Male: Island Capital of an Island Nation

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Maldives is a nation of approximately 1,190 coral islands, which constitute two lengthy chains running north to south and covering an area of 90,000 sq km. Its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is spread over 859,000 sq km in the Indian Ocean. Male, the capital of the country has a land area of 2.5 sq km and contains about a third of the population of the country. Only 200 islands are inhabited; most of them have less than 1,000 inhabitants each. Maldives occupies a respectable position in the Asia-Pacific region both in national GDP growth rate, and human development.

Located at 4°10' and 4°16'67" North latitudes, and 73°30' and 73°5’ East longitudes, Male (pronounced as Maale’) is the only island city in the world devoid of mountains, highlands, and rivers. It is a sea-dominated flat land. The surging waves of the sea and lush green vegetation instill natural charm and pristine beauty to it. Male’ (Kaafu) Atoll (coral formation) is one of the 20 atoll groups of Maldives (Figure 16.1). It was traditionally the King’s Island where the Royal Palace was located and from which the Royal dynasties ruled over the islands. Prior to 1968, it had a fortification wall with entry and exit gates (doroshi) all around. When the city was remodelled by Ibrahim Nasir, the second president of Maldives (1968–1978), the Royal Palace (Gan’duwaru) along with its picturesque forts (kotte) and bastions (buruzu), was demolished.

The name Malé is derived from the Sanskrit word Mahaalay (maha = big or great; and aalay = house), meaning royal palace or capital. Male city covers the entire land area of the island of Male; it is heavily
urbanised and is one of the most densely populated cities of the world. Almost one-third of the Maldivian population of around 360,000, lives in Male, the only city in the country. The non-resident floating population is also large as many Maldivians and foreign workers have to pass through the city since it is the only entry point to the country, centre of administration, and bureaucracy.

Climatically, it is a hot, warm, and rainy city. Being on the path of both south-western and north-eastern monsoons, it gets more than its share of rainfall. Occasional storms flood the island country and inflict heavy damages on its fishing industry, which is the main source of livelihood. On 26 December 2004, it was struck by the tsunami that swept across the western coast of Sumatra. Almost two-third of the city was flooded. It is reported to have killed over 220,000 people around the rim of the Indian Ocean: Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and Sri Lanka. Male underwent more than its share of damage.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Although small in size, Male has been the political, economic, and cultural hub of this far-flung archipelago for centuries. Since the arrival of Islam in the twelfth century AD, it has been known as the ‘Island of
the Sultans.’ Set in the middle of the Male Atoll, it covers just 1.8 sq km. Fifty years ago, it was a sleepy village lost in the limbo of the Indian Ocean. Today Male, caught up in a race to join the rest of the world, contains much of the wealth of the country and is its administrative and religious centre.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the peace and charm exhibited by the clean rectangular streets of coral sand, and one story coral buildings behind neat palisades, enchanted the visitors enormously. An English woman, Lawson Robins, who visited Male in 1920, noted that there was no Telegraph, no Ox Carts, no Motor Cars, and no other Carriages. It was ‘a land of quietness and peace’. And adds, ‘Some of the best houses have walls of whitewashed coral stones; but most are in a tiny compound surrounded by a fence of cad Jan. Trees and shrubs flourish, we saw firs, oleanders, bamboos, palms, and other plants. And ‘each street was carpeted with white coral sand soft and clean’.1

The English traveller, T. W. Hockly, recorded in 1934, ‘The roads are all of white coral sand and I have never seen any place kept cleaner….There were several small shops and a few houses where plantain, papaya and mango trees, and many shrubs were flourishing luxuriously…. The poorer inhabitants have their houses walled with mats or cadjans made from palm leaves, about six to seven feet in height. Every little dwelling stands in its own compound. They are roofed with cadjans or corrugated iron sheets.’2

H.C.P. Bell stayed in Male in 1921, and remarked that, ‘With its teeming population of over 5,200 souls, it is far too overcrowded already.’ Yet, the capital now boasts of 104,000 inhabitants, nearly a third of the population and a floating population of several thousand people, who come to sell their wares and buy goods.3

**POPULATION**

The first settlers of the Maldives islands were Dravidians from the southern coasts of India. Giraavaru, the Male Atoll, claims to have been settled first. They then shifted to other islands. The land they had occupied is now being used to develop tourist facilities. These early settlers led a very simple life, and were ruled by local headmen. According to a folk tale, one day a prince Koimala from India arrived
in a big ship and settled down on the sandbank. A palace was built, and the island was formally named Maa-le (Male’), while the nearest island was named Hulhu-le.

