new university. It would create a strong university environment, and it is again a sign that the new democratic government is sincere in its efforts to improve the higher education scene in the country.

Besides the work being done within the Ministry of Education, the government has established a special Higher Education Council, including people from various sectors. The Vice-President, Dr. Waheed, is chairing this Council.

Finally the Minister informed that Maldives continues to send students abroad on bilateral scholarship programmes. These are mostly directed towards the Commonwealth countries such as UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Fiji. Students in Islamic studies also go to Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. However, the Ministry of Education does not handle these scholarship programmes. Instead they are administered by the Ministry of Human Resources Development (HRD), that was recently merged with the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Meeting at National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research (NCLHR)

In 2002 we missed to visit NCLHR, an institute located in a historic building in central Male. It has a mandate from the Maldivian government to preserve the tangible cultural heritage of the Maldivian people; to do research into the Dhivehi language and history of the Maldives; and to preserve and promote the Dhivehi language. The vision is to become a well-established centre that promotes Dhivehi language and literature, by focusing on research regarding Maldivian history. The mission is to promote its rich cultural and linguistic heritage and work towards making the Maldivian people proud of it.

NaseemaI was introduced to NCLHR through Ms. Naseema Mohamed (photo to the right), connected to the institute as an Advisor in its History Department since 1997, and since 2001 titled Special Advisor. With a professional training in India and Australia she has carried out extensive research work on Maldivian history and published ten volumes set of books on Maldivian history in Dhivehi, and also a number of English-language books, including "Dhivehi Writing Systems" in 1999, and a very interesting collection of articles titled "Essays on Early Maldives", first published in 2006.

NLCHR is a focal point for international researchers with an interest for Maldives within the field of humanities. Over the years, scholars from many countries such as Sweden, Denmark, USA, UK, France and Germany have been engaged in collaborative projects. Among the Nordic researchers mentioned by Ms. Mohamed are the above-mentioned Prof. Nils-Axel Mörner, Stockholm University, and Mr. Lars Vilgon from Sweden. Mr. Vilgon has spent several years collecting material worldwide about the Maldives. During the period 1991–1999 he published from Stockholm a nine-volumes set of books titled "Maldives Odd History. The Maldivian Archipelago and its People".

There is also a strong Norwegian connection with NCLHR, from the time of Thor Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki expedition. Heyerdahl and his team visited Maldives in 1983-84, and a year later Heyerdahl published a sensational book titled "The Maldivian Mystery" based on excavations in Nilandhoo, Vaadhoo and Gan in the southern part of the Maldivian archipelago. Later the Norwegian archaeologist Prof. Egil Mikkelsen from the University of Oslo carried out the first scientific archaeological excavations in Maldives. The work was carried out during the period 1996–1998 at Kaashidoo Island in Kaafu Atoll. The excavations revealed that a Buddhist culture was well established in the islands for 1000 years until the Maldives were converted into Islam, probably by a man called Sheikh Yusuf Al Tabrezi in the year 1153 A.D. Mikkelsen's results were presented in a book titled "Archaeological Excavations of a Monastery at Kaashidoo" that was published by NCLHR in 2000.

Ms. Naseema Mohamed informed that NCLHR currently has a staff of 96 people, posted at different places in Maldives. The main office of the institute will soon move from its present location to a most spectacular house, namely the ex-president Gayoom's former palace.

Lars Eklund

Maldiverna: Hotat paradiset söker ny väg för framtiden

Tidig morgon, lätt dis och blått till kristallgrönt vatten så långt ögat kan nå. Planet från Zürich sjunker långsamt ner mot denna till synes oändliga havsyta tills vi ser den lilla smala ön som utgör Malés flygplats och vi landar mjukt.

Det är alldeles tomt utanför den låga vita stationsbyggnaden och mjuk fuktig värme omsluter oss när vi vandrar över plattan.

