

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

The Maldives: Paradise on Earth

by Rahat Fahmida

On the occasion of the august visit today of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Maldives, and current Chairman of SAARC, The Daily Star publishes this feature on his picturesque country which marches ahead towards a future of self-sufficiency.

The last paradise left on earth, says a booklet of an international hotel about the Maldives. It is undoubtedly true to a great extent, visible to many of us who were not fortunate enough to visit the island, from photographs.

This islands have evolved as coral reef ecosystems developing around volcanic ridges in the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean. The Maldives comprises of 19 coral reef atolls off the southern coast of India. Often marked as mere dots on the map of the world, the Maldives is an archipelago of 1,190 coral islands. There are only 200 inhabited islands. During the British colonial days this was an outpost of the British navy and airforce.

As segments of coral collect on the reef, an island ecosystem develops around it. Islands emerge as tiny sand bars devoid of vegetation which eventually get colonised by marine life, plants and trees carried by the sea and by birds and other forms of life. The islands finally develop into self-sustainable environments suitable for human habitation. The geography of these islands has given them unique and distinctive characteristics in every respect. It has developed a complex social organisation and helped the people of the Maldives to maintain a long history of political, social and economic independence.

The Maldives is a 100 per cent Muslim country. It has a language of its own — Dhivehi — developed over centuries and a script called Thaana in which 95 per cent of the population of the Maldives are literate. The country has a wealth of literature and customs and traditions all of which give the Maldivian people a distinct identity. It has a population of 214,000.

Today it has emerged under the leadership of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (52). The Maldives attained independence from British rule on July 26, 1965 and Mr Gayoom has been President since November 11, 1978. Before that he served in a number of government posts. He also served as the UN permanent representative of Maldives.

President Gayoom polled a majority of 92.9 per cent of the popular vote in the referendum to become President after being nominated by the Citizens' Majlis. He was re-elected in 1988 for a third consecutive term of five years by a majority of 96.37 per cent.

The Citizens' Majlis comprises of 48 members; two members elected from each of the 19 atolls, two elected from Male and eight members nominated by the President. Members of the Majlis are elected for a period of five years by universal adult suffrage. The Citizens' Majlis has the power to enact laws within the framework of the constitution and sanction the annual national budget. Ministers can participate in the sittings of the Majlis but cannot vote unless they are members. The Citizens' Majlis is an institution over 50 years old and it is headed by the Speaker.

It has an independent judicial system based on the Sharia. The country is divided

into 19 administrative regions called atolls. Each atoll is administered by an Atoll Chief appointed by the President and acting under the guidance of the Ministry of Atoll Administration. The island of Male with a population of 56,000 is the country's capital, and the social, political and commercial centre of Maldivian life.

The Maldives has experienced rapid economic change in the past twenty-five years. The traditional subsistence economy based primarily on fisheries, agriculture and the collection and export of shells, gradually changed as the economy opened up to international markets and trade. The import of rice, flour, sugar as

well as other consumer products increased steadily. The range of exports expanded and replaced traditional export of commodities of copra and

other coconut and marine based products. External trade increased, and the need for a national shipping line became imperative. Shipping

soon became the largest foreign exchange earner of the country while fishing and agriculture remained an integral part of the economy.

The development of tourism has resulted in an overall expansion of the economy. The spread of its benefits has provided direct and

indirect employment and income generating opportunities in other industries such as fisheries, construction, carpentry, boat building, printing, and mechanical repair.

Tourism in the Maldives began in the early 1970s. The first few tourists that came were small groups or individuals, and the country began to be recognised as an international tourist destination. The Maldives offered the unspoiled beauty of tropical islands which made it an ideal holiday spot.

At that time the demand for international travel was high and the steady flow of tourists since then has created a thriving industry that is the

single most contributor to national development today. It is an important source of government revenue, as more than 100,000 tourists a year visit the Maldives today.

The opening of the Male International Airport in 1981 provided the gateway to the Maldives. Around fifty international flights a week fly to the Male International Airport during the peak season.

