

SWEDISH RHAPSODY

A Diary of the 18th European
Conference on Modern
South Asian Studies,
Lund University, Sweden,
6-9 July, 2004

by William Radice

6 July 2004



9.15 a.m.

Hands up, conference participants, if you walked under the railway tracks more than once on arrival at Lund Station. A notice on the platform told us to go to the conference desk in the main hall of the station. It didn't, however, say where the main hall was. So, with Dr **Nandini Goptu** of Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, who got off the same train from Copenhagen as I did, I walked down the steps to the tunnel under the tracks, turned left, and emerged into the street. No main hall there. Must be the other side, I said, so we staggered down the steps again with our suitcases, along the tunnel, and up the steps the other side. No main hall there either – just an exit to another street. A helpful young man in a newspaper shop, speaking the perfect English that we take for granted in Scandinavia, told us we should go down into the tunnel again, but instead of going up the steps directly ahead, we should take the steps to the right. This we did, and found the ticket office, but still no main hall or conference desk. 'Let's try along here by the café,' I suggested, and although Nandini said she had a map of Lund and could find her own way to her hotel, she meekly followed me one more time, and at last we found the conference desk where two young helpers were immediately able to direct us to our hotels.

The pitfalls of foreign travel! However carefully the organisers of a conference might plan for the confusion or ignorance of hundreds of participants from all over the world, they can't think of everything, and I don't for a minute blame them for assuming that if the lay-out of a station is obvious to those who use it every day, it will be obvious to everyone else.

*That was how I started my diary. Now that I am back in London, I must add that Professor **Staffan Lindberg**, Convenor of the Conference, told us at the business meeting on Friday what a challenge it had been to arrange for the desk to be there at all. Like the railways in Britain, Swedish railways have been privatised, and there are even separate companies for different parts of the station. It took a month of phoning to establish who was responsible for the main hall, and he was finally allowed to place a desk there only on condition that it was removed every night. Professor Lindberg told us this story as an emblem of the difficulty of getting anything done in a situation in which state planning has been eroded by neo-liberal reliance on 'the market'. This, I now realise, was the main theme of the conference, and my diary was a groping attempt to articulate it.*

Nor can I blame our hosts for the curious conversation I had with an American, over breakfast at our friendly small hotel. 'Are you attending the South Asian Studies Conference?' I asked him, or at least that was what I thought I asked him. No, he said,

he was from Suffolk University, Boston, and they had an exchange programme with the Faculty of Law at Lund. He then started talking about the Salvation Army. He said he had not seen any members of the Army in Sweden, whereas in the States they were pretty much everywhere, and he'd also seen them in Britain. Politely continuing the conversation, I said I used to see them when I lived in Oxford, but I'd rarely seen them in Northumberland, where I now live when I am not in London. Returning to the conference, I said it was a big one, that it met every two years in different European cities, two years ago in Heidelberg, the time before in Edinburgh, the time before in Prague, etc. I waved the long list of participants at him, and he was impressed. I then showed him the timetable for the 44 panels, with 'South Asian Languages in Focus' at the top left, and 'Federalism in South Asia' at the bottom right. He looked a bit puzzled, and said there didn't seem to be much about the Salvation Army there. At which I roared with laughter and said, 'Now I understand why you were talking about the Salvation Army! I'll have to put this in the diary of the conference I've promised to write.' 'Please don't,' he implored, 'it will be another dumb American story. I wasn't properly awake.' 'No dumb American at all,' I said, 'just a mumbling Englishman. I'll remember to pronounce "South Asian" clearly from now on. It's not really a term that any of us much like – it came into use because you need a term to cover all the countries of the subcontinent.'

Anyway, here I am in this charming town in southern Sweden, conveniently accessible by train and road from Copenhagen and the rest of Europe because the Danes and Swedes finally patched up their differences and completed in 1999 the Öresund bridge from Copenhagen to Malmö.¹ I'm attending the 18th European Conference on Modern Salvation Army Studies, and who knows yet whether this diary will save my soul or damn me to eternal perdition!

12.15 p.m.

I shall have to write my diary at odd moments during the four days of the conference, and this time I've come to the computer room in the Department of Sociology slightly before the end of the inaugural session. It was held in Academic Society Building where registration for the conference has been taking place and coffee is available during the morning and afternoon breaks. In fact my misnomer above might not prove to be totally inapposite, because in the opening remarks by Professor Staffan Lindberg, Conference Convenor; by Professor **Björn Wittenmark**, Pro-Rector of the University of Lund; and by Professor **Dietmar Rothermund**, President of the European Association of South Asian Studies; as well as in the key note address by Professor **Dipankar Gupta** of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, high claims were made for research and conferences as a salve for social and economic problems. The Pro-Rector told us how when Lund University was founded in 1666, following the Swedish annexation from the Danes of the southern provinces of Skåne, Blekinge and Halland, its purpose was 'to turn the Danes who lived in this area into good Swedes.' Nowadays its mission was somewhat different. As the largest university in Scandinavia, with 41,000 students, it aimed at internationalism, and was currently giving special emphasis to a new multi-disciplinary research programme on sustainable global development. Professor Rothermund then gave us the 36-year history of the European South Asian Studies conferences. Three of them had been held in Scandinavia: two in Denmark and one in Sweden. Over the years the subject of South Asia had doubled in size and complexity because the population of the region had doubled, and he mentioned environmental degradation and 'the dilemma of security and liberty' as foremost among the challenges that South Asia now faced.