Inreseblanketterna är snabbt avklarade och vi är ute i ankomsthallen med rader av skyltar över små bås för de olika turisthotellen som här plockar upp sina gäster för

vidare båtferd till ett eller annat av de bortåt 80 små öhotell som ligger utspridda i den maldiviska övärlden. Små korallöar utspridda i arton atoller.

Börjar paradiset här?

Mini-Manhattan

– Välkomna! Där ligger Malé, säger den unge **Shanmugam** som kommit från vårt hotell för att möta oss. Liksom 30 000 andra är han gästarbetare på Maldiverna med en oviss framtid, och en som drömmer om att spara ihop pengar tillräckligt för en pilotutbildning.

Han pekar och vi ser tvärsöver det kristallblågröna vattnet huvudstaden Malé resa sig som ett litet mini-Manhattan med sina allt fler 7-8-våningshus i enda stort

gytter. Färjan dit ligger förtöjd femtio meter bort vid en lång kaj.

Vi ser redan båtar i alla de former från stora långsmala träbåtar som påminner om vikingaskepp med en hög stäv utskuren i trä till hypermoderna plastmotorbåtar i alla storlekar. Färden över till stadsön tar bara tio minuter.

Fasaden av kontor, banker och resebyråkontor är prydlig. Lite längre bort tornar regeringsbyggnader upp sig. Längs kajen ännu fler båtar och många av dem stora lyxyachter.

Varenda kvadratmeter bebyggd

Vi vandrar genom gator och gränder. Ingen trängsel. Det är rent och snyggt och inte mycket folk, men i stort sett varenda kvad-



Huvudstaden Malé, en enda tätbebyggd ö på 1,5 kvadratkilometer och en befolkning på 70 000 personer. En charmig och vacker stad, så



Idylliska strandbungalower på rad, anlagda för att ge turisterna den paradisuplevelse de betalar för. Här på Vadoo Beach Resort i södra Male-atollen.

FOTO: LARS EKLUND

ratmeter är bebyggd och gatorna är smala. Trots det finns det ganska många bilar och motorcyklar som lirkar sig fram överallt. Det kan inte vara många kilometer som dessa fordon kan röra sig över för ön är inte stor, bara ca 1,5 kvadratkilometer.

Här finns allt att köpa – kläder och underkläder, elektronik och prylar från hela världen. Här ser man ingen fattig. Husen är nymålade i olika pastellfärger och träd är planterade längs de vindlande gatorna.

Blandningen av folk är njutbar: Unga och gamla, kvinnor och män i moderna kläder, en och annan slöja men också många yngre kvinnor i jeans och tröja. Stans befolkning uppgår till ungefär 70 000 invånare.

Inte många turister. Inte många kaféer och serveringar för dem. Bara ett fåtal ganska exklusiva lyxhotell. Det är alltså maldivier som lever i detta till synes moderna välstånd. Hur är detta möjligt?

Högklassturism på avskilda öar

Det ekonomiska välståndet i Malé bygger på en turistsatsning som nog är ganska unik för ett helt land. Bara 200 av de 1 200 små öarna är bebodda. På 80 av de andra, obebodda öarna har man under de sista 30 åren låtit privata entreprenörer bygga mer eller mindre exklusiva hotell i bungalowstil – ett hotell för varje liten ö.

400 000 turister har det blivit per år under de sista åren, med undantag för tiden efter terroristattackerna i Amerika den 11 september 2001, efter vilka tillströmningen faktiskt har halverats. 400 000 på en befolkning på knappt 300 000! Där ligger Thailand i lä med sina åtta miljoner turister på 60 miljoner invånare. Lägg därtill att maldivierna i stort sett slipper att ens se dessa turister.

– Det är de rika turisterna som slutat komma, säger föreståndaren för Vadoo Island Resort, dykparadis på en liten ö i södra Male-atollen, som vi besöker över dagen. De andra, charterturisterna i den mer överkomliga prisklassen fortsätter att komma som vanligt, säger han, och pekar

på en grupp japanska ungdomar som står nere på bryggan och tar på sig de svarta groddräkterna för dykning i korallrevet strax utanför ön.

