

Cobbled streets without traffic

My first contact with IIAS was when my husband Gananath Obeyesekere was invited to Leiden for several months as a research scholar in 1997. We were given a section of a spacious though slightly run down house with a garden. My husband was annoyed at first because we had to share a communal bathroom, but we quickly realized what a luxury it was to have a large apartment with a garden – a rare commodity in a land of small living spaces.

Ranjini Obeyesekere

THOSE MONTHS IN LEIDEN were for me a sheer delight. I felt I had gone back in time to a medieval world of cobbled streets and monumental public buildings that were, not just monuments, but still very much in use. I loved the long walks by the canals, the open market along its bank, the restaurants with their lights reflected in the water and the city squares where one could sit and enjoy a cup of coffee and watch the world go by. But what amazed me was that this small 'walking city' was also a modern city, with its sophisticated shops that carried every kind of modern necessity from furniture to food to household goods. I asked a friend, "How do shops get their goods if no vehicles are allowed in the city centre?" I was told that vehicles could come in between 6 p.m. and 7 a.m. to make deliveries. Much later I tried very hard to introduce this system to our old city of Kandy in Sri Lanka, where we lived. I managed to convince the then Mayor to try it out,

but it was not a success. The businesses all protested and since they carried a significant vote bank for the Municipal councillors, the experiment ended after two weeks. Our small city, once the ancient capital of the country, and marked as a World Heritage site, continues to be congested and polluted, crammed with all manner of vehicles and jammed with pedestrians who have little space to walk.

When five years later my husband and I were again invited to IIAS, this time in its former branch at the University of Amsterdam, we were delighted to return to an institution that we knew. Our apartment was located in the centre of the city, a tall narrow brick building just four storeys high, looking out over the river Amstel. I had the sense that I was walking into the doorway of a Vermeer painting I had once seen as a student. As I stepped in I was amazed at the narrowness

of the stairs. This time it was a miniscule apartment, but beautifully appointed with all the conveniences one could wish for – a miracle of a twenty-first-century modern apartment in a seventeenth-century shell!

We settled in quickly and two days later began the daily walk across the little bridge, the 'Halvemaansbrug', over the Amstel to the University where our offices were located. Those morning walks were a meditative experience for us both. The serenity, the ever changing reflections of clouds and shimmering buildings in the slowly moving water of the canal, the tree shaded roads with the occasional cyclist, are memories that remain with us.

We would use the excellent facilities and office space at IIAS and work on our specific projects during the day. It was the first time after many years I had untrammelled time for my own work, undisturbed by the demands of household or family commitments. I was able to get a first version of a translation I was doing of the Yasodhara poem, later published by Suny press.

The IIAS offices would (sensibly) close by late afternoon, and the long evenings were ours to explore the flower markets, the antique fairs, the old churches, and the many museums. We would end the day savouring one or other of Amsterdam's many and diverse ethnic restaurants. Our memories of Amsterdam will always be of a great European city, which like all great cities is a melting pot of peoples and cultures, foods and art, and thus a very liveable city for people like us, IIAS scholars from distant parts of the world.

Ranjini Obeyesekere,
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I was the beneficiary of two memorable fellowships at IIAS, first in Leiden for six months in 1997 and then in the summer of 2002 in Amsterdam. My wife Ranjini has described better than I ever could the pleasures of living in these two beautiful cities.

Gananath Obeyesekere

Regarding my stay in Leiden I had the following to say about it in the preface to my book *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek Rebirth*. In that work I thank Wim Stokhof and his colleagues for a productive stay and add: "I cannot think of a better place than the beautiful city of Leiden for putting together a satisfactory first version of a work that to me remains an unfinished one." In addition to putting together *Imagining Karma*, I gave several public lectures on my fieldwork, and if I remember correctly, especially on my work on the so-called Aborigines of Sri Lanka, the Veddahs.

One of the intellectual pleasures of my stay in Leiden was meeting other scholars, especially younger ones (no longer young, just as the present writer is in his ripe old age), and engaging in conversations and communal meals with them. It was at Leiden that I learned what PhD rituals are like in the Netherlands, and I assume elsewhere in Europe – such a contrast with my US experience! The Amsterdam experience was similar and yet different. Both my wife and I enjoyed the artistic and intellectual pleasures of a great city. Additionally it was great fun meeting some of my old friends, Peter van der Veer and

Carla Risseuw, and new friends in the Anthropology Department; enjoying their hospitality and conversations during meals at homes and out in restaurants. It was in that department that I gave a lecture on the theoretical underpinnings of my work on visions, expounded at length in my book published this year as *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience*. I then had the pleasure of putting that lecture in print in an article I wrote in 2006 on "Asian Studies and the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in a book in honor of Wim Stokhof and edited by Josine Stemmelaar and Paul van der Velde, *What About Asia? Revisiting Asian Studies* (2006).

Both visits were eventful ones in my long intellectual career. My work and thinking and my personal life experiences have been much enriched by these two memorable visits to Leiden and Amsterdam as guests of IIAS.

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