

## Anthropology of Small Islands: The Case of Lakshadweep Islands of India

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The tiniest Union Territory of India, Lakshadweep is an archipelago consisting of 12 atolls, three reefs and five submerged banks. It is a uni-district Union Territory with an area of 32 Sq.Kms and is comprised of ten inhabited islands, 17 uninhabited islands attached islets, four newly formed islets and 5 submerged reefs. The inhabited islands are Kavaratti, Agatti, Amini, Kadmat, Kiltan, Chetlat, Bitra, Andrott, Kalpeni and Minicoy. Bitra is the smallest of all having only a population of 225 persons (Census 1991). The uninhabited island Bangaram has been enumerated during 1991 census operation and has a population of 61 persons.

### Location, Area and Population



It is located between 8 °- 12 ° 13" North latitude and 71° -74° East longitude, 220 to 440 Kms. away from the coastal city of Kochi in Kerala, in the emerald Arabian sea. Considering its lagoon area of about 4,200 Sq.kms, 20,000 Sq.kms of territorial waters and about 4 lakhs Sq.kms. of economic zone, Lakshadweep is a largeterritory.

According to the 1991 Census, Lakshadweep has a population of 51707 persons. (It is 60,595 as per the Census -2001, provisional population Data sheet). More than 93% of the population who are indigenous, are Muslims and majority of them belong to the Shafi School of the Sunni Sect. Malayalam is spoken in all the islands except Minicoy where people speak Mahl which is written in Divehi script and is spoken in Maldives also. The entire indigenous

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population has been classified as Scheduled Tribes because of their economic and social backwardness. According to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes list (modification orders), 1956, the inhabitants of Lakshadweep who and both of whose parents were born in these islands are treated as Scheduled Tribes. There are no Scheduled Castes in this Union Territory. The main occupation of the people is fishing, coconut cultivation and coir twisting. Tourism is an emerging industry.

### Geology

There are no conclusive theories about the formation of these coral atolls. The most accepted theory is given by the English Evolutionist Sir Charles Darwin. He concluded in 1842 that the subsidence of a volcanic island resulted in the formation of a fringing reef and the continual subsidence allowed this to grow upwards.

When the volcanic island became completely submerged the atoll was formed encircling the lagoon where, with the action of the wind, waves, reef to currents and temperature, the coral islands were formed.

Sand bags were first formed in an atoll. They became naturally the nesting grounds for sea birds. They continued to be their exclusive preserve till as a result of the fertilization of the soil by their droppings (Guano deposits), ground vegetation became possible and man then took over, thus leaving the birds to seek another sanctuary.

Fundamentally this concept is still valid, although many consider submerging volcanic islands is by the melting of Pleistocene ice sheets. The fringing reefs are quickly built, repaired and strengthened by a micro organism called polypous. They are the architects and engineers of these atolls. The corals are the hard calcareous skeleton of these polypous.

### Fauna & Flora

The flora of the islands include Banana, Vazha, (*Musapara disiaca*), Colocassia, Chambru (*Colocassia antiquarum*) Drumstick moringakkai (*Moringa Oleifera*), Bread Fruit, Chakka (*Artocarpus incisa*) wild almond (*Terminalia catappa*) which are grown extensively. Some of the shrub jungles plant like Kanni (*Scaevola keeningil*), Punna, (*Calophyllum phyllum*), Chavok (*Casurina equisetifolia*), Cheerani (*Thespesia populnea*) are unevenly grown throughout the island. Coconut, Thenga (*Cocos nucifera*) is the only crop of economic importance in Lakshadweep. These are found in different varieties such as Laccadive micro, Laccadive ordinary, green dwarf etc. Two different varieties of sea grass are seen adjacent to the beaches. They are known as *Thalassia hemprichii* and *Cymodocea isoetifolia*. They prevent sea erosion and movement of the beach sediments.

The marine life of the sea is quite elaborate and difficult to condense. The commonly seen vertebrates are cattle and poultry. Oceanic birds generally found in Lakshadweep are Tharathasi (*Sterna fuscata*) and Karifetu (*Anous solidus*). They are generally found in one of the uninhabited islands known as PITTI. This island has been declared as a bird sanctuary.

Molluscan forms are also important from the economic point of the islands. The money cowrie (*Cypraea monita*) are also found in abundance in the shallow lagoons and reefs of the islands. Other cypraea found here are *Cypraca talpa* and *Cypraea maculifera*. Among crabs, the hermit crab is the most common. Colorful coral fish such as parrot fish (*Callyedon sordidus*), Butterfly fish (*Chaetodon auriga*), Surgeon fish (*Acanthurus lineatus*) are also found in plenty.

