THE ECONOMIC MAKE-UP OF THE MALDIVIAN SOCIETY......
AN HISTORICAL OVER-VIEW

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The most striking feature of the Maldives as a nation has been her ability
to maintain herself as an integral nation-state. Consisting of over 1,300 islands,
of which only 200 are inhabited, Maldives (or Dhivehi Raajje -- as it has been
called by Maldivians since time immemorial) has been a unitary state with a
government, a language, an economy based on her own means of production
and a unique culture. The country, with a total population of 206,000 (1988 mid-
year estimate) spread over 20 administrative divisions (called the Atolls) is
administered from Male', the political capital and economic and the cultural axis
of the archipelago. The uniqueness of the Maldives as an island-nation is
vividly pictured in our minds when these tiny islands -- most of which measure
less a square mile -- are known to be spread over an exclusive economic zone
of 325,578.24 square miles (843,247.64 square kilometres).

To summarise the nature of the average Maldivian, we may say that the
average Maldivian is conservative and suspicious. He sticks to customs and
traditions. The ways of his fore-fathers are good enough for him. These were
the ways in which he behaved and when taken together these were the basis
on which his nation-state was run. He was just a cog in the bigger machine,
which he called Dhivehi Raajje (the Island Realm). Even the Sultan himself
rarely functioned as the law-giver thereby departing from established customs
and traditions. He was more the perpetuator of age-old customs and traditions.
If ever, it was rare when a Sultan changed a time honoured custom. In this
way, Maldivians had a body of customs and traditions which may be called an
unwritten constitution from times unknown -- possibly many millennia -- until
1932, when Maldives got her first written constitution. This was a watershed in
the history of Maldives. For it was then that the country embarked on its
modernisation and shedding of the cocoon of isolation which she herself wove by keeping aloof from all that went around her. Again, we may attribute this isolation to the lack of an impetus for progress by the limits of resources which Maldivians could develop themselves or for which others -- such as colonial powers -- had an interest.

The early export trade of the Maldives consisted of cowries, coir, coconuts and ambergris. The first two commodities were so important that the Maldives was called by Al-Bairuni, the famous Arab writer of the eleventh century, “Dyvah Kouzah” or the “Cowry Islands”. By the fourteenth century dried fish and cloth were included amongst the exports. Cloth, which was never manufactured in the Maldives, was imported and this shows the next most important phase of Maldives, as an entrepôt, in the trade of the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese, on their appearance in the east found the Maldives visited by trading and pilgrim vessels, passing to and fro between Arabia and the Gulf, and the Malabar coast, Bengal and even China. Quite early they entertained the idea of taking their own possession of the rich trade of the Maldives. By 1502 the Arab operators of the sea-trade with the Maldives no longer risked the return journey of their richly laden ships during the presence of the Portuguese fleet and joined forces with those of the Zamorin of Calicut, who had taken up the struggle against the Portuguese. One year later the power of the Portuguese had so grown, that the Commander of the Fleet, Vicente Sodre, was able to forbid traffic with the Maldives to the traders of Calicut. A report submitted to the court of the Portuguese King at about this time puts the number of the islands at 12,000. About 8,000 were said to be populated. It is no surprise today for us to look from behind and see the greed for trade and the strategic importance the Portuguese attached to the Maldives with these spurious reports as their guidance, and spent resources quite out of proportion to what was really available in the Maldives. In other words, the Portuguese wasted far more resources on the conquest and subjugation of the Maldives than what they could have had as clear cut profit, either from the Maldives as a trading centre or as a central station for their forces in the Indian Ocean. We
also recall that the Portuguese forcibly entered into a trade agreement with the Maldivian King, Sultan Kalhu Muhammed (first reign 1491-1492; second reign 1494-1510; third reign 1512-1529) who granted them the right to establish a “factory” in Male’ in 1518. This agreement was abrogated by Sultan Ibrahim Iskandhar I (1648-1687) in 1649. Prior to this, almost the entire trade of Maldives was monopolised by Mammali Marakkar, the predominant Mapilla merchant who lived at Cannanore and who styled himself as “Lord of the Maldive Islands”.