¹ I've subsequently learnt that the forty-year controversy about the bridge did not arise from historic enmity so much as from fears that it would damage the ecology of the Baltic – fears which have not, thanks to its cunning design, been realised.

Professor Lindberg said he hoped that the two main themes of the conference would be 'ethnic and national conflicts' and 'poverty and human development', that 'it was time to fight post-modernist denial of human agency in poverty and human development', and that growing European interest in the subcontinent (fuelled partly by business opportunities) offered 'a fantastic basis for building a real sense of community between scholars in South Asia and South Asian specialists in Europe.'

Having read last night in my hotel part of *The Scandinavians*, a book by **Donald Connery**, I was able to connect the tenor of these remarks with Sweden's own great achievements in development, welfare and poverty elimination. We take it for granted now that Sweden is a wealthy and successful nation in a prosperous part of the world, but you don't have to read much Swedish history to learn this was not always so. Between 1860 and 1930 she lost one fifth of her poverty-stricken rural population to emigration to the United States. The builders of modern Sweden have shown, however, that poverty is not inevitable, and that what can be done here can also be done elsewhere. Hence the importance Sweden has attached to overseas development, and the underpinning of that effort by research was reflected by the support that SIDA (the Swedish International Development Agency) was giving to the conference, paying for travel and accommodation for 42 participants from the subcontinent.

The book I was reading was published in 1996, and as I talk to our Swedish hosts during the week I shall be interested to know how much has changed since then. Is there, for example, a free market in housing now in Sweden, such as did not exist in the hey-day of social democratic planning? But everything that was said at the inaugural session confirmed that, whatever the changes, this is still a land of fairness and justice, excellent education, equality between the sexes, rationality, determination and hope. As I also like, when I am abroad, to listen to music – live, or on my CD 'diskman' – I was listening last night to the string quartets of **Jean Sibelius**. Forgive me, Swedish friends, for not being able to think of a Swedish composer when I went to find some music to borrow from the Library of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne (which also supplied me with Donald Connery's book). Norway has **Grieg**, Denmark has **Nielsen**, Finland has Sibelius, but who does Sweden have? Maybe I shall find out by the end of the week. But Sibelius's four string quartets don't seem to me too traitorous a choice. Swedish is Finland's second official language and cultural links between the two countries are profound. Sibelius learnt Swedish before he learnt Finnish, and most of his songs are in Swedish. Moreover, the fact that three of the four quartets are youthful works, the Quartet in E Flat Major written in 1885 when he was 20, and the Quartets in A Minor and B Flat Major in 1889 and 1890, seems right for a conference about a subcontinent whose population is so massively tilted towards young people. The CD's notes on the first quartet describe it as 'bursting with joy and sunshine...In character it is loving and "innocent", but in addition to the classical episodes it has some original, unusual turns and moments that suggest a budding romanticism.'

I hope for the same from this conference, and indeed from Lund itself, whose classical buildings have already been lit up, yesterday and today, by bright sunshine between the showers of rain.

4.30 p.m.

My hope was not disappointed as I listened to Professor Dipankar Gupta's key note address. His title was dry – 'Cultural Politics in South Asia: Processes, Causes and Futures' – but his mood was more than a match for Sibelius's first Quartet. Undaunted by the religious and caste conflicts of the last decade, he presented a new case for affirmative action on behalf of scheduled or backward castes. This policy had come

under assault in India from both liberals and communalists: the essential thing now was to breathe new life into it not just by appealing to altruism, selflessness or the need to reverse historic injustices. The case for it had to be made on the basis of the 'minimum set of resemblances' that a diverse society needed in order to achieve justice and cohesion. The skills and opportunities achieved by minority groups were for the good of society as a whole. That is not to say that all groups should be uniform. Diverse traditions and identities could be tolerated, so long as they did not diminish the necessary set of resemblances. Citing the case of the 'hijab' controversy in France, he said that because the hijab did not stop women learning mathematics or any other subject, it was irrelevant to the task of attaining the minimum set of resemblances that education should provide. He compared affirmative action to an antibiotic: it released the potential in an individual for good health, which when it was achieved then rendered the affirmative action redundant. It should not become entrenched as a vested interest, whose purpose was to secure and preserve privileges for any one group.

I left the inaugural session before the end of the questions and answers that followed Professor Gupta's address, for as so often after a lecture on a lofty theme the questions were lapsing into waffle and unclarity. Would the separate panels that started after lunch maintain the optimism and spirit of community that the organisers of the conference wanted to promote? If an all-seeing, all-hearing witness could somehow hear all 44 panels at once, would they hear a harmonious orchestra, or a chaos of confusion and discord?

7 July

8.30 a.m.

Not being omniscient, all I can do – except for tomorrow when I shall be closeted all day with other members of the Bengal Studies panel – is indulge in haphazard, whimsical 'panel-hopping'. The contributors I have heard so far are like individual players in an orchestra: they are focussed on their individual instruments, and can sometimes be robustly indifferent to the more grandiose ambitions of the conductor. Let the hospitable organisers of the conference concern themselves with big themes and overall structure: we, as individuals, have our own jobs to do, and if there are only a limited number of people able to appreciate the technicalities of tuba or piccolo-playing, so be it. Maybe one can categorise papers at a conference in terms of the 'set of resemblances' that Professor Gupta spoke about in his address. A panel, say, on 'Gender and the local state in South Asia' can pull in a wide set of resemblances, as nearly everyone is interested in Gender and in its alluring local manifestations (especially here in Sweden). Contributors to 'South Asian Languages in linguistic focus', however, or the 'History of Indian Princely States', may belong to a much smaller group – but enjoy themselves all the more for being amongst fellow-specialists, just as Norwegians seem to get a kick out of sharing their language with less than 4 million others, delighting in differences from Swedish and Danish so subtle that they seem to play a perpetual game of concealing or proclaiming their national identity according to who they are talking to.