Male would certainly count as one of the smallest capitals in the world in terms of its physical size and population. As mentioned earlier, around 30 per cent of Maldives’ population lives in Male. Different from any other place in Maldives, Male is a city of high-rise buildings and paved roads. While the government offices are located in one area, the main streets are lined with shops and offices. In the old bazaar area, which still houses the country’s hub of wholesale and retail trade, the lanes are so narrow that a single vehicle would find it difficult to navigate through, especially during the busy hours.

There are no beaches on Male; instead seawalls surround it from all sides. The city has no natural beach and so an artificial beach has been created, and adjoining breakwaters surrounding the harbour in the south-west of the island provide a pleasant jogging route, especially popular in the evenings when it is cooler. People of Maldives are a traditional Muslim Society; there is hardly any trace of Buddhism, which they practised before their conversion to Islam. Except for mosques, no other religious place, church, temple, etc., is permitted in the country. Women keep their body covered; the foreigners too are advised to cover their shoulders and legs. These rules, however, do not apply to the resort areas where beach attire is the norm.

The pace of population growth in Maldives is one of the highest in the world. It increased from 180,088 in 1985 to 213,215 in 1990 and 244,644 in 1995. Its current (July 2007) population is estimated to be 369,031. The growth rate between 1977 and 1985 was 3.2 per cent per annum and between 1985 and 1990, 3.4 per cent. By 1995, it dropped to 2.75 per cent per annum. Maldives has a relatively young population. At the time of the 1985 census, 45 per cent of the population was under 15 years of age; in 1990 the percentage went up to 49. According to recent estimates, 24,400 more children were added to the population during 1995-2005.

Male is no exception to the above-mentioned characteristics of Maldives. Despite its small size, population growth is high. The natural increase apart, people from other islands migrate to Male as it offers better living conditions and employment opportunities. Population growth of the city picked up after A. Gayoom became President in
1978. In 1911, it had only 5,236 inhabitants. That constituted 25.7 per cent of the national population. Its population increased further when the Gan Air Base was closed in 1976 and the tourist industry developed around the Male International Airport at Hulhule. In 1985, Male had 45,874 inhabitants; the number went up to 55,130 in 1990 and to 62,793 by 1995. Its current population hovers around 100,000.

A fast-growing population has put tremendous pressure on the available housing and other resources. Efforts are on to build more houses, but it is not able to catch up with population growth. Reclamation of the shallow waters around the island coupled with annexation of the adjoining former resort island of Villingili, (renamed Ward 5) has increased the size of the city nearly two-fold. The next-door airport island is also going through a priority five-year extensive reclamation project to provide more space for housing. Once it is finished, Hulhu Male (as it will be named) will provide an additional 7 sq km of usable land – three times the current size of the city.

Since marriages are generally endogamous, the sex ratio in Male is quite favourable. For a girl, the best husband would be deemed to be the son of her maternal uncle (mother’s brother), and for a boy the daughter of his maternal uncle. Earlier, the girls used to marry right after the menarche ceremony. According to the prevailing tradition, the husband leaves his parental house and goes to live in his wife’s house after marriage. For this reason, in Divehi families, parents are happy to have daughters as they bring boys into their home, whereas sons would ‘bring fish to someone else’s house,’ meaning that even during courtship, their interests would be in the household of their would be wives.

Most but not all women in Male wear the buraga, an Islamic body cover (a veil covering the body from head to foot). It is quite popular but the culture is relaxed, and women play a conspicuous role in the civil service and other areas of public life. Literacy level is high, but opportunities for professional education are scarce. Those seeking professional qualifications have to go abroad. The situation is different in other nearly 200 inhabited islands spread over a vast swathe of ocean. People from these outlying atolls go to Male for better schools, hospitals, and career opportunities. This is the main reason for shortage of housing in the capital. The flats are small, every piece of land is valuable and intensively used.
LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Although the physical size of Male may not merit its inclusion among
the large cities of the world, it is the only and practically indispensable
‘city’ in the Islamic Republic of Maldives. Male has a municipal
government, which looks after the civic amenities of the people. Its
role is, however, extremely limited, as the national government takes
care of not only the national issues and problems, but also those of
the capital city. The municipal government has a Chairman, Vice-
Chairman, and elected members; it functions under the Ministry of
Home Affairs. The Chairman of the municipality reports directly to
the Minister of Home Affairs, Housing, and Environment.