The setting up of Borah merchants’ shops in Male’ in 1857 saw almost the entire trade dominated by them for almost a century. Besides, their stay prompted them to involve themselves in the politics of Maldives in a way that always served to weaken the unity of the nobles and people. Their strength as an economic force finally came to end on 1 August 1962. Though Maldivians had used their own money (Lari) from the reign of Sultan Muhammed Thakurufaanu (1573-1585), the word Rufiya, derived from the Hindi Rupiya, came to common use as about the time of the establishment of Borahs in Male’. At first a Rufiya consisted of 120 Lari, but by a law passed in the Majlis in 1948, Lari became the one hundredth of a Rufiya.

After World War II, the government in partnership with share-holders formed many corporations to further commerce and trade. These functioned until the mid-sixties and one of these, the Maldivian Nationals Trading Corporation formed the nucleus of the successful Maldives Shipping Limited.

Due to economic difficulties that faced Sri Lanka in the early 1970’s, the traditional market for dry fish was lost. As a result of this Maldives started selling raw fish to the Japanese. This started on 9 June 1972 with the purchase of a shipment at Kadholhudhoo (Raa Atoll). This was a turning-point in the economic history of the country. This established money as a medium of exchange throughout the islands and replaced the barter system that existed up then.
Another very significant step taken by the Government of Maldives was the mechanisation of fishing fleet started in 1974. This enabled the fishermen to extend the range of fishing and also be independent of the changes in wind directions. Opening of a fish cannery at Felivaru on 2 February 1978 was the next most important step in modernising the fishing industry.

Anything that could be said about the early period of our economy could only be speculative. From the information available today we may say that the entire working population of that period were "gatherers". Gatherers of the cowries, fish, ambergris and coconuts from the seas and islands around them. Processing these resources were minimal. For they had not developed the concept of trading in these. Trading as an economic activity was confined to the transhipment of goods that came from elsewhere and was limited to their capital, Male'. It was, in other words a "specialised activity" in which only the elite of Male' engaged. Even then the division of the country on the class basis had been well established. But it must be remembered that though this class system was in existence, it was not rigid like a caste system. People moved from a "lower" strata to a higher one and managed to secure higher places in the establishment. Along with this went their social standing in society as well. Male' was the city-state, replete with a King and his court, an economy more or less depending on her prowess as an emporium, very little dependent on the produce of other atolls which in turn were taken as fiefdoms of various nobles who lived in Male'. The atolls, more or less, were the "back-yard" and the hinterland of Male' economy. Whatever food and other products brought for sale from these islands kept Male' at the higher level it was. That was the picture of the past.

The following table gives the value of total imports and exports from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), which was the main trading partner for the Maldives. (These are given in Pounds Sterling):-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Exports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>20,136</td>
<td>5,101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>33,536</td>
<td>5,709</td>
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<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>39,215</td>
<td>38,743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>76,387</td>
<td>67,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>177,783</td>
<td>10,046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910-11</td>
<td>190,436</td>
<td>16,348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>215,906</td>
<td>26,434</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At very early times of Maldivian history, we know of no efforts that were made to develop or even to enumerate the human and other resources of the country. But we know that it was in the reign of Sultan Ghazi Muhammed Thakurufaanu the Great (1573-1585) that the first census were taken. This was done purely with a view to computing taxes and other administrative business. We have no records of these available to us today. But it may be said with certainty that all the Sultans who followed, made it a point of “enumerating the heads” (in Dhivehi “boa himenun”) for the above-said purposes. We only have records of these for relatively later periods.

There is no doubt that the Maldivian society -- as any other that was in the same geographical position -- was strongly influenced by what went on around her. As the Maldives from the very early times acted as a meeting place for sailors who frequented the sea routes that criss-crossed the oldest known ocean to man -- the Indian Ocean -- she borrowed from all those with whom she came into contact. It may be more appropriate to say that the Maldives acted as a cultural melting pot for all the elements that travelled in the Indian Ocean, be it the Arabs, Persians, Malays, Indians, Chinese or even the Sri Lankans. This did not change even after the arrival of the Europeans in this part of the world. Their colonial instincts only added the ingredient of sophistication into it.