The following animal, bird, and tree are declared as state symbols of Lakshadweep. Animal - Butterfly fish (*Chaetodon auriga*) locally known as "Fakkikadia". Bird-- Sooty tern (*Anous solidus pileatus*) locally known as "Karifettu". Tree - Bread-fruit (*Artocarpus incise*) locally known as "Chakka"

### History

Early history of Lakshadweep is unwritten. What now passes for history is based on various legends. Local traditions attribute the first settlement on these islands to the period

of Cheraman Perumal, the last king of Kerala. It is believed that after his conversion to Islam, at the behest of some Arab merchants, he slipped out of his capital Cranganore, the present day Kodungallor - an old harbour town Kochi, for Mecca. When his disappearance was discovered, search parties went after him in sailing boats and left for the shores of Mecca, in search of the king from different places. It is believed that one of these sailing boats of Raja of Cannanore was struck by a fierce storm and they were shipwrecked on the island now known as Bangaram. From there they went to the nearby island of Agatti. Finally the weather improved and they returned to the mainland sighting other islands on their way. It is said that after their return another party of sailors and soldiers discovered the island of Amini and started living there. It is believed that the people sent there were Hindus. Even now unmistakable Hindu Social stratification exists in these islands despite Islam. Legends say that small settlements started in the Islands of Amini, Kavaratti, Andrott and Kalpeni first and later people from these islands moved to the other islands of Agatti, Kiltan, Chetlat and Kadmat. This legend of Cheraman Perumal is not, however, substantiated.

The advent of Islam dates back to the 7th century around the year 41 Hijra. It is universally believed that one St. Ubaidullah(r) while praying at Mecca fell asleep. He dreamt that Prophet Mohammed(s) wanted him to go to Jeddah and take a ship from there to go to distant places. Thus, he left Jeddah but after sailing for months, a storm wrecked his ship near these small Islands. Floating on a plank he was swept ashore on the island of Amini. He fell asleep there but again dreamt of the Prophet asking him to propagate Islam in that



Island. Ubaidullah started doing so. But this enraged the headman of the island and he ordered his exit at once. St. Ubaidullah(r) stood firm. Meanwhile, a young woman fell in love with him. He gave her the name Hameedat Beebi and married her. This further offended the headman and he decided to kill him. It is said that the headman and his henchmen surrounded Ubaidullah(r) and his wife to kill them. At once St. Ubaidullah(r) called up on the Almighty and the people were struck blind. At this time St. Ubaidullah(r) and his wife disappeared and as soon as they left the island people regained their eye sight. From Amini St. Ubaidullah(r) arrived at Andrott where he met with similar opposition but he succeeded finally in converting the people to Islam. He next went to other islands and successfully propagated Islam and returned to Andrott where he died, and was buried. The grave of St. Ubaidullah(r) is today a sacred place. Preachers from Andrott are respected deeply in far

off lands like Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Burma etc. It is a marabout or Mukbara.

The Arrival of the Portuguese in India again made Laccadives an important place for seafarers. It was also the beginning of years of plunder for the islands. The finely spun coir was much sought after for ships. So the Portuguese started looting island vessels. They forcibly landed at Amini to procure coir sometime in the early 16th century, but it is said that the people killed all the invaders by poisoning, ending the Portuguese invasion.

Even after the conversion of the entire islands to Islam, sovereignty remained in the hands of the Hindu Rajah of Chirakkal for some years. From the hands of the Chirakkal Raja, the Administration of the island passed on to the Muslim house of Arakkal of Cannanore around the middle of the 16th century. The Arakkal rule was oppressive and unbearable. So sometime in the year 1783 some islanders from Amini took courage and went to Tipu Sultan at Mangalore and requested him to take over the Administration of Amini group of islands. Tipu Sultan at that time was on friendly terms with Beebi of Arakkal and after deliberations, the islands of Amini group were handed over to him. Thus the islands suzerainty came to be divided as five came under the rule of Tipu Sultan and the rest continued under Arakkal house. After the battle of Seringapatnam in 1799 the islands were annexed to the British East India Company and were administered from Mangalore. In 1847, a severe cyclone hit the island of Andrott and Raja of Chirakkal decided to visit the island in order to assess the damages and for distributing relief. An officer of the East India Company Sir William Robinson volunteered to accompany him. On reaching Andrott, the Rajah found it difficult to meet all the demands of the people. Sir William then offered the Rajah help in the form of a loan. This was accepted. This arrangement continued for about four years but when the interest started mounting, the English asked the Rajah to repay them which he could not. In 1854 all the remaining islands were handed over to the East India Company for Administration. so, came the British rule.