Allt är importerat

Det betyder att turismen består av helt avskilda enklaver i det maldiviska samhället. Nästan allt importeras, byggnadsmaterial till de exklusiva hotellrummen, bungalowerna på pålar ovan vattnet, barerna och matsalarna, alla elektriska apparater – från TV till frysanläggningar, maten som serveras. Och detsamma gäller spriten som serveras här på turistanläggningarna, trots att det annars råder totalförbud mot spritdrycker i såväl Malé som resten av detta strikt islamiska ösamhälle. Importen sker från hela världen.

Till och med personalen är importerad: från hotelldirektörer och tekniker från väst, över dyklärarna från Japan ned till servitörer från Sri Lanka och Indien. För att inte tala om dricksvattnet: för att inte förstöra det naturliga grundvattnet – mest regnvatten som samlas i grottor och ihålligheter, så måste varje hotell ha avsaltningsaggregat för att framställa sitt eget dricksvatten från havsvattnet.

TV:n farligare än turism?

– Vi har skapat en turism här på Maldiverna som är ekologiskt hållbar och som inte låter vårt folk påverkas alltför mycket av västerländsk livsstil, säger en högre tjänsteman i utbildningsministeriet som vi träffar för att diskutera forsknings- och undervisningsutbyte med.

– För 30 år sedan var det ingen som trodde att vi kunde klara det, men det har vi faktiskt och det fungerar, tillägger han. Och ändå har lokalbefolkningen inte kom-

VÄNDI



annorlunda alla andra städer i Sydasiens.

FOTO: STAFFAN LINDBERG

FORTS.

mit att markant påverkas av detta. TV har nog haft ett betydligt större inflytande på folks nuvarande livsstil än turismen.

Detta gäller förmodligen också påverkan på naturen. Hittills verkar denna välregisserade turism ha skonat miljön, inte bara det ömtåliga grundvattnet utan också korallreven och fiskebeståndet.

För varje hotell och ö finns exakta föreskrifter om var turisterna får gå, simma och dyka. Inget skräp tycks kanta öarna, inga rev verkar skadade. I sanning, man förundras om detta verkligen är fallet för dessa 80 turisthotell med sina 400 000 besökare per år.

Det andra Maldiverna

Ekologiskt hållbar turism och ekonomiskt välstånd i huvudstaden Malé! Vi vet att detta inte är hela sanningen om Maldiverna. Det stora flertalet invånare lever i små ösamhällen med fiske och koralljordbruk som inkomstkälla och en betydligt enklare levnadsnivå. I all FN-statistik är landet fortfarande betecknat som ett av världens fattigaste länder. Alla de stora internationella biståndsorganisationerna har kontor i Malé och man får hoppas att de bedriver verksamhet också utanför huvudstaden. Men hur står det till med verklig utveckling för folkflertalet?

Kan turismen utvecklas ännu mer i samma banor som hittills efter terrorattackerna i USA den 11 september i fjol? Finns det så många rika västerlänningar och japaner att denna turistström kan öka? Kan fisket efter tonfisk, som tillsammans med turismen utgör landets ekonomiska ryggrad, med tillhörande konservindustri utvecklas ännu mer till en hållbar industri med ordentliga inkomster även för de små hantverksfiskarna i övärlden?

I Malé drömmer tjänstemännen nu om att ta steget över till massturism, med den indiska medelklassen för ögonen. Miljoner köpstarka indier kunde väl lockas hit till en frihamn med billiga varor från hela världen. Turisterna skulle kanske kunna tillåtas lifta runt i övärlden, även de bebodda öarna, och bo på små pensionat och hotell.