Maldivians were cultural synthesisers rather than innovators. Again, the
cultural world of the Maldivian had limited horizons. Their whole world was their island environment. Their resources were scanty. They were rarely subjected to the harsh treatment of a colonial master. All these made the average Maldivian shy to be of service. He was happier being self-employed. There was another very important factor that made this come about. His wants were guided by the resources available to him and so were his stimuli for enterprise. The limits of his resources made him inactive to the degree that there was no competition or contest.

Today the true colours of this imbroglio are reflected in the ethnic composition, linguistic synthesis and cultural amalgam of the Maldives. But the wonder of the Maldives is that, though built with all these component blocks, Maldives faces the world as a single and integral nation. The harmony and order that characterise the Maldivian society today, in a world torn apart on these very lines that unite us, is ample tribute to the skills of Maldivians of all ages in nation building.

The earliest definite statement on the status of those employed is given in Isdhoo Loamaafaanu, which was written in 1194 AD. This document, written just three score years after the official acceptance of Islam by the King in Male’, retains some vestiges of a former legal system, which is alluded to in the document itself in very clear terms. Therefore we may say that the whole subject of serfs dealt with here is based on “the manner of granting (serfs) in accordance with the custom in former times.” Freeing a King’s subject from the “royal treasury and having him transferred to perform other duties” was a common practice until the beginning of the twentieth century. The next reference to this subject of employment is by Ibn Batuta who was in Maldives twice in the mid-fifteenth century. Writing on the women he states: “One of their curious customs is to engage themselves as house servants, in consideration of a fixed sum, which does not exceed five pieces of gold. Their board is at the expense of those who hire them. They do not regard this as a disgrace, and most of the daughters of the inhabitants do it. You will find in the house of a
rich man ten or twenty of them. The cost of all dishes broken by one of these maids is charged against her. When she wishes to go from one house to another, the masters of the latter give her the amount of her debt, this she remits to the people of the house she is leaving, and her new masters become her creditors. The principal occupation of these hired women is to make rope from the kanbar (i.e. making coir from coconut husk).

Coming to latter times we see that just prior to the promulgation of the first written constitution in 1932 there were 450 government employees. A few years after that there were 704 and in 1943 there were 888 employees. The 1,000 mark passed on 12 August 1957. It must be recalled that the structure, conditions and remuneration underwent a drastic change in 1957 and 1958. Since then the growth of employees in this sector has been simply phenomenal. Though the first female employees to be engaged as clerks in a government office work on 5 August 1952, there were women employed in various capacities at the Sultan’s Palace. Women also played their part at times of war even in the very remote past. Besides, there were women who held very responsible posts and they were members of the highest Councils of State. This was the highest body which was consulted by the Sultan and the members of this body were all styled as “Kilegefaanu”, the Sultan himself being called “Ras Kilegefaanu”.

The Maldives, though a small and under-developed country with a weak export dependent economy, has neither been dominated by the powerful force of a colonial over-lord nor has it any inherent features of colonial vestiges left in it. Maldivians have all along their long recorded history, been free to exercise their right to determine the degree and extent to which they put their most valuable resource -- themselves -- to work for them. The main occupations which may be called theirs, such as agriculture and fisheries, both of which were practised at subsistence level produced an excess which they bartered and sometimes saved for another day. Though fisheries has been and still is the main employer of the available human resources, agriculture of
the "slash and burn" type was practised by Maldivians. Though they are the "elect of the sea", Maldivians have been characterised as "agriculturists by inclination and fishermen by compulsion."

As in other tropical countries, the main health problems of the Maldives are infectious in nature.