So yesterday afternoon I plunged first into Panel 44, 'Religious Reform movements in South Asia from the 19th Century to the Present', where I heard Dr **Dietrich Reetz** of the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, speak with carefully researched authority on 'The Deoband Universe: what makes an educational movement of Islam?' With a specialised paper on a subject outside one's own field, one can gain from learning something new, or think about how it might be connected with wider issues. 'The Deoband exerted its influence through India's independent existence as a learned reference institution of

normative and orthodox Islam', stated Dr Reetz's abstract. Not much there for the non-specialist in modern Indian history or in Islam, one might think; but the abstract and the paper itself went on to bring out connections that might make even **George W. Bush** prick up his ears: 'the inspiration of Deobandi thought for purist Islamic groups and radical militants across a number of countries in Asia and Africa has made sensational news after September 11, 2001', creating a need, in the interests of balance, for the movement to be 'ascertained and assessed more realistically'. I found myself thinking about the issue of 'faith schools' in Britain. If Catholics and Jews have been permitted for a long time to run schools that accord with their faith, why shouldn't Muslims, Seventh Day Adventists, Moonies, Druids and the rest be allowed their own schools too? British government policy is to allow an expansion of faith schools, but could this, to adopt Professor Gupta's terminology again, diminish the set of resemblances that a cohesive society requires? Do parents have the right to impose on their children education in a religion that those same children might later reject? In fact, of course, parents opt for faith schools for reasons that are not necessarily religious: they may feel they will protect their children from racism, or that a religious ambience will provide a more disciplined environment for learning. I got the impression from Dr Reetz's paper that parents in India, Pakistan, or other countries where there are Deobandi schools might choose them for those reasons, and certainly not out of sympathy for militant Islamist ideology.

On to Panel 27, 'South Asian Languages in Linguistic Focus', and here Professor **Boris A. Zakharyin** of Moscow State University was considering, with scientific precision, whether **Panini's** rule of 'Lopa' or 'zero-replacement' might also be applicable to modern Hindi, producing *larka* ('boy') from the verbal root *lar-* ('to be militant, to make war') by deleting the first vowel of *-ak-* (a suffix signifying a person characterised by the activity *lar-*), so that *lar+ak+ka* became *larka*. A questioner asked Professor Zakharyin if the rule could be applied to languages generally. With scrupulous scholarly caution, he replied that it was probably applicable to other New Indo-Aryan languages, and it might indeed be applicable more universally, though he had not himself investigated this. Easier, I wanted to say, to argue a universal connection between warfare and boys, but I knew that was way outside Professor Zakharyin's field of purely morphological concern. The participants of the panel had an expert, professional air: no dilettantes here! Noticing a piano outside their meeting-room, I imagined them as similar to a group of professional pianists, able to discuss in detail the merits of alternative fingerings in a Beethoven piano sonata.

Finally, before returning to my hotel-room for a rest before the Reception in the evening, to Panel 46, 'Spirit and Power of Sacred Places, and Preservation of Cultural Heritage', where I happened on a paper that really was about music. Basing his presentation on his current PhD research, **Jon Skarpeid** from Norway was speaking about 'Aspects of Pilgrim Music in North India'. Comparing the 'new devotional music' that has become popular in recent years with traditional styles such as dhrupad, he was speculating on connections that might be made between musical structures and the 'bigger narratives' of cosmology or philosophy. If a dhrupad performance normally has a 'non-metrical' beginning *and* a non-metrical conclusion, and modern devotional music has an emphatic beat throughout and a clear-cut beginning and end, did this change reflect a new focus on 'modernity' and the 'here and now'? I must confess I was doubtful whether there was anything in what he said that could be proved with any precision; yet his paper has set me thinking. Back in my hotel, and listening for the third time to the wonderful third movement of Sibelius's Quartet in A Minor, I wondered what philosophical or cosmological meaning could be attached to its A + B + A + C + A structure? The repeated 'A' section is a cheerful mazurka – the bread for the sandwich, so to speak. The two fillings 'B' and 'C' are more dissonant and melancholy. There *is* a narrative here, and

it's different from the narratives to be found, say, in the polyphony of **Palestrina** or **William Byrd**; but what story is it actually telling? If the cheerful, optimistic atmosphere of this conference is the bread, while the fillings in the form of individual papers may be problematic, disquieting, tragic, or even uneatable, what will this say about the larger narrative of the conference as a whole?

Before my mixed metaphors give me indigestion, I'd better take a break here, join other participants for coffee, and then do some more panel-hopping before lunch.

3 p.m.