Men hur reagerar detta till synes enkla och fria muslimska samhälle på allt det nya som ändå tränger in inte bara i staden Malé utan också ut på öarna, med TV, Internet-caféer och nya konsumtionsvanor?

Påverkades av 11 september

Med nästan 100 procent läskunnighet är också folk öppna för hela världspolitiken och den allmänna utveckling som är på gång i Asien. Man är ytterst medveten om den förändrade situation som 11 september och Afghanistan-kriget medfört, och det hörs röster om att det krig mot terror som USA deklarerat egentligen är ett krig mot islam, som därmed också drabbar Maldiverna.

Och även om officiella företrädare för



Turismen spelar en avgörande roll för Maldiverna. Välkomnande plakat möter på flygplatsen varifrån turisterna skeppas vidare till andra öar.

FOTO: LARS EKLUND

landet gärna framhåller den liberala tolkning av islam som alltid rått i landet, där kvinnor traditionellt aldrig haft slöja, så finns det nu krafter i samhället som motsätter sig den uppluckring av traditionella värden som man anser vara på gång och till och med vill ha bort den utländska turismen.

Insändare i veckotidningen Monday Times efterlyser en ökad roll för islam, och allt fler unga kvinnor väljer att sätta på sig huvudduk, därtill kanske inspirerade av samma trend som i Malaysia – ett land som spelar stor roll för den religiösa utvecklingen i Maldiverna, och som stått bakom bygget av det väldiga Islamic Centre mitt i huvudstaden.

Satsning på frihandel

Man kan också bekymrat ställa sig frågan hur det kommer att gå för ekonomin och sysselsättningen när den tredjedel av befolkningen som i dag befinner sig i skolåldern kommer ut på arbetsmarknaden. Kommer det då att finnas jobb åt dem eller hamnar de i arbetslöshet?

Det är en fråga som ministeriet för mänskliga resurser, arbete och sysselsättning arbetar med. Ansvarige ministern A K Kamaludeen, en av de mest kompetenta medlemmarna av Maldivernas regering, tror sig ha svaret:

– Vi ska fortsätta satsa stort på turismen och tonfisk-fisket, men vi måste komplettera med att förvandla Malé till ett centrum för fraktgodshantering och frihandel, som medför att Malé blir en attraktiv destination för köpstarka indiska och lankesiska turister som i dag reser till exempelvis

Singapore för att handla.

Med sitt strategiska läge i Indiska Oceanen skulle Maldiverna kunna bli ett idealiskt resmål för folk från exempelvis Mumbai, turister som inte är intresserade av att sola och dyka på obebodda öar i atollerna men som mer än gärna skulle åka till Malé och handla. För att komma dithän krävs dock väldiga investeringar i infrastruktur och en rejäl utbyggnad av hamnkapaciteten, vilket gör att det är svårt att tro att projektet kan förverkligas snart.

Kamaludeen föreslår också att framväxten av lokal småindustri i kooperativ regi ska främjas ute på öarna, småindustrier som bygger på lokalt hantverk och lokala förutsättningar.

Ett annat mera bryskt sätt att öka sysselsättningen för den maldiviska befolkningen, som på allvar diskuteras, är att ta över jobben från de i runt tal 25 000 gästarbetarna, som framför allt kommer från Indien och Sri Lanka.

Frågan är dock hur många av dessa jobb som verkligen kan tas över, med tanke på att det finns ytterst få högt utbildade maldivier för att ta över jobben som experter samtidigt som det inte alls är säkert att folk accepterar att ta de lågkvalificerade och lågavlönade servicejobben i ett läge när kostnadsläget i huvudstaden Malé ligger på svensk nivå – en lägenhet i ett nybyggt hyreshus kostar 4 000–6 000 kronor i månaden, och parkeringstillstånd för att få parkera sin bil på gatan (ytterst få har garage) kostar 500 kronor i månaden!

Lars Eklund
Staffan Lindberg

SWEDISH SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES NETWORK

So different, so similar!