Ibn Batuta who was in the Maldives in mid-fourteenth century wrote: "In the midst of all this a fever seized me, and I was very ill. Everyone who goes to that Island (Male') must inevitably catch the fever." This was the picture then. Almost 250 years later, another visitor, Pyrard de Laval wrote: "I fell ill of a severe burning fever, very common there and very dangerous, especially to strangers, so much so, that few get over it." These references were to the scourge that claimed the largest number of lives of Maldivians -- Malaria.

The other most important enemy was diseases of a gastroenteric nature. Due to the porous nature of the soil and the shallow depth of the water-table, the aquifer was easily contaminated by faecal matter. Analysis done as far back as 1909 by the Staff Surgeon of HMS "Prosperpine" concluded that the ground water of Male' "was quite unfit for human consumption, showing contamination by sewage matter."

With the proclamation of the first written constitution many reforms were initiated. By a law passed in the then Legislative Assembly on 27 March 1933 and ratified by the Sultan on 8 May 1933, many reforms were ushered in. This included among others:-

(a) The opening of the two rainwater tanks (in Henveyru and Mafanuu) to the public,
(b) Filling up of all bathing tanks (Dhivehi = Veyo) in Male' and in all other islands,
(c) Appointment of Health Inspectors,
(d) Organization of a waste disposal system,
(e) Construction of a public convenience system and the prohibition of pollution of the sea-beach,
(f) Opening of a dispensary for the sale of imported drugs,
(g) Segregation of lepers on a separate island,
(h) Formulation and enforcement of a code of regulations for the protection of foods in public eating houses and shops.

As a direct result of this, the Government Dispensary which was the forerunner to the Central Hospital was opened under the charge of an apothecary from Sri Lanka, Mr. Arumanayagam. By April 1934 this was functioning.

In 1948 the United Kingdom, the then Protecting Power for the Maldives became a member of the WHO South East Asia Region. Full membership for the Maldives as an independent nation was granted on 5 November 1965. WHO assistance in the field of health began with a survey in 1951 and has continued without break with resident staff since 1959. Considerable progress has been made in this field with the help of WHO. Male' itself has not had an indigenous malaria case since 1967.

Traditionally the government took little interest in the sphere of public health. But preventive and curative measures were always enforced with the outbreak of any disease on an epidemic scale. Practitioners of traditional medicine, Foolhumaa (mid-wives) and Fandithaveriya (practitioners of faith-healing) were the core of the old Maldivian society. They were given special privileges and tax exemptions. They in turn charged little or nothing for their services.

Though the first formal institution for instructing Maldivian students was opened by Sultan Ibrahim Iskandhar I (1648-1687) in his twentieth reignal year, we know that teaching -- and learning -- both religious subjects and the language and to a degree navigational skills were prevalent in the Maldives
from a very early period. Proficiency in the traditional vocations were acquired from a teacher -- frequently from the parents -- rather than mastered at a place of learning. The Government catered for the education, especially religious education of children of Male', boys and girls from the age of about six years. Throughout the Atolls, teaching devolved usually on the Katheeb and Mudhim. Pyrard de Laval, who was in the Maldives from 1602 to 1607 has this to say on the education of that period. "Their studies are to read and write, and to learn their Alcoran and to know how they have to live." At a latter date; when the two English naval officers, Lieutenants I.A. Young and W. Christopher conducted their survey in 1835, they saw teachers instructing pupils in religious as well as other subjects. The government had set up subsidised schools called "Edhuruge", one for each ward of Male'. Subjects taught were Quran, reading and writing of Arabic and Thaana (Maldivian writing), daily prayers and basics of Islam and the main functions of Arithmetic. According to the 1921 census there were 839 Quran Schools, 18 Navigation Schools, and 4 Arabic Schools.

This was the organization of the education system in the Maldives until a school, by the name of Madhrasathul Iblidhaaiyya was opened on 2 December 1907. The first formal school by the name of Madhrasathul Saniiyya (later Madhrasathul Majeedhiyya and now Majedhiyya School) was opened on 20 April 1927. A branch of this same school for girl (later to become Aminiya School) was opened on 28 November 1944. In these two bold steps taken by the government lies the beginning of the modern educational system of the Maldives.