The sequestration of the islands is a clear example of the political manipulations and methods adopted by the British for establishing their supremacy in India. Its traditional system of administration was treated by the English as something of misgovernment. But they were more interested in their own political and economic interests than the good government of the islands. Their policy was to exploit the profits from the islands through the Beebi without taking responsibility of its administration. The British later brought the Lakshadweep Regulation 1912, which confers limited power of judicial and magisterial status to Amins/Karanis of the islands. A reasonable restriction of outsiders were also brought into force by the above regulation. Nine Primary Schools and few dispensaries were started during the colonial rule in the islands. The Union Territory was formed in 1956 and it was named Lakshadweep in 1973.

### **Role of Women**

Women enjoy a unique position. The Marumakkathayam system of inheritance, under which Tharwad property descends through the female line saves the women from proverbial economic dependence. Ancestral or Tharwad property is equally shared among the members of the joint family in Kavaratti and Agatti, whereas in Andrott the division is between the Thavazhi only.

The Tharwad property is managed by the eldest male member of the family known as Karanavan. He has no right to alienate or sell any portion of the Tharwad property. The wife and children of the Karanavan are not entitled to any share from Tharwad. Thus the Tharwad property system has given economic freedom and independence to women in the social system of Lakshadweep. The husband is obliged to make an annual payment towards the maintenance of the wife which forms part of the marriage contract. The wife has full freedom to demand a divorce on grounds of non-payment of these customary dues. Divorce

is not a disqualification for a woman to seek a fresh alliance. There is also no ban on the remarriage of a widow. The early history of Lakshadweep also reveals that "Hameedath Beebi" of Pantaveli at Amini was the first lady to accept the preaching of Saint Ubaidullah(r) amidst humiliation and threats. She became the wife of the Saint who went to Andrott and settled there.

The predominance of women folk in all walks of life is a peculiar feature of Minicoy. The husband takes the wife's family name after marriage. All family affairs are managed by the female of the house.

Most males being the bread-winners of the family serve in international ships as seamen. The famous traveller Marco Polo(1254-1324) in his travelogue made a reference to Minicoy as the island of females. The Turkish traveller Ibnu Bathuta touched Minicoy while on his way to Maldives and married two women and stayed there for one month. In the village (Athiri) administration, the ladies have an important role. The female Chief(Boduthatha) is the head of the women's assembly who organizes Women's labour for common purposes in the "Athiri".

### Demographics

According to the 2011 census Lakshadweep has a population of 64,429, roughly equal to the nation of Marshall Islands. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakshadweep> - cite note- cia-27 This gives it a ranking of 627th among the 640 districts in India. The district has a population density of 2,013 inhabitants per square kilometre (5,210 /sq mi). Its population growth rate over the decade 2001-2011 was 6.23%. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakshadweep> - cite note-districtcensus-26 Lakshadweep has a sex ratio of 946 females for every 1000 males, and a literacy rate of 92.28%.

Most people of Lakshadweep are descendants of migrants from the Malabar Coast of southwest India and the islanders are ethnically similar to coastal Kerala's Malayali people. More than 93% of the population who are indigenous, are Muslims and the majority of them belong to the Shafi School of the Sunni Sect. The southernmost and second largest island of Minicoy has an ethnically Mahls population that are native to the Maldives.

Categorized in various sections, the Lakshadweep People collectively form a unified platform. Aminidivi, Koyas, Malmis and Melacheris are the prime human communities of Lakshadweep. Belonging to diverse sects, these people of the place follow their respective religious rituals and also participate in other group's festivals with equal enthusiasm.

A combination of 36 coral islands, Lakshadweep is rich with a huge store of natural treasures. The culture of this beautiful island speaks of centuries old religious traditions. At present, most of the people of Lakshadweep are Muslims. Also, there are several ethnic groups found in the place that populate the entire region of Lakshadweep. Aminidivi group is the original human community that once started habitation process in the land of Lakshadweep. An island named Amini was gradually formed by the local people which today is a bustling habitat of Aminidivis.

Koyas are yet another interesting ethnic group of Lakshadweep. Once referred by the name of Karnavar or Tarawadis, these people used to preside over the Panchayats of the island. Usually the people of Koya communities follow their own festival and uphold a separate and proud heritage of their own.

Connoting the word sailor, the community of Malmis evolved under the supervision of the Koyas. The people of this group are found serving the heads of Koya community by transporting vessels from one place to another. Also, some skilled Malmis workers also assist the Koya people by reading the nautical texts.