Report from a SASNET contact journey to South Asia, in February–March 2002

by Lars Eklund and Staffan Lindberg

[The Maldives](#)

[Sri Lanka](#)

[India/New Delhi](#)

[India/Hyderabad](#)

[India/Varanasi](#)

[India/Kolkata](#)

[India/Shantiniketan](#)

[Bangladesh](#)

Between 25 February and 23 March 2002 we made a rather fantastic journey into known and unknown terrain of South Asian academic institutions in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. The purpose was to network with researchers and institutions, and get to know under which conditions and with what expectations they function.

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The Maldives

Our first stop was Malé, capital of the Maldives – an Islamic republic consisting of 1 200 islands set in the Indian Ocean near to the Equator. Here we met with an extraordinary beautiful archipelago, whose existence though is acutely threatened due to the global green house effect. We met two ministers and several researchers during our two days visit, and they were all very positive towards SASNET.

The country has a long history of International trade, but it opened up to the World only recently, awakening from nearly 100 years of isolation. Therefore they welcome proposals for co-operation in the field of research. Primary education has reached to the 270 000 inhabitants, out of which almost 95 % are literate, and young people are going abroad to a great many countries for higher education. Till a few years ago no higher education was available in the Maldives, but now we learnt that the College for higher education is going to be upgraded to a university proper before 2005.

[More information on our meetings at the Maldives](#)

Besides tuna fishing, up market tourism is today the mainstay of the country's economy. We had the opportunity to visit one of the 80 tourist resort islands, this one located in the South Male atoll. Here we spent a day, snorkling the coral reefs, besides studying the leisurely life style of the mostly Western and Japanese tourists. Around 400 000 tourists visit the country every year, but the terror attacks in America on 11 September last year has drastically reduced the number of tourists coming also to the Maldives. The drop is nearly 50 p.c, and it is mainly the more well to do segments who stay away, whereas charter tourists continue to pour in.

Government officials now dream of opening a tax free shopping mall at Malé for Indian tourists, realising that diving and snorkling may not be their first natural choice. Others, however, worry more about the effects the tourism may cause the environment and culture, and two of the three existing research institutes in the country want to develop research on changes in land use and marine biology. Swedish researchers are more than welcome in this effort.

Sri Lanka

Next stop was Colombo, Sri Lanka. Like backpackers imagining a totally unplanned journey but following the paved tracks of all others, we ended up – like many other Swedish researchers – in the colonial style [Galle Face Hotel](#), established in 1864 and still maintaining the Royal Scandinavian Suite, etc. This was our first visit to the country after the war started in 1983, and the Colombo skyline had changed almost beyond recognition.

We arrived five days after the [Cessation of Hostilities Agreement](#) was signed on February 22, and all people we met in the country were hilarious about the prospect of peace after 19 devastating years of war. The newspapers were full of praise for the accord, even though voices of dissent were heard, both from President **Kumaratunga**, and from JVP, the third largest party in Parliament.





In Colombo we met the leading persons [at the Embassy](#) and discussed Swedish support to the strengthening of research capacity at Sri Lankan university institutions. Sida-SAREC grants are channelled through the University Grants Commission. The support has been going since 1976 and is currently involving biotechnology, biochemistry (pest control), electrical engineering, regional development and poverty alleviation (geography and economics), archaeology, IT, marine sciences, post-graduate studies, staff development, and infrastructure at national research co-ordinating institutions. Current support amounts to 21 million SEK per year during the period 2000 – 2002.

We had a number of formal and informal meetings with researchers and teachers at institutions in Colombo, including the [National Science Foundation](#) (NSF), the [University of Sri Jayawardenepura](#), and the **University of Kelaniya**. At the meeting at NSF several researchers from the University of Colombo took also part. At all meetings representatives from the entire spectrum of sciences, including natural sciences and medicine, were present. Generally there was a considerable interest in collaboration on research and education with Sweden, and several teachers and graduate students expressed their interest in going for Masters and PhD studies to Sweden. We tried to respond to these wishes by giving names of relevant institutions and funding alternatives.