Male of the 1990s was divided into four wards: Henveiru, Galolhu,
Maafannu, and Macchangolhi. Vilingili, a nearby island and former
tourist resort, is the fifth division (Male’viligili). Earlier, it was
uninhabited and was used as a tourist resort. Now the land of Viligili
is used for housing and related activities. The names of the four wards
of Male’ Island were given by the Giraavaru fishermen: Maafannu =
‘maa’ (big) + ‘fannu’ (a place where a village path meets the sea);
Henveiru = ‘en-beyru’(where fishermen got their bait); Galolhu = ‘galu-
olhu’ (stone groove); and, Macchangolhi = mathi-angolhi (windward
path-fork).

Each ward of Male has a ward office to manage the municipal
services provided by the government, and municipal authorities. The
level of services extended by the city government is fairly high from
South Asian standards. Information Communication Technology (ICT)
was introduced in the city in the late 1980s. This has led to tremendous
growth in electronic media especially television, telephones, and mobile
services. Male is a city that widely utilises e-media for different
purposes including commerce and services.

With the establishment of the Ministry of Science and Technology
in 1998, the Government of Maldives is rapidly improving both
infrastructure and civic services to encourage municipal and
administrative districts to enter the e-age. Given a sustained high rate
of economic growth, Male is likely to further intensify the use of ICT.
The potential benefits from e-commerce, e-government, and e-
co-operation are limitless for a country like Maldives, geographically
so dispersed and widespread. ICT can transcend geographic isolation
of the country and link people and places more closely than ever before.
ECONOMIC BASE

Male is no longer a city dependent on fishing. It has become a major tourist destination of the world, and, therefore, it has become a city full of shops, hotels, and taxis. It is on the way to becoming a global resort and convention centre.

Tourism

Tourism was introduced to Maldives in the early 1970s. The first two resort islands opened in 1972 had a capacity of 280 beds. Kurumba village (today a five star hotel), was a joint venture of two Maldivian entrepreneurs with an Italian investor. A second resort was opened the same year on the island of Bandos. The number of tourists who came to Male that year was 1,096.

In 1979, the Government of Maldives started taking interest in the promotion of tourism. It enacted a law requiring all foreign investments to be registered at the Department of Tourism and Foreign Investment. A tourism master plan was formulated in 1983, setting up guidelines for the overall development of tourism, and identifying tourism zones in different parts of the country. In 1984, a tourism advisory board was created. The Department of Tourism was upgraded into a ministry in 1988. The opening of Male International Airport in 1981 was an important milestone in the development of tourism in the country. Earlier, tourism was a seasonal industry; now it has become a year round business. A school of hotel and catering was established in 1987 to meet the manpower requirements of the industry. The government as well as the private sector assist those employed in industry and deserve to get overseas training. The Tourist Information Unit was set up in 1989 to further disseminate information.

Development of tourism has fostered the overall growth of the country’s economy. It has created direct as well as indirect employment and income generation opportunities in other related industries. Today, tourism is the country’s biggest foreign exchange earner, contributing nearly a fifth of the GDP. As in AD 2000, there were 86 tourist resorts in the country and the number of tourist arrivals was 467,154.

There are no beaches on Male; instead seawalls surround all its sides. However, a newly landscaped artificial beach area, and adjoining breakwaters stretching all the way round to the harbour in the south-
west of the island provide a pleasant jogging route, especially popular in the evenings when it is cooler.

The most dominant feature in the city’s skyline is the golden dome of the Islamic Centre – home to the Grand Friday Mosque (Masjid Al-Sultan Mohammed Thakurufaan Al-A’z’am) – the largest building in the Maldives. The worship area can accommodate a congregation of 4,500. Opened in 1984, the centre was designed by a Malaysian architect and built with the assistance of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, and other countries. A short distance away is the historic Friday Mosque (Hukuru Miskiyy), and Minaret that date from the mid-seventeenth century and the tomb of the man believed to be responsible for the country’s conversion from Buddhism and Hinduism to Islam in AD 1153. There are 29 mosques in Male alone, and nearly 700 throughout Maldives.