It's often said that the real work of conferences takes place in the coffee and lunch breaks, when there is a chance to meet old friends and make new ones. As this is the fifth time I have come to a European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies, and participants tend to remain loyal once they have come to one, I have already met friends from Norway, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Russia and Scotland, as well as India and Bangladesh (there seem to be more participants from the subcontinent than ever before). Whenever I meet Professor **Erik Komarov** of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow, I always remind him of how when I heard him give a seminar at St Antony's College, Oxford, in the early 1980s, he began by saying: 'You people tend to think that, when a speaker comes from the Soviet Union, his paper has been written by **Leonid Brezhnev** himself.' I invited him to my house in Oxford at that time, and as we walked there I told him half-seriously that you could tell a lot about the English class-system by looking to see if people had lace curtains in their windows or not. Did that nugget of information, I wonder, pass into the theory of Marxist-Leninism? This time he told me that he planned to propose me as the first Prime Minister of a united Bengal. Since he also told me that he had written forewords to every translation of **Tagore** that had been published in Russia over the last 20 years, I said I would learn Russian before he made his proposal, so that I could read his forewords. This will ensure that he is never able to propose me as Prime Minister, as my energy for learning new languages is declining with age; so the *dui bangla* will certainly be safe from me!

Among new friends, I was particularly pleased to meet Dr **Udaya Narayana Singh** of the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, whom I knew from a comprehensive bibliography of Bengali linguistics much used by my colleague Dr **Hanna Thompson**, who has recently completed a PhD on Bengali grammar. I had not, however, thought of him as Bengali, as the lions of Bengal tend to spell their names 'Sinha'. He told me his mother was Bengali and his father was Maithili; among his many accomplishments are translations he has done into Maithili of Tagore's writings for children. He gave me a book of his own Bengali nonsense rhymes, and I hailed him as a fellow poet masquerading as an academic – a common phenomenon among Bengali-wallahs.

Then, at last night's Reception by the University of Lund that we were all invited to in the main building of the university (an imposing classical-style building dating from the early 1880s, designed by **Helgo Zettervall**, and recently re-painted a brilliant cream-white), I was delighted to meet my Norwegian friends **Torkel Brekke** and **Arild Engelsen Ruud**, both now lecturers in the University of Oslo. I reminded Torkel (who I first met when he was completing a D.Phil at Oxford on the re-interpretation in 19th century India of classical religious texts), of the hilarious occasion when I was in Oslo for a meeting of the European Network of Bangladesh Studies. The Network (which is now, it seems, defunct) had done a cheap deal with the Radisson Hotel in Oslo, on condition that we all shared rooms. I was put in a room with a professor from Delhi who was a hearty snorer – so hearty that I couldn't get a wink of sleep. In desperation, I rang Torkel and his wife **Margrete** and asked if I could come to their flat for a night. They received me warmly,

and fed me, I remember, with delicious fresh shrimps. I then decided, lest I cause offence to my room-companion, that I would brave his snores for the third and last night. Fortunately we were so well wined and dined that evening, that I slept like a log. Help! That dear gentleman may be here at this conference and may come to read this! Let him be assured that I'm quite capable of snoring myself these days, though my wife, I'm relieved to say, has not yet fled from my bed to alternative accommodation.

Arild I knew when he was doing a PhD at the LSE on social change in a village in West Bengal. He learnt *parishkar bangla* while during his fieldwork there. A prosperous married man now with three children, he reminded me that I had once promised to learn Norwegian. This – whatever my failure with Russian – is a promise I really would like to keep, though it seems from the ease with which Norwegians and Swedes talk to each other that Swedish might do just as well. I had already suggested to Dr **Jeanne Openshaw** of Edinburgh University (an expert on the Bauls of Bengal, a regular resident at Santiniketan, and another dear friend) that we go to one of the only two Swedish restaurants listed in the Lund handbook, and sample some cold herring. Arild and Torkel came along too, plus two of their friends from Lund University: **Olle Qvarnström**, Professor of the History of Religions and a Sanskritist, and **Bo Holmberg**, Professor of Semitic Languages and an expert on Syriac. Neither of them knew the restaurant (it takes a foreigner to find an authentic local restaurant), but they gamely came along to advise us in our choice of what was more like Swedish *nouvelle cuisine* than anything eaten by the farmers and fishermen of yore. The waiter described each of the four incarnations of herring on my plate, and I asked if I should eat them from left to right or right to left. It didn't matter, he said, and by the end of the evening (which finished in the Grand Hotel of Lund, and two glasses of *brännvin* – 'Swedish Schnapps' – for me with two of Professor Holmberg's exquisite small cigars) an awful lot didn't matter. Indeed, for anyone walking through the quiet streets of Lund under the lovely everlasting sky of a Swedish summer evening, why should anything matter?

Back to the matter of the conference, and an interesting conversation I had in the coffee-break this morning with Professor Dietmar Rothermund, retired now from the Südasien-Institut at Heidelberg but still the doyen of the European Modern South Asian Studies Conferences and President of the European Association of South Asian Studies. He told me how the Conferences arose from a German South Asian Conference he organised at Bad Herrenalb in the Black Forest in 1966. There were 89 participants, including the famous historians **Eric Stokes** and **Ashin Das Gupta**. Professor **Ben Farmer** of the Geography department at Cambridge suggested that a South Asian Studies Conference be held in Cambridge in 1968, and that was the start of the conferences, which have been held every two years, in the cities of Heidelberg (three times), Elsinore, Venice, Berlin, Toulouse, Prague, Edinburgh, to name but a few. Of course in the early days they were much smaller. The participants were all historians and political scientists, and all the sessions were plenary – making it possible to achieve 'a universe of discourse'. Could a conference grow too big for its own good? He said he thought the size (390 participants this year, the largest so far) was still manageable, though it was certainly now impossible to orchestrate the entire conference round a single theme. What about the claim – implicit in the uplifting inaugural session – that the researches of scholars could influence the decisions of politicians? Professor Rothermund was sceptical of this, but he did speak up for the Indo-German Consultative Group, which consisted of a mixture of business people 'and a few scholars' (including him) from India and Germany, and always completed its annual meeting with letters to the Heads of State of both countries making quite precise recommendations on matters such as Indo-German taxation agreements.