Besides this, training of essential personnel such as the Foolhumaa (the mid-wife), people who practised local medicine and the Fanditha-man (the magician or faith-healer) were done on a private basis. They learnt their vocation from someone to whom the learner was apprenticed. This was usually handed down from father to son or mother to daughter. The government supported these services by exempting all such persons from taxes and compulsory work.
Military service was well organised and there was a considerable body of men who served in these services. The Sultan was the Commander-in-Chief and under him were organised the infantry and artillery battalions, each of which had its captain or field-commander. In 1905 Commander A.R. Hulbert of the Royal Navy reported the following composition of the armed forces:-

- Palace guards: about 40.
- Gunners: about 12.
- "Volunteers": 30.
- The Militia: 1,000.
- Total: 1,082.

In 1920 the number of soldiers were estimated to be 800 to 1,000. This was indeed a large proportion of the then total population of 70,413 (1921 figures). The Navy then consisted of 14 Guraabu (vessels). Each of these had 11 crew and a captain. The fleet was under the command of Ranahamaanthi, above him was Velanaa Vazeeru, who was directly responsible to the Sultan. The soldiers and sailors were given rice as the monthly pay each of whom received 12 measures (Dhivehi: NAALHI) twice a month, on the New and Full Moon days.

Contrary to the general acceptance, Maldivian history is well documented and there are numerous records from the days of the past, especially from the time of liberation from the Portuguese occupation. A number of these are preserved in the Maldives itself while others are in foreign countries. Very little effort has gone into investigating these. This is more so with the archaeological material found all over the Maldives. There is no doubt that as these are examined by scholars more light will be shed on various aspects of Maldivian life in the days gone by.

The earliest recorded information on the life of Maldivian society in Dhivehi is found in the Loamaafaanu, several of which are preserved. Two of
these have been deciphered and they throw light on the administration of the
country and life in the Maldives in the twelfth century. As this was the period
when Islam was taking root in the Maldives, the transition from a non-Islamic to
a totally Islamic society is very well illustrated in some of these documents.

The famous Moroccan traveller, Ibn Batuta, who visited the Maldives on
two occasions in the mid-fourteenth century, left to us the story of the then
Maldives. Though written by his pupil, Ibn Jazyee, this work contain much
about the social, economic and other aspects of Maldivian life.

The next most important source on the history of Maldives is given to us
by a castaway French sailor, Francois Pyrard de Laval, who was unfortunate
enough to have his ship “Corbin” wrecked on the reef of Fulhadhoo in the
Maldives. His work published upon his return to Europe after five years in the
Maldives goes into great detail of the Maldivian life of his period.

Though of little help in the social sphere, the Thaareekh written by
Hassan Thaajudhdeen, is the next most important. Written in Arabic this
chronicle of events were kept up-dated by successors of Thaajudhdeen until
the first quarter of the nineteenth century. With this, one may include the
numerous lists of Kings, which give little more than the linage and the reigning
periods of them, called in Dhivehi “Raadhavalhi”.

The monumental work done by the late H.C.P. Bell of Ceylon Civil
Service in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century stands un-rivalled in
its comprehensiveness of research. To Bell Maldivians owe much.

From the late nineteenth century up to the present there are many
records, both judicial and otherwise preserved in the Maldives. These need to
be studied and better utilised.

Enumeration of the population, as referred to earlier could be traced to
Sultan Ghazi Muhammed Thakuruwaanu the Great (1573-1585). This work was carried out mainly in order to assess the taxes. This practice was carried on by almost all his successors. Though there are no records left today of these very early census, the later ones, especially the enumerations carried out in the nineteenth century are extent. From 1911 up to today census of the Maldives have been carried out on a more regular basis and the data are available to us. In 1911 and 1921 the census was carried out under the supervision of officials from the Ceylon Government. The next census enumeration was done in 1931, followed by one in 1946. Data on the population are available for 1953, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1980, 1981-82, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988 and 1989. It may be noted that from 1980 onwards data have been collected and arranged on a more systematic and scientific basis than before.