The street in front of the Islamic Center is sandy, reminding the visitors of the time when all roads of Male were made of soft white coral sand. Across the street is Sultan Park, the former site of the Sultan’s Palace and current home of the National Museum where many archeological treasures, including the pre-Islamic remains of Buddhism (stone head of Lord Buddha), and palanquins and umbrellas used by former Sultans are showcased. The Presidential Palace and offices are located close to the park.

The Hukuru Miskiyy, or the Old Friday Mosque, was built in 1656 during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim Iskandhar I. Opposite the Hukuru Miskiyy is the Medhu Ziyaarath, the shrine of Abu al Barakaath Yusuf al Barbari, a North African, believed to be responsible for converting the people of Maldives to Islam way back in AD 1153. A part of the Hukuru Miskiyy is a minaret built by Sultan Ibrahim Iskandhar in 1675. The Sultan’s Palace was demolished and the palace grounds were turned into a public park (Sultan Park). The surviving palace building within the park today houses the National Museum. Opened in 1952, the Museum displays a large and varied collection of artifacts showing a glorious bygone era, including stone objects from the pre-Islamic period. Some of the most significant items on display are the coral stone head of Lord Buddha, and an eleventh century piece from Alifu Thoddoo.

Mulee-aage, the former Presidential Palace was built by Sultan Shamsuddeen III for his son just before the First World War. When the Sultan and his son were banished from the country in 1936, the
Palace became a government property and converted into Presidential Palace in 1953 when Male became a Republic. In 1986, it was renamed as Presidential Palace and was upgraded to hold official functions and to accommodate visiting Heads of States and other foreign dignitaries. It is now being used as the President’s office.

Jumhooree Maidan (Republic Square) is a public square, constructed along the northern waterfront in 1989, is Male’s most popular place for social gatherings and relaxation. It is also one of the favourite evening hangouts for children.

**Fishing and Fish Processing**

As mentioned earlier, the main source of livelihood for the people of Maldives has been fishing. It continues to employ a large number of people directly or indirectly. The method of fishing employed in Maldives since times immemorial has been the pole and line method. The types of fish caught by this method are tuna, skipjack tuna, frigate, and mackerel. Tuna is the main catch; it forms the main diet of the people and is also exported in different forms. Today, fishing *dhoanis* are mechanised. During a favourable season, the catch could be as much as a thousand fish per *dhoani* per day. Skipjack tuna and yellowfin tuna are the most common species caught in Maldives.

With the mechanisation of the traditional sailing *dhoani* in 1974, the fisheries industry of the country was revolutionised. A new generation of *dhoani*, designed especially for mechanisation was introduced. Since Japan had interest in importing Tuna, it helped the government to develop the industry all the way from catching to canning and export. In 1977, the Maldives Fisheries Corporation was constituted to further develop the marine wealth. It was later renamed as Fisheries Projects Implementation Department (FPID), and in 1993, as Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company (MIFCO).

The fish-canning factory set up in 1977 as a Japan–Male joint venture was followed by a new Felivaru Tuna Processing Plant with its own electricity, desalination plant, water storage tanks, and an ice factory in 1986. Although this plant produced 150,000 cans per hour, it was unable to meet the ever growing demand for Maldive tuna in the global market.

When the Japanese pulled out, the Government bought three mother ships from Korea and a large number of the collector vessels were
constructed in Male. A boat yard was built on the island of Alifushi where second-generation Mark II dhoanis were constructed. The opening of the exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for fisheries proved to be a boon for Maldives’ fishing industry.

The local market, just a block away from Male’s fish market on the northern waterfront, is divided into small stalls. Here, the pace is slower and the atmosphere peaceful, compared to the hectic activity in the rest of this neighbourhood. Each stall is filled with a variety of local produce mainly from the atolls. Another building just close by sells smoked and dried fish.

Canned fish produced at the canning plant at Felivaru in Lhaviyani Atoll is available in a number of shops in Male. Vacuum packed smoked fish and chipped dried fish are also available in many supermarkets around Male.