As for EASAS (the European Association for South Asian Studies), Professor Rothermund said it was a much younger organisation, and he and Professor **Jaroslav Vacek** of Charles University, Prague, had started it in 1997 mainly because there were already similar Associations for other regions (Japan, the Middle East, etc.), and they thought South Asian Studies should be represented too. The Association, which is administered by Professor **Dirk Kolff** of Leiden University, collected subscriptions and produced a small newsletter. Members got a reduction in their registration fees for the South Asian Studies Conferences. Otherwise the Association did 'very little'.

I thought about this further – and about the general issue of the nexus between academic research and government policy – when I stepped into Lund's magnificent Romanesque Cathedral (which is on the edge of the University area), and happened to catch a short mid-day service. As I listened to magical tones of the prayers and Gospel in Swedish, I reflected that, like the Church, academic activity may only rarely influence political action, but it is a kind of control on it. If religious leaders can (sometimes) exert moral control on politicians – stop them going too far in corruption or criminality, so academics can (sometimes) stop politicians from pursuing policies that stray too far from rationality or truth. Or at any rate it is comforting to think that they can.

So maybe Professor Rothermund was being too modest about the impact of the Conferences and of the European Association of South Asian Studies. He was more upbeat about the opportunities Conferences gave to energetic young scholars, and I found this entirely borne out by a paper I heard before lunch in Panel 31, 'Political Development and the Process of Democratisation in South Asia'. Given by **Hans Gorm Norden Andersen**, a brilliant young researcher from the Department for International Development Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark, the paper argued, from field work done in Nepal, that competition between political parties at the local level could have a significant impact on development, as a party that built schools, roads, or drains could attract votes. An excellent paper, in perfect English, presented with skilful use of tables and charts on an OHP. Here one felt that the purpose of the conference, as defined in the inaugural session, and the content and quality of an individual paper, were in perfect harmony: crisp fresh bread, and an appetising filling of freshly-caught herring.

Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more! as the old Welsh hymn goes, and I had better squeeze in one more bite of the sandwich before today's panels close at 5 p.m. today with a guided tour round Old Lund. Tomorrow I may not manage to write anything, as the Bengal Studies panel fills the whole day. Two more Sibelius String Quartets to listen to as well, with I hope something profound to be gained from his 'Intimate Voices' Quartet in D Minor, Op. 56 (1909) – the only string quartet from Sibelius's mature period.

9 July

11.35 a.m.

Despite a very long day yesterday and a late night, I woke up early enough this morning to listen to the Intimate Voices Quartet: a truly great work. The serene dialogue between the viola and cello at the beginning, with all four instruments coming in together after that, reminded me of the calm and harmonious dialogue we enjoyed during our Bengal Studies panel yesterday; and the fifth movement – an energetic Allegro – made me think of how the captivating, exhilarating energy of a conference must, if the conference has any useful purpose at all, have a core of seriousness. As the commentary on the recording of the Sibelius quartets puts it (a masterly recording from Finland, by the

Sibelius Academy Quartet): 'This display of energy does not conceal the fundamental seriousness of the music: the two heavy and unrelenting D minor chords in the final bars form a logical conclusion to all that has gone before them.'

Before I address both the harmony and seriousness, however, I must thank Dr **Bo Badr Saleem Lindblad**, Professor Emeritus of International Child Health at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and Visiting Professor, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan, for giving me some guidance on Swedish music. He recommended the works of **Hugo Alfvén** (1872-1962), and also gave me the names of **Hilding Rosenberg** and **Lars-Erik Larsson** (the only Swedish composer I had actually heard of, as his 'Pastoral Suite' is quite widely performed in Britain, particularly by youth orchestras). I shall go to Lund's main music shop before I leave, to see if I can buy some CDs. I met Dr Lindblad at a delightful private dinner on Wednesday evening hosted by **Lars Eklund** (the Conference Webmaster) and his Bengali wife **Bubu Munshi**, to which Professor **Swapna Bhattacharya** of the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, Calcutta University was also invited. The evening could hardly have been more international, as Professor Bhattacharya is both a fluent German speaker (having done her PhD at the Südasiens-Institut in Heidelberg, under Professor Rothermund) and an expert of Burma, Dr Lindblad is married to a Kashmiri, Mrs Eklund prefers to talk to her husband in Swedish rather than English (though her cooking has remained *khāti bangali*), and their younger son **Daniel** is highly accomplished on the viola but also plays the sitar. I accompanied him on the piano towards the end of the evening, but I could not persuade his father to get out his clarinet.