People of Melacheris community are involved with the profession of gathering nuts of coconut trees. Known as the core working section of Lakshadweep, Melacheris community lives in the west of the island. It can be said that Lakshadweep People are a true manifestation of cultural unification and social enrichment. Different people in Lakshadweep are:

### **Koyas**

Koyas of Lakshadweep symbolizes the land-owner community of the island which has been prevailing in the place from many centuries. Although the majority of ethnic groups in Lakshadweep island are Muslim, yet the social division is based upon three main categories - cultivators, land-owners and sailors. Considered as the descendants of South Indian land-owners, people of Koya community hold a prestigious position in the societal structure of Lakshadweep. Found in Kalpeni, Andrott and Kavaratti islands of Lakshadweep, the Koyas have a stronghold in the local panchayats. In case of any vital socio-economic issue, a member of the Koya group is usually nominated to present the ultimate verdict.

The history of Koyas in Lakshadweep dates back to the early periods of Muslim rulers. Called as Karnavars or Tarawads, the people of this community were once too proud to socialize with other clans of Lakshadweep. Even today, the Koyas are regarded as the superior human groups and have the privilege of taking the prime decisions on behalf of the entire society of Lakshadweep.

Apart from possessing a respectable rank within the social arena of Lakshadweep, the people of Koya group have to engage themselves in alternate occupations too. Earning their livelihood by ferrying indigenous boats is one of the main professions of the Koya people. The festivals of Koya community involves a wide range of religious occasions and other local ceremonies which are further enlivened by folk dances and music. The womenfolk of Koya groups, during major festivals, are found hymning songs in local dialects. As an integral human community of Lakshadweep, Koyas consistently enrich the very base of the ancient civilization of the island.

### **Malmis**

Malmis are a distinct human community of Lakshadweep. Connoting the term sign of ways, the people of Malmis group are predominantly sailors who, from a very long time, work under the Koyas of the island. Plying the local boats which are colloquially called asodams, the Malmis people are also quite adept in operating the nautical tables.

As one of the core communities of Lakshadweep, Malmis have an ancient heritage that coincides with the earliest civilizations of the place. During their gradual evolution, the Malmis of Lakshadweep were known to have served their superior counterparts - the Koyas. With the passage of time although several changes have taken place in the island of Lakshadweep, the very occupational profile of Malmis has remained the same. Ferrying essential commodities like rice from one island to another, Malmis still ply the boats of the financially strong Koya people.

The population of Malmis community religiously follow the customs of Islamic faith. The culture of Malmis reflects the very respect of the people in the concerned religion. Apart from major local festivals, the Malmis have their own folk celebrations too where they perform various music and dance shows all of which represent the vibrant cultural tradition of Lakshadweep. From a socio-economic point of view, the people of Malmis community have enough prospects of growth. Along with proper educational facilities, if the Malmis group can be provided with adequate occupational security, there is no doubt in the fact that in no time these people will emerge as one of the prosperous groups of Lakshadweep.

### **Melacheris**

Once inhabited the islands of Chetlat, Bitra, Kadmat and Kiltan of Lakshadweep, the Melacheris community today lives in the Amini island. The community is identified as the core working section of Lakshadweep which collects nuts of coconut trees as a part of its main occupation. The term Mela refers to the west direction, while Cheris connotes to ahamlet.

The ethnic division of Lakshadweep led to the formation of Melacheris community which was once found in the wide-spread islands of the place. The Melacheris symbolizes the lowest rung of social classes prevailing in Lakshadweep which is preceded by Koyas and Malmis. While the Koyas hold the foremost position among the various ethnic tribes of Lakshadweep, the Malmis come second with respect to their social ranking. The Melacheris comes after the two dominating communities and hence is found involved in all the ground-level activities of Lakshadweep.

The people of Melacheris usually earn their livelihood from collecting nuts of coconut trees from which they extract the sweet toddy. This is the only indigenous economic activity of Melacheris group which is still prevalent in the island of Lakshadweep. Since the Melacheris people practice the faith of Islam, hence the culture and festivities of the community is also co-related with the same religion. From Muharram to Id-ul-Fitr, Melacheris community enthusiastically take part in every single religious event. Given adequate socio-economic scope, it is believed that the Melacheris community of Lakshadweep can become a well-placed ethnic group of the island.

### **Aminidivi**

Aminidivi is the oldest socio-ethnic group of Lakshadweep with a population of around 7340. The Amini island is the place where the people of Aminidivi group are found. Coral sandstone are in abundance in the island of Amini and the main occupation of the people ranges from making of floral designs on hard coral stones to walking sticks made up of coconut and tortoise shells.