[Report from the meeting at NSF, 1 March 2002](#)

[Report from visit to Sri Jayawardenepura University, 1 March 2002](#)

[Report from visit to Kelaniya University, 5 March 2002](#)

Going uphill to Kandy. We also travelled uphill to Kandy and visited the oldest and most prestigious university in Sri Lanka. That is the [University of Peradeniya](#) just outside the historical city of Kandy – particularly famous for the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth. We spent two days in the beautiful town with its lake surrounded by charming tourist hotels.

We had two informal meetings at the university, with researchers and teachers at the Dept for Geography, and the Dept for Sociology. And just like in Colombo the response towards SASNET and possible research co-operation was overwhelming.

[Report from meetings at Peradeniya University 3–4 March 2002](#)

India

We arrived in Delhi with the spring, in the early hours of March 6. Only a few days earlier the weather had been much cooler. However, in politics the heat had already arrived with communal carnage in Gujarat, starting on February 27 after an attack on a train with Kar Sewa activists returning from Ayodhya. The communal violence that followed claimed more than 700 lives of Hindus and Muslims.

Now everybody was waiting for the next event in this contentious episode of nationalist mobilisation, that is, the pledge by Hindu extremists to start building the Ram temple at the site of the destroyed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on March 15. The BJP government, squeezed by recent electoral losses (the Congress party now rules in 13 of the 29 states of India), tried to quell the feelings and achieve a compromise. With help of a powerful Hindu religious leader, **Kanchi Shankaracharya**, a so called 'phased resolution' was reached on March 9, which meant that there would be a "symbolic puja with one stone" on undisputed land on March 15, while the remaining action would have to await the resolution of the land issue by the Supreme Court. The question was: Would this agreement stand and avert a major conflict, in Ayodhya, and elsewhere?



We spent a full week in New Delhi, living in one of the numerous secluded enclaves for the affluent people. The BJP-dominated municipal corporation has in the recent years – without much noise – cleared several slums and pavement settlements, and dumped the poor people outside the city limits. At the same time the city has grown enormously, and new exclusive housing estates are established within as well as outside New Delhi, not the least in the new satellite towns in neighbouring states, e.g. Gurgaon in Haryana.

First day we had a meeting at the [Swedish Embassy](#) in Chanakyapuri with **Hans Nicklasson**, Minister (Economic, Trade Policy and Cultural Affairs), Dr. **Sunita Chakravarty**, Senior Programme Officer, and **Dharmesh Sharan**, Information Officer. **Signe Röpke**, First Secretary at the Royal Danish Embassy and **Caj L. Söderlund**, DCM Minister Counsellor at the Embassy of Finland were also present.

[Report from the meeting at the Swedish embassy](#)

The next day Staffan held a guest lecture at the Centre of Social Medicine & Community Health, at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The title of his lecture was "*Pills against Poverty 25 years later*". The seminar was chaired by Dr. **Alpana Sagar**.

Besides this we had several meetings in New Delhi, from 6–12 March, 2002:

[Report from a meeting with scholars at the Social Sciences faculty of Jawaharlal Nehru University, JNU](#)

[Report from meeting with Prof. Partha N. Mukherji and Dr. Rahul Mukherji](#)

[Report from meeting with Dr. Gail Omvedt, Sociologist, Fellow, Teen Murthi Bhawan](#)

[Report from a meeting at Indian Council of Cultural Relations, ICCR](#)

[Report from meeting with Mr Massoulie, European Union, Delegation of the European Commission to India, Nepal and Bhutan](#)

[Report from meeting with Dr. Evelin Hust, Representative, South Asia Institute \(SAI\), University of Heidelberg](#)

[Report from meeting with Dr. Frederic Grare, Centre de Sciences Humaines](#)

[Report from meeting with Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat, Centre for the Study of Regional Development at JNU](#)

[Report from meeting with the professors of Political science at the University of Delhi, and members of the DCRC – Developing Countries Research Centre](#)

[Report from meeting with Dr. Arun Bali, Indian Council of Social Science Research](#)

Staffan went on his own, by flight, to Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, which in recent years has turned into one of the most important centres for learning and research institutions in India. Besides meetings for SASNET Staffan also held a seminar on "*Indian Farmers Movements in a comparative perspective*", at both the National Institute of Rural Development, NIRD, and at the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS).