Dr Lindblad is from the Swedish island of Gotland. Among the many interesting things we learnt on a guided tour of Old Lund on Wednesday evening, was that an exceptionally rare fern grows in only two places in the world: the walls of Lund Cathedral, and the walls of the Cathedral at Visby on Gotland. What a fascinating country this is! I have to restrain myself from devoting the bulk of this diary to Sweden, rather than to South Asia, as this is only my second visit to Sweden and my curiosity about its history, society, language, literature and music holds no bounds. The guided tour alone could fill many pages, but I'll pass over Lund's Lady Bishop (a former riding champion, apparently, and owner of five horses), the Vikings and their runes, **Carl von Linné** (who studied in Lund and was later to claim that 'God made the world but Linnaeus ordered it'), or the amazing astronomical clock of 1425 that is the Cathedral's most unusual feature, and restrict myself to a story we were told in front of a sculpture in the crypt of a giant clutching a column. The story goes (something) like this. A giant agreed to help with the building of the cathedral, but asked for the sun, moon and stars as payment. The priest who was negotiating with him said this was impossible, and the giant demanded the eyes of the priest instead. When the work was nearly complete, the giant said he would only finish it off if he was paid his fee. The priest was so distraught that the giant relented enough to say that he would release him from the fee if the priest could find out his name by the next morning. At a loss to know how he could discover this, the priest went out into the wilderness to cry. He happened to hear the giant's wife in her cave mentioning her husband's name: Finn. The priest rushed back and called out to the giant, 'Finn, Finn, put the last stone in.' The giant burst into a rage and attempted to tear down the cathedral. At which God directed the sun's rays at him like a laser, and he was turned to stone, clutching the pillar to this day.

Not a story that I can connect with the Modern South Asian Studies conference in any way, but having talked to Professor Staffan Lindberg, the Conference Convenor, over lunch today, I do find more and more logic in the conjunction of South Asia, Sweden, and development that is giving the Conference its 'fundamental seriousness'. In Donald

Connery's book *The Scandinavians*, in a passage about **Tage Erlander**, Social Democratic prime minister of Sweden from 1946 to 1969, I find: 'Erlander talked about many other things, but none so fervently as his feeling that the sense of solidarity which Swedes have with each other is now being extended to a sense of responsibility for what is happening to people elsewhere in the world. "Swedes are now asking, What are we doing for the rest of the world? What about the millions who are dying while we live well? There is a feeling of moral responsibility."'

That was in the 1960s, but judging by the plenary session last night on 'Poverty and Human Development in South Asia', the feeling is still very much alive. No one could fail to be shocked and sobered by the statistics we heard from Dr **Ghanshyam Shah** of JNU in Delhi, and from Dr **Zulfiqar Bhutta** of the Aga Khan University, Karachi. Dr Shah argued that economic growth in the region had not achieved the progress that neo-liberals had hoped for in overcoming inequality, malnutrition, unemployment and other poverty indicators; yet the examples of Sri Lanka and Scandinavia showed that it was possible, through the right kind of intervention, to achieve rates of improvement in human development faster than economic growth. Dr Bhutta, Husein Lalji Dewraj Professor of Paediatrics and Child Health at the Aga Khan University – and a master of the art of Powerpoint presentation – spoke of how the knowledge of what interventions to make definitely existed, but the political will to achieve them often did not, and that our greatest obstacle was 'a poverty of imagination'.

Tired as I was after a whole day with the Bengal Studies panel from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (too tired, in fact, to stay for the third speaker **Meera Nanda** and the discussion), I found myself wondering if fatigue – the fatigue of people of good will in innumerable spheres of government, education, health, or academic research – might not be an even more basic obstacle, especially in exhausting tropical climates. Human energy is often remarkable, and there are many people who try to direct their energy to the benefit of others, but no energy is unlimited. Dr Shah told us that 75% of Indian villages have primary schools, but 25% of teachers do not regularly attend. Why not? Dr Bhutta spoke of how researchers on public health often concentrate on the 'immediate determiners' of ill health rather than the political and economic background factors that produce those determiners. Could this be because such things are more complicated and exhausting to research? Dr Bhutta spoke with optimism about the role of universities in 'evidence generation and in advocacy'; he called for a new drive towards 'inter-sectoral research and collaboration', towards bringing medicine and economics closer together. If this is not happening, I wondered, could academics look more closely at why? If a consensus is reviving that responsible governments do have to intervene, that human development cannot be left to the market, and yet there is still a gulf between aim and performance, could we try harder to understand why? If human development depends – as Professor Lindberg told us at the beginning of the conference – on human agency, are there reasons that we could address as to why human agency, even when it is full of good intentions, is often ineffective?²

Yet in many spheres it *is* effective, and we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves: much good work *is* done, and much *is* achieved. At a lecture this morning by Professor Udaya Narayana Singh, first speaker in the panel on 'Globalisation, technological advances and minority languages in South Asia', I was impressed at the effort already being made in India to preserve vast numbers of minority languages. The figures he gave us staggered

² I've since been told by **Roger** and **Patricia Jeffery** of Edinburgh University, with whom I had lunch at Copenhagen Airport on Sunday, that there *are* 'plenty of studies' looking at why interventions in aid and development are often ineffective.

me: 1576 'rationalised mother-tongues'; 1796 'other mother tongues; 22 constitutional languages; the largest non-scheduled language, Bhili with 5.57 million speakers; 38 language groups asking for constitutional recognition...The scale of the effort, the number of agencies and institutions involved – the size and complexity of India, the sheer fact that she does not as a democracy and nation sink beneath the weight of this complexity, that she can pull off organisational feats such as the recent general election: all this is truly humbling.