**Commerce and Trade**

Once upon a time, fishing was the main and only economic activity of Maldives. While it continues to provide livelihood to a large number of people, especially in the atolls outside Male, the economic base of Male has changed from fishing to tourism. Being the only city in the country, it has emerged as a commercial centre apart from being administrative centre. Located almost in the centre of the country of 200 atolls, Male has become the CBD of Maldives.

All activities in Male including government offices open at 7:30 AM and close at 2:30 PM. People are free for the rest of the day. Some shops close during mid-day when the temperatures are too high and reopen later in the afternoon when the mercury drops a little and people come out on the street again.

The main commercial area of Male is located on the northern waterfront. This area is the main hub of trade and is a hive of activity throughout the day. The waterfront and the by-lanes in the area are crowded with shops stocked with a variety of goods. Also in the area is Male’s local market which sells fish as well as other local products. These days, the market is full of clothes and other items of day-to-day consumption and use, both imported and locally produced. Many a dhoanis (fishing boats) unload dried fish, fresh fruits, and vegetables grown in different atolls of the country for sale in Male. The pace increases in mid-afternoon as the dhoanis start returning with the day’s
catch mainly of tuna. The fishes are transported by road to the open-sided market and laid out on the tiled floors. As soon as the fishes are displayed, they are sold out in no time. The market is kept scrupulously clean, washed, and disinfected everyday.

The local market is divided into small stalls. Here, the pace is slower and the atmosphere more pleasant and peaceful. The pale green light that filters through the fine green mesh that adorns its windows, and doors further enlivens the environment. The shops are filled with a variety of local products of the nearby atolls: vegetables, fruits and yams, packets of sweetmeat, nuts and breadfruit chips, bottles of homemade sweets and pickles, bunches of bananas hanging on coir ropes from ceiling beams, and smoked and dried fish.

EMERGING DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO

The future of Maldives lies in discovering the unique opportunities the physical geography of the country offers with changing times. Nature has put many roadblocks on its development; but behind these roadblocks are the opportunities waiting for exploration. To develop an archipelago of nearly 1,200 islands, with 199 of them populated and a capital that houses one-third of its population within an area of less than 3 sq km, appears to be a ‘Mission Impossible’. But the globalisation, liberalisation, and privatisation processes are likely to benefit countries like Maldives more than many others inland. With the ICT almost abolishing isolation, and drastically reducing distance, the country need not now suffer from geographic constraints and can move forward economically and technologically. It does, however, need a visionary leadership and down-to-earth planning and development processes for a new future.

The erstwhile President, Maumon Abdul Gayoom, had grasped this geographic reality and adopted a regional development strategy to decentralise Male, and redevelop other regional centres where a part of the 80,000 residents of Male could be relocated. ‘So we began a program of decentralisation to have schools, hospitals, health centres in the islands as well as garment factories. And we also expanded tourism so that there are resorts in many of the atolls now outside the Male’ area,’ said Gayoom in 2002.
According to the Minister for Planning and Development, Mr Ibrahim Hussein Zaki, the present distribution of population is not conducive to equitable and sustainable development of the country. Since most of the other 199 islands have populations fewer than 500 each, only a regional approach to group these islands into viable units would help. The present income disparity between Male and the outer islands is 3:1. Similar is the case with respect to physical and social infrastructure such as schools, markets, healthcare facilities, sanitation and energy. The strategy of the Maldivian government aims at selecting ‘focus islands’ with the generous assistance of the Asian Development Bank. Meanwhile, a population redistribution programme is bringing people and development together. People are shifted to areas with more employment opportunities and better access to services. This would ensure equal opportunities for people to benefit from national development. ‘The idea is to divide our 20 atolls into five regions. Every region will include three or four atolls, and every atoll will have two or three growth centres,’ explains Zaki. ‘Every region will have a port, an airport, a hospital, secondary schooling. So we are making it easier for the private sector to start businesses in these centres and encourage immigration like Male’s.’ It aims at each region having a population of roughly 50,000.

To begin with, the project has started in two regions: North and South. The government has established regional development and management offices in these two regions, each including three and four atolls, respectively. Soon, similar regional development offices would be set up in the other three regions too.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. www.hellomaldives.com
2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

Other References