Traditional handicrafts like lacquer work, mat weaving and the creation of souvenirs from black coral, tortoise shell and shells-crafts have revived. As tourism flourished, 'tourist shops' began to spring up both in the islands and in Male along with a profitable informal souvenir trade.

The supply of local agricultural and marine foods have earned indirect employment opportunities in these occupations. While there is still some concern about the environmental impacts of tourism development, the positive effects of tourism have integrated the economy and increased the national product.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has always been involved in social welfare work and particularly helped those in need of medical care and attention. The last decade in the Maldives has seen a rise in the standards of health and education, the development of communications between the islands and with the outside world.

In the international arena, the Maldives has become an active member of a number of international organisations including the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth, the Islamic Conference and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The Maldives maintains diplomatic and trade relations with a large number of countries all over the world.

As one of the founding fathers of the SAARC, President Gayoom hosted the Association's sixth summit in November 1990, and he is thus the current Chairman of SAARC. It was in the same year that the Maldives celebrated its 25th year of independence.

SAARC has two main objectives. One non-political in nature, stressing national development through socio-economic and cultural cooperation.

The other the creation of a stable, peaceful regional order in South Asia. Mr Gayoom stresses and is working towards both with equal importance as the Association's current Chairman.

It is the diplomacy and ingenuity, resilience and bravery and the free spirit of the homogeneous people of the Maldives that has ensured a history of independence. The Maldives, though small in size and despite many tasks ahead, continues towards a future of independence and self-sufficiency.



Countless tourists visit the islands dubbed as 'the last paradise on earth.'



Coconut trees drape the vast expanse of beaches overlooking the sea.

OF SAND, SUN AND SCUBA DIVING

by Fayza Haq

ONE wonders how Maldives is so different in its religious belief from its neighbour India. Legend has it that the fierce seamanster Raanamani haunted the islands and demanded human sacrifice. Beautiful young maidens were regularly slaughtered by this demon until a Muslim, Abul Barkath Yousuf Al-Barbary, appeared on the scene. By reciting verses from the holy Quran he frightened the monster that slithered away. The ruler Kalaminja was so struck by this new religion that he immediately converted into the Islamic faith which is today a part and parcel of Maldivian society.

The people of Maldives are rich in legends. The earliest history speaks of an Aryan prince who became the ruler of an aboriginal race, who welcomed the newcomer to the island because of his superior navigational skills. Whether the story of prince Kiomala is true or not the island was settled by Aryan immigrants who colonised Sri Lanka as well.

About 974 A.D. an Arab trav-

eller came here and took back wonderful stories of pearls, spices, coconuts, dried fish, and abundance of cowrie shells, which was the accepted currency till the sixteenth century. The news of this resulted in more traders and travellers visiting the islands. Early traders must have found Buddhist customs in Maldives as Buddhist statues have been excavated in one of the atolls. The greatest influence was that of the Arab and Persian travellers.

The name of 84 sultans are recorded in Maldivian history. The first king of the Male Dynasty was King Kiomala who renamed himself Sultan Mohammed bin Abdullah. During the Hilali period Maldives was opened up to the world.

In the sixteenth century Captain Andres Andre and his garrison ruled over the Maldives for 15 years. But these invaders were driven out by Mohammed Thakurufaan. There are a lot of songs and tales about how Thakurufaan wiped out the Portuguese and then ruled over Maldives pros-

perously and well producing the Utheem dynasty.

During the Dutch and British colonial period of India and Sri Lanka the Maldivians proudly maintained their own supremacy. Today they keep to their own culture and avoid negative influences of the world outside.

As a teacher of English in Male and Gan for four years I had ample opportunity to get to know the Maldivian education system. The school children, who wear spotlessly white uniforms, are taught Arabic and Dhivehi, apart from English. They are full of life and enthusiasm.

The traditional education developed over the years involved 'Kiyavaage', 'Makhtab', 'Madhrasa'. This system deserves praise as it has ushered in 93% of literacy. Most of the Makhtabs teach how to read and write in Dhivehi and Arabic, as well as do some basic arithmetic. Even in the far-flung islands the schools have a strong constructive influence.