What was Professor Lindberg's view, I asked him over lunch, of the contribution that researchers and academics could make to these efforts? You should talk to the representatives of SIDA who are here, he said – they are listening, they are taking the conference seriously.

But their problem, my problem, anyone's problem with a large conference and so much going on at once, is how to hear the whole orchestra, how to know which instruments to listen to more carefully than others. Even within a single panel, such as my own on Bengal Studies which I attended from beginning to end, how to evaluate the ultimate usefulness or importance of the papers? We ranged – cheerfully, harmoniously, but unpredictably – from medieval Bengali Mahabharatas to Patuya scroll painters, from 'genitive subjects' in Bengali grammar to the education of Bengali women, from a Halle University project on Bengali 'literary historiography' to the Baul concept of the self, from the bilingual French-Bengali writer **Lokenath Bhattacharya** to Bengali Ayurveda. I had my own views about which papers were better than others, in terms of clarity or originality, but an inchoate piece of research – at an early stage in its development – might later prove to be of more significance than something more polished. Yes, we're all playing in an orchestra, but we do not know who is composing or scoring the music; we don't even know if there is any composer at all.

What we do know, however – and perhaps this is another thing to think quite profoundly about – is that virtually all the participants in a conference are trying, as best they can, to express the truth: the truth about whatever they are studying. In a world in which there is always plenty of deceit and mendacity, this alone is a thoroughly positive goal, and may, more than anything else, account for the wholesome, happy, enthusiastic mood of a wide-ranging, free-spirited, unregimented conference such as this. We have been eating the bread of intellectual liberty, and breathing the air of good-tempered discussion and debate. 'Possibly the purest air you'll ever breathe,' says *The Rough Guide to Sweden*, and this is perhaps another reason for finding Lund a uniquely appealing venue.

The paradox is that inside that wholesome bread come fillings of danger, suffering and fear. We listen to the grim statistics on poverty, yet dance out into the clear Scandinavian night, for a carefree meal in one of Lund's delightful restaurants. I listen to Professor **Zafar Nawaz Jaspal** of the Department of International Relations, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad on nuclear weapons strategy in Pakistan and India, and come away from that grim subject with a smile on my face, because I have been impressed and cheered by the clear objectivity of his analysis, his ability to see things in a fresh way, his practical realism, his emphasis on how to 'rationalise a bad reality' by further strengthening measures and agreements that will reduce the risk of nuclear accident or theft, stabilise the balance of deterrence, ensure that the weapons are there only to prevent war and never to fight it. Is this the ultimate paradox of the academic pursuit of truth: that in the pursuit of the truth about even a horrible subject, there is interest, fulfilment and joy?

As I sit in the Conference Computer Room and tap out these thoughts, it occurs to me that the Information Revolution, the electronic technology that makes academic communication worldwide so easy, the retrieval of information so breathtakingly fast, the workings of the organisation that has been responsible for this conference, SASNET: the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (<http://www.sasnet.lu.se>) – founded by Professor Lindberg and his colleagues in 2001 – so speedy and efficient, all this is another source of joy. It may also be a topic in **Madeleine Bunting's** recent book, *Willing Slaves: Why the Overwork Culture is Ruining Our Lives* (Hamish Hamilton, 2004), but at a Conference far away from one's normal tasks and responsibilities, we have the joy of the technology and not the frenzy of it, the fun and not the fears.

Time now for a short break before the Conference's business meeting at 5 p.m.; then the Conference Dinner; then home, though not for me – I'm staying an extra day, which I shall devote to the a jaunt to the resort of Ystad and a visit to Ales Stenar, the Iron Age stone circle that is Sweden's Stonehenge. There'll be a bit more to add, no doubt, to the diary, when I get back to London; but all too soon – I know from past experience – the exhilaration of the Conference will fade, and its mood music will become, at best, the Adagio of the Intimate Voices quartet, whose 'broadly singing mood echoes warmly comforting and painfully nostalgic sentiments in turn.'

12 July

11.00 a.m.

Back at my desk in London, I must now finish this diary, and have been encouraged to do so by an email from Lars Eklund, who has read the rough draft of what I wrote up to the end of Wednesday, and tells me: '*I really like your combination of casual observations, personal reflections and some detailed reviews of panels/papers, and naturally your references to classical music. (Did you manage to get hold of some Swedish composers?)*' I was worried that he might think my musings utterly self-indulgent and preposterous! But I think more and more that what I have been trying to do is capture with anecdote, imagery and autobiography the central problem of how, on the one hand, to 'make things work' for the betterment of humankind, and how to make the researches of scholars – and gatherings of scholars such as this conference – relevant to that endeavour. Because we do not have a clear verbal solution to that problem, I keep reaching for music. Will Swedish music help me more than the disturbing complexity of the mature Sibelius? I managed to rush to the music shop just before the Conference's business meeting on Friday afternoon, and found a CD of Hugo Alfvén's First Symphony with assorted shorter pieces; and a CD of the 'Best of Lars-Erik Larsson'. I have been listening to these CDs at intervals ever since – in my hotel room on Saturday morning before I set off for Ystad, Kåseberga and Ales Stenar, then again in the evening, and then in Copenhagen Airport on Sunday while waiting for my flight to London – and have found myself thinking as often before on how music is both the most international of languages, yet also the most national. I adore the brooding lyricism of the second movement ('Romance') of Larsson's Pastoral Suite, and a similar quality of intense string sound in the 'Adagio cantabile' of his 'Little Serenade for String Orchestra'; but the piece that for me has already become the epitome of Sweden and of the experience of this conference is Alfvén's Uppsalarsapsodi Op.24, also known as his Swedish Rhapsody No. 2. It was commissioned in 1907 for the celebrations at Uppsala University of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Linnaeus, and was modelled in some ways on **Brahms'** Academic and Festival Overture. Apparently it did not go down well with the Dean of the University, who took exception to Alfvén's use of student drinking-

songs for some of the themes of his rhapsody. According to the notes on the CD: 'Towards the end of the piece the horns paraphrase the drinking-song *Helan går* (Down in One), and, with the help of the clarinets, they describe the passage down the throat.'