[Report from meetings in Hyderabad 13–14 March, 2002](#)

Lars on the other hand went by train to Varanasi, the holy Hindu pilgrimage city on the Ganga, a city which nowadays has strong links to Swedish education and research through the good offices of Karlstad University, who runs the Swedish Study Centre for Indian Culture, located in the Ganga Mahal mansion overlooking Assi Ghat.

[Read Lars' report from the visit 12–14 March, 2002](#)

We joined again at Kolkata, the eastern metropolis of India, where we enjoyed Bengali hospitality for four days, travelling with ship on the Hooghly as well as by comfortable Metro underground transport (the first metro in India), and visited some of the numerous academic institutions in the city, from 15–19 March, 2002.

[Report from meetings at Management Centre for Human Values, at the Indian Institute of Management, and the Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences, CSSSC.](#)

Rabindranath Tagore created his world famous Vishwa Bharati University in 1921 at Shantiniketan, near Bolpur, three hours by train north from Kolkata. The university, which now is a national university, is still there, and we decided to go there for a visit on 17–18 March, 2002.

[Report from Shantiniketan](#)

Bangladesh

We arrived in Dhaka with Biman Air after a short flight from Kolkata, in the evening on 19 March. The temperature was pleasant, around 30 degrees Celsius.

Bangladesh is just experiencing the consequences of the political turnaround which last year's general elections has caused. The BNP party and its three allied parties won a sweeping victory on 1 October 2001, and routed the previously ruling Awami League. The new Prime Minister **Begum Khaleda Zia** and her government spare no effort in trying to undo the actions of the former government and the party that formed its core. MPs of the Awami League have accused the government of widespread election fraud and refused to participate in the deliberation of the parliament (Jatiya Sangsad). Accusations and counter-accusations are made daily in the media. The new prime minister, for example, says 'that her government has inherited a shattered economy' (The Bangladesh Observer, Dhaka Thursday March 21, 2002).



On Thursday 21 March, the government passed the so called 'portrait repeal bill', which means that portraits of **Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**, the murdered leader of the Independence movement, are going to be removed from all official offices across the country. The tiny group of 58 MPs of the Awami League were in uproar.

We wondered how this unstable political situation affects researchers and teachers at the University. However, our polite invitations to discuss the political situation were met with very diplomatic answers. Instead we notice, that Dhaka University has `recently imposed restrictions of free-mixing of male and female students as well as smoking on the campus' according to a press report here. We wonder what it would mean if our students arrive here for course work and are found `chatting at different places on the campus in "objectionable gestures".'

Meetings at Dhaka:

[Report from meeting with Dr Rita Afsar, BIDS](#)

[Report from meeting with faculty members, Social Sciences, Dhaka University](#)

[Report from meeting with teachers at the Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka](#)

[Report from meeting with Anders Granlund, Counsellor, Embassy of Sweden](#)

[Report from meeting with researchers at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies](#)

[Report from meeting with the gateway personnel at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies](#)

[Report from meeting with Prof. Dr. Raquib Ahmed, Geography and Environmental Studies, Rajshahi University](#)

[Report from meeting with Prof. Ishrat Shamim, Chairperson, Dept. of Sociology, Dhaka University](#)

[Report from meeting with Prof. Gyasuddin Molla, Political Science, Dhaka University](#)

[Back to Home](#)



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