As there is a shortage of teachers there are teacher-training programmes, while many instructors are imported from India and Sri Lanka as well as Pakistan and Bangladesh.

A lot of the food that I ate during my four year stay in the Maldives was flown in from Sri Lanka and India or shipped from elsewhere. What was fresh and cheap was the fish. With traps, trawl lines or by hand, the fish is caught in the 'Dhoni'. Fishing is the backbone of the Maldivian life and economy. Marlin, sailfish, skipjack and massive tuna are netted without difficulty. Known as 'Maldivian Fish' the dried skipjack is the basic export of the country.

As office workers ride away in their bicycles, trolleys laden with fresh tuna and skipjack, make their sale from door to door. Drivers stop their cars and fill the boot with seafood.

Fish provides a large percentage of domestic product as well as job opportunities. With the vast sea resources the fish

export grows. Fish is the main source of protein for the islanders as it is consumed in large bulks.

There is a fish canning plant at the island of Felvaru. The entire process takes four days. There are the latest equipments and sophisticated quality control. Felvaru is the coldest part of Maldives with its ice plant and cold storage.

Tuna waste is processed into fishmeal. The workers learn the skill of modern techniques with relative ease.

In the Maldives one often longs for fresh fruit and vegetable yet there is some agriculture to be found in the turquoise blue archipelago. Sweet potatoes, cassava, finger millets, sorghum and bajra are grown in some places. The land also yields green beans, onions and spinach. Although rice is not cultivated it is the staple diet. Bakeries in Male produce good bread and cakes. Needless to say, bananas and coconuts are found here in plenty.

Although I stayed in the more urbanised areas of Gan and Male I could not help being conscious of the lure of tourism. It is said that the best diving in the world is found in the Maldives. The islands are scattered in a chain pattern across the equator. Visitors come to unspoiled romantic white beaches with uncomplicated, unhurried life.

Mass tourism has not spoiled the natural landscape or adversely affected the place in any way. The visitors are totally overwhelmed by the underwater landscape as well as the surrounding blue ocean. Many island resorts have modern bungalows and each resort is a complete community of its own. Discos, restaurants and bars cater to the needs of the visitors who have come for a quiet holiday. A lot of the country's economy depends on the vacationing visitors who go in for wind-surfing, scuba-diving, water-skiing and fishing. On arrival the visitors automatically get 30 days visa, and this is very encouraging.

BARBARA Miller, a beautiful blue-eyed blonde, believes that in a previous life she was born black. For it is black people to whom she has devoted her life.

She was married to a handsome, mustachioed Aboriginal and has an 11-year-old son, Michael, who has been 'adopted' by black communities all over Cape York Peninsula.

Barbara is Secretariat Director of the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council in Cairns, and the other day she shocked Australians with a report she delivered to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, warning that Aborigines "as a powerless group, have turned their rage in on themselves."

This explained, she said, in her quiet, unemotional voice, cell suicides, self-injury, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. "And, of course, alcoholism."

Barbara Miller has been fighting for justice for black Australians since 1970. She married Mick Miller, a dashing schoolteacher she encountered at a meeting on injustice. They are no longer together.

Aborigines living in the scattered communities on Cape York trust her, and have confided their problems, fears and despair as they never had before to a European.

Cairns, said when he read her report: "It isn't just because she was married to an Aborigine that Barbara has such an understanding of Aborigines. Her attitude is such that even if she had not married Mick Miller, she would still have been accepted."

"There are certain people who deal with Aborigines in a detached manner, whereas Barbara almost becomes an Aborigine, she can really feel for the people."

"She not only understands Aboriginal ways, but when she puts it on paper, all she has to do is reach within herself; she's got it all in her head, and has had it there for so long."

Gladys Tybingoomba, 44, and Alison Woolia '42, both from Aurukun community on Cape York, sat talking with "Auntie" Barbara and myself about her empathy with Aborigines. "I know I'm not Aboriginal," Barbara had said. "It's just that I feel in tune with Aboriginal people. I relate to them as my family."

