The Swallows and Sweden from a Southern Perspective

"Across these fields a highway is going to be built... Why are you not protesting? To silently accept that the land is taken away from you - it does not fit with our picture of a democratic Sweden, where people fight against oppression and injustice."

These words come from Pratim Roy and Snehkata Nath, founders of the Indian environment organisation Keystone. They are on a three-week visit to Sweden, invited by the Swallows. Keystone and the Swallows are collaborating since 1994 on questions concerning ecology and the environment. We are now on the rich fields of southern Sweden and are looking out over Skeagårds' properties. Charlotte Norrmann, who is at the moment changing the farming system on Skeagårds from conventional farming to ecological cultivating, has told us that the government is planning to build a new highway connection across her properties.

High Mechanisation that Frightens

The purpose with Pratim's and Sneh's visit, is to receive their reflections on our society and our way of work at home, and to have the opportunity to view us with a southern perspective. Since Keystone is working with "eco-development" together with the indigenous people in the Nilgiris mountains in southern India, the visit is very much concerned with forestry and environmental issues. We studied the large-scale forest clearing outside Kramfors, Angermanland. The computerised cutting machine cuts the trees, peels the branches and cuts them out regularly cut pieces with a ravishing tempo - the machine chews two trees per minute. Here as well our guests are amazed.

We thought that you Swedes protected your forests... But the image of a highly mechanised Sweden does not contain the whole truth. It is of course important to pinpoint the different aspects of our society. We have especially tried to show Pratim and Sneh that there are groups who protest against the high technology development and struggle for a different and a more small-scale and humane society. We have studied small-scale ecological family run farming, KRAV-marked* products, recycling and re-utilisation systems. We have met representatives from organisations that are safeguarding the environment and that are trying to urge people to have reflections on the contemporary consumption society.

Home among the Lapps

The encounter with Sweden certainly offered surprises, but it was also obvious that there are several parallels to be drawn from our work here in Sweden and the work in India. A meeting with the Lapps in Glen, in the Southern Jämtland, was exiting and invited to interesting discussions and comparisons. We had the luck to be able to participate in the large autumn reindeer marking and slaughter. Two thousand reindeers were driven from the mountains and gathered into a small fold in order to be marked. About fifty of the reindeers were slaughtered according to the Lapp tradition. Pratim and Sneh saw many similarities between the situation that the Lapps and the Nilgiris' minority populations experience.

The Lapps, as well as the people we are working with, have, through out time, been discriminated regarding their language and culture, Pratim explains. Large-scale forestry has driven them away from their original lands. In the modern society there is no room for them and it is therefore difficult for them to continue living their traditional lives, whether it is reindeer breeding or honey collecting.

Stuck in the Consumption Trap

An important insight we got during the visit to Sweden, was concerning the amount of similarities there are considering all the differences, continues Sneh. We have a lot to learn from each other, as regards to both the good and the bad. It is very useful to come
here and to be able to see, with one’s own eyes, how much of the day-to-day life here circles around consumption and that the individual human being is entirely in the hands of the multinational cooperation’s and their sharp marketing methods. I do not believe that the same situation will arise in India, even though today there is a fast growing urban middle-class class with a strong purchasing power. We Indians consume preferably Indian goods and are proud of our domestic brands. The youth dresses in Indian jeans and urban people rather drive a Maruti than a Toyota. In spite of grand marketing campaigns, the foreign ”multinational’s” have still not succeeded in getting hold of the Indian market. And here you have something that you could learn from us!

Getting away from Dependency

Surely it is this what it is all about –to learn from each other. The mutual exchange must be the ground to the collaboration between the organisations in the North and the South. But the question is how do we create a relation, based on equal terms when one of the partners holds all the money, and secondly, is it at all possible? Certainly, is what our Indian friends believe.

–It is all about self-consciousness, says Sneh. The responsibility to establish a relation of equal collaboration is not only yours. The organisations in the South, too often take the role of the needed, with their head down and the beggar bowl in their hands reaching out to meet their givers. In order not to place ourselves in a strongly dependent relation vis-à-vis our givers, it is important that we create our own local income generating methods. Keystone is now financing a larger part of the activities with their own means. The money comes from our own sales, loans from an Indian Development Bank and from consultant tasks that we accomplish.

–Even though the Swallows so far are our only foreign giver, we do not see ourselves as being in a rigid dependency situation. With the Swallows the relation is rather the opposite. You are all too kind! A collaboration on equal terms also includes that you must dare to express your demands to your partner.

The Tables Are Turned

The visit of Pratim and Sneh provided us, active Swallow members, with an excellent opportunity to get a response on the work we do. We gladly talk a lot about inter-exchange, to inform each other of experiences drawn and the collaboration on equal terms... It is probably time for self-examination. How often do we not travel to India to evaluate projects and organisations? But have volunteers from the South been working within our organisation? Do our partners in the South participate in the planning of our future work? How often do we listen to their points of view...? Is it not, finally, time to change roles and show that we are serious with our fairy words?

After traveling around in Sweden for three weeks with Pratim and Sneh, and visiting different organisations and individuals, that in various ways are working with the environmental and ecological issues, it was obvious that a commitment at home is a prerequisite for a rewarding exchange. It is only then, one can make interesting comparisons and learn from one another. Moreover, our Indian colleagues realized that there is a need for a social commitment in Sweden. They also saw the excluded and the exposed people in Sweden. And, they are convinced that it is the over-consumption in the North that is the main reason for the unequal distribution in the world.

–It has been incredibly valuable to be here and to be able to, with your own two eyes, see the reality you live and work in. Now we understand much better, says Pratim at a final meeting with the board and the staff of the Swallows. But, tell me one thing, why are you so stressed here? We have met many of you Swallows in India and there you seem to be much more relaxed. We do not have the time to answer that question, because we have to rush off to have lunch before the concluding discussions in the afternoon begin...

Text and Photography: Karin Gregow
The Swallows, Lund

Translation by: Olof Sandkull