



SASNET lecture at Lund University:

The Maldives – Paradise Lost?



Nils Finn Munch-Petersen

Senior expert, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), Copenhagen

Tuesday 27 April 2010, 13.15 – 15.00

Venue: Conference room, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies (ACE), Lund University
(Ideon Alfa 1 Building, Scheelevägen 15 D, first floor)

Organised by: Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET), Lund University

Seminar Abstract:

The Maldivian Islands lie close to India and Sri Lanka but Maldivian society virtually unknown to the outside world. Maldivian history goes back to the 12th Century when the Islands, under the influence of Arabian traders, converted from Buddhism to become an Islamic sultanate. The Islands are distinct from other South Asian nations by having a homogeneous population with its own language and script and a very high level of literacy, as well as the absence of caste, and an open marriage structure, where having been married to a number of different partners is considered normal for both women and men.

At present the islands are known as a "Paradise destination" for tourists with luxury resorts and a yearly receipt of more than half a million tourists. However, tourist resorts are exclusively found on uninhabited islands and as a consequence holiday visitors, diplomats, researchers and journalists only experience the capital and tourist islands – a minimal and atypical part of Maldivian society.

Presently the Maldives are threatened by a rise in sea level due to expected global warming. More immediate threats are a break-down of society caused by a growing economic and demographic imbalance precipitated by uncontrolled tourism growth and the influx of lowly-paid foreign workers, leading to social inequality, unemployed youth, narcotics related criminality and growing Islamic fundamentalism.

Nils Finn Munch-Petersen



is a senior expert at NIAS (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies). He is Mag. Scient. in Social Anthropology and holds minor degrees in Zoology, Botany and Geology.

After field research in South India, Nils Finn first visited the Maldives in 1974 as the first social scientist in the islands, and travelled extensively in the Northern and Southern Atolls. From 1977 to 1979 he followed up his research in the islands and visited 120 of the 201 inhabited islands as well as numerous uninhabited islands. Since then, he has visited and worked in the islands for UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank and the German GTZ

in 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1989, 1990, 1991, 2006 and 2008. Due to his critique of misconceived Danish projects by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was never allowed to work for Danish aid in the Maldives.

Becoming an atoll society specialist, Nils Finn has also worked extensively in the island nations of the Pacific Ocean, notably in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Northern Tonga as well as with coral conservation and community projects in the Andaman Islands, Mozambique, Egypt, Philippines, Vietnam and Yemen.

Through the years Nils Finn has written extensively on the Maldives, including articles in the Swedish magazine SYDASIEN, and the Yale Encyclopedia of World Cultures. And he is the foremost, non-Maldivian, world specialist on the Maldivian Islands.

An extensive CV can be found on NIAS' website:
http://nias.ku.dk/research/nils_finn_munch-petersen