Gladys: "Her outside appearance is white. But she has a black heart and a black mind. Even though Auntie Barbara and Uncle Mick are not together now, she never put her back on us. She is loyal. We trust her and she trusts us. When she arrives it is like a queen arriving. A tribal leader."

Alison Woolia, looking steadily across at Auntie Barbara: "They say that maybe you were a child somewhere else,

White Woman with a Black Heart

Barbara Miller has been fighting for justice for black Australians for two decades and now people living in scattered communities in Queensland have confided their problems, fears and despairs to her as they never have before to a European. by Desmond Zwar

a black child; and your spirit died and you were born into another world from us and you have come again to us."

Barbara Miller — suddenly emotional: "Well, I wasn't going to say it, but that's how I feel."

Barbara's office is the "umbrella" of Cape York Aboriginal community councils; advising them on their socio-economic development, and acting as an on-the-spot observer of what is going wrong in the sometimes depressing row of weatherboard houses with broken louvres often clustered around a canteen.

Lou Wyvill, whose Commission has spent more than a year sitting in community halls trying to get at the underlying reason Aborigines suicide, asked Barbara Miller to go out among the people and get additional evidence for him. What

she discovered was "rage turned inward."

She says: "Black crime in Australia is not directed against whites as it is in the USA, but against other blacks. Generally against the Aboriginal's own family; his wife, girlfriend or de-facto are the most likely victims. Men are fighting their brothers, fathers and uncles and bashing their mothers. Women are running away from sons-in-law and grandmothers are being raped by their grandsons."

Alcohol, does not in itself, says Barbara Miller, cause violence. "Alcohol is used by Aborigines as an anxiety-reducing agent; to cope with the stresses attendant on colonisation and racism. Alcohol abuse has become a way of defying white authority."

"I have seen children hanging about outside the canteen



MILLER: back to her roots

drinking glasses of beer. It is nothing to see children with \$20 notes in gambling games at a community on pay or pen-

sion days. Children are neglected. They arrive at school or pre-school unfed or undernourished, tired and with

short concentration spans, especially after pay or pension nights.

"When I visited Community C I was told that cases of sexually transmitted diseases are dealt with every day, occurring in children as young as five. It is usually teenage boys who are the perpetrators, abusing young girls and boys. Some young boys are violated with sharp sticks being shoved repeatedly in their anus. The children won't talk about it and are receiving no help besides medical treatment." Barbara Miller's investigations have also brought suggested remedies—some already being put into action. "Because Aboriginal men no longer have initiation as a 'marker' between youth and manhood, young men are using a jail sentence as the marker."

"Initiation is now rarely practised in North Queensland and the first time a male Aboriginal gets drunk or goes to jail, tends to fill that vacuum. We are hoping to get together with elders and young people to do something about a traditional marker; for some it might mean bringing back initiation."

Another suggestion: "dry" houses where alcohol may not be consumed. And "tough love", a scheme first tried among the American Indians "who have many problems matching Aborigines' problems."

"Most programmes deal with the person who is the al-

coholic", explained Barbara, who does not drink. "Tough Love is directed at the spouse. She needs to take responsibility for her own life and not be overly responsible for the alcoholic's life. Because that tends to happen. They cover up for the alcoholic, to save face."

"In Tough Love the spouse is advised to say: 'OK, if you come home drunk, I'm not going to cook your dinner.' When he asks for money or grog, she won't give it to him. It means punch-ups. But they get punched up whether they cook the dinner or not, whether they give money or not."

"But we are finding that it is working. They are not always getting punched up. What is happening is that the spouse is getting her self-esteem back and is starting to take responsibility for herself, not just her husband. And this is forcing the husband to take responsibility for himself."

Barbara Miller goes to work every day in an under-budged, understaffed office in Cairns that is looked on with respect by both Aboriginal communities and government.

Is she happy? "Oh," she laughs. "Very much so. And I have only recently found I am able to forgive the churches and the missionaries for what they did, possibly with the best will in the world, to the Aborigines in the early days."

— GEMINI NEWS