What strikes me about the piece is its solid, well-made, rational character, combined with glowing romanticism and a capacity for exuberance and even anarchy. At the Conference's business meeting, Lars Eklund and Staffan Lindberg apologized for some of the more anarchic aspects of the conference, though the majority of comments were warmly appreciative of its smooth and sensible organization. What might seem to some anarchic was, Lars Eklund implied, an inevitable consequence of academic freedom: the autonomy of the convenors of the panels, their right to organise their panels how they liked. Somebody asked: 'Could the panels have started slightly later in the day (8 a.m. being too early for some participants), with shorter coffee-breaks?' 'The hour long coffee-break was there to allow some flexibility to convenors,' answered Professor Lindberg; it was not envisaged as 'a full hour of compulsory, mandatory coffee-drinking'. Those unforgettable words, in his beautiful Swedish intonation, summed up his sense of humour; but we also had his and his nation's passion and commitment in his story of the conference desk at Lund Station. If in Sweden, of all places, it was now as difficult as this to place a desk in a station, what about the difficulties of delivering effective education and health care to the masses of South Asia, where neo-liberal economics had also come to prevail? And how could the next European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies be planned in such a way that our expertise and research could be better translated into action? This was the challenge, this was the 'mission' – and his use of the word made me think that perhaps the confusion of 'South Asian' with 'Salvation' that began my week so amusingly was not so absurd after all.

Yet, as discussions went on at the business meeting about whether a socially useful central theme would help it to secure funding – a focus on Aids, or on education, or (Professor Lindberg's own suggestion) on the balance between 'government, market and civil society' – the worry also arose (expressed by one or more participants) that if that was done, less 'useful' branches of learning might be neglected. Are not philology, history, archaeology, also important instruments in the orchestra?

And the Dinner that followed the business meeting reminded us – more than Alfvén's boisterous Uppsala Rhapsody reminded Uppsala's humourless Dean – that the purpose of an international conference is also to have fun, to create fellowship and harmony. As we piled our plates high with shrimps and herring (our South Asian visitors wondering, perhaps, why in the cold climate of Scandinavia people eat so much cold food), refilled our wine-glasses applauded Professor Rothermund's gracious presentation of red roses, one by one, to the students and others who had helped to run the conference, and watched the venerable, antique-costumed dancers after the dinner who showed us that in Sweden, at least, one is never too old to dance, one could once again persuade oneself that for 400 people from all over the world to meet in the harmonious and sociable pursuit of truth, is good in itself, even if our impact on the region's dismaying poverty indicators remains so slight.

'Finn, Finn, put the last stone in.' Which stone should I choose? Whisked off by Torkel, Olle and Bo to the 'Bishop's Arms', where I made a foolhardy attempt to drink some rather bitter Swedish schnapps slowly (if I'd listened to Alfvén's Rhapsody beforehand, I would have known it is better to down it in one), I missed the climax of the dancing. **(Kerstin Andersson, of the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg, writes: 'It ended in a very nice way. They had Lund's Folk dance team to perform traditional Swedish dances, and they managed to get everyone to participate in**

the final dances. So Swedes, Indians, Germans, Englishmen, Italians and so on were all united in a traditional Swedish folk dance!')

So I'll end instead with my solitary trip to Ales Stenar. It was a challenge to get there in post-modern Sweden, as buses are scanty on a Saturday, and the timetable did not conform to what I had been told in the tourist office. But by dint of bus to Sjöbo, two hour wait there for bus to Ystad, taxi, refreshment in the fish restaurant at Kåseberga, and a walk up the hillside in a ferocious wind, I made it. I walked ritualistically past each one of the 58 standing stones, arranged in the shape of a ship, and sited so that the horizon forms a perfect flat circle – 180° sea, 180° land – counting them off, and wondering if anything that our science and scholarship will achieve will last as long as this 'symbol of might and faith'. Those who conceived it, planned it and built it, dragging the stones into position, and leaving them for hundreds of subsequent generations to ponder, didn't need an orchestra, or a conference, or computers, or a diary to tell us that in the long run everything comes down to sea, earth, stone, wind and sky, and that for however much we can do, there is at least an equal amount that we can't.

But that is no reason, our generous, earnest, kind-hearted Swedish hosts have repeatedly shown us, not to keep doing what we can. Best wishes for the future of SASNET!

Hjärtligt tack från oss alla.

William Radice

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK



**More information on the conference,
including day-by-day reports with photos to be found at
[http://larseklund.in/Old.sasnet.lu.se-23.april/sasnet.lu.se/
wwwroot/EASAS18.html](http://larseklund.in/Old.sasnet.lu.se-23.april/sasnet.lu.se/wwwroot/EASAS18.html)**