According to the ancient archives, Amini was under the rule of British Empire from the early days of 1799. In later years, the place had been visited by many known and unknown historic figures among which the name of Vasco Da Gama demands a special mention. The common religion practiced by the people of Aminidivi community is Islam. Being founded decades back, today Islam not only dominates but also influences every socio-cultural dimension of the Aminidivi people.

The People of Aminidivi are known for their excellent hand-made crafts. Splendid designs on coral stones made by the local people have become a special trait of Aminidivi community. Since the island is quite rich with natural reserves, hence the inhabitants take full advantage of the resources to earn their livelihood. Coconut and tortoise shells are commonly used to make walking sticks of various shapes and sizes. These have a huge demand among the tourists who come to explore Lakshadweep round the year.

As far as the cultural domain of Aminidivi group is concerned, the people have their own indigenous local songs some of which depicts the traditions of the place, whereas some others express the Islamic rituals. Songs of fishermen while on boat are an integral part of the ethno-cultural tradition of Aminidivi community. People of Aminidivi are cordial in nature and popular for their outstanding handicraft skills.

### **Religion**

The inhabitants of Lakshadweep are known to practice different religious customs that were once propounded by the Saint Ubaidullah who is believed to be the propagator of Islam religion in Lakshadweep.

There are several festivals that have originated in the island of Lakshadweep to mark

the eminence of Islam. Eid-Ul-Fitr, Muharram, Bakra Eid and Milad-Un-Nabi are the prominent occasions when the people of the island gather in various mosques to commemorate the holy sermons of the various prophets.

Religion of Lakshadweep is characterized by certain unusual festivals too that are found in the core ethnic groups of the place. Mouloud is one such religious event when the islanders offer prayers to the divine power and eat in groups. The festival of Ratheeb is another uncommon occasion which originated in the Kavaratti region of Lakshadweep. The grave of Sheikh Kasim, one of the respected saints of Islam is praised during Ratheeb by the people of the island to gather his holy blessings. Lakshadweep Religion primarily comes under the Sunni branch of Islamic faith.

### Languages

Languages of Lakshadweep in 2001

Malayalam (85.00%)

Others (15.00%)

The principal languages of Lakshadweep are Malayalam, Iseri (Dweep Bhasha) and Mahl.<sup>[32]</sup> The people of all the northern islands speak a dialect of Malayalam with Tamil and Arabic influences, due to extensive trade activities of these people. The people of Minicoy, the southernmost atoll, speak Mahl, a variant of Divehi language spoken in the Maldives. Malayalam with Malayalam script was introduced as the official language of Lakshadweep during the British raj. Previously a type of Arabic script (Arabi Malayalam) was used for the language. The policy was continued by the Indian government. Malayalam serves as a link language on the islands including on the Mahl dominated Minicoy Island.

### Economy

Lakshadweep's gross state domestic product for 2004 is estimated at US\$ 60 million at current prices. There is little economic inequality in Lakshadweep and the poverty index is low. Coconut fibre extraction and production of fibre products is Lakshadweep's main industry. There are five coir fibre factories, five production demonstration centres and seven fibre curling units run by the government of India. These units produce coir fibre, coir yarn, curled fibre and corridor mattings.

### Fisheries

Lakshadweep is the only coral atolls of the country. With a vast lagoon of 4,200 km<sup>2</sup>, it has territorial waters of 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 4,00,000 Lakhs km<sup>2</sup> and coastal line of about 132 km. There is an estimation of about one lack tones of tuna and tuna like fishes and about an equal quantity of shark in the sea around Lakshadweep. Fishing is the main livelihood of the islanders. Freshly caught tuna is processed by drying it in the sun after cooking and smoking. The resultant product, known as `mas`, are popular products exported from these islands to southeast Asian countries. Eleven workshops in islands and two boat building yards cater to the needs of fishermen. There are 375 boats in operation in Lakshadweep.

### Tourism

Due to its isolation and scenic appeal, Lakshadweep was already known as a tourist attraction for Indians since 1974. This brings in significant revenue, which is likely to increase. Since such a small region cannot support industries, the government is actively promoting tourism as a means of income in Bangaram and Kadmat islands. Bangaram is projected as a major destination for international tourism.

Marine fauna are plentiful. Water sports activities such as scuba diving, wind surfing, snorkelling, surfing, kayaking, canoeing, water skiing, sportfishing, yachting and night-voyages into the sea are quite popular activities among tourists. Tourists flock to these



islands throughout the year except during the South-west monsoon months when seas are extremely rough.

### Desalination

A low-temperature thermal desalination plant opened on Kavaratti in 2005, at a cost of ₹ 50 million (€922,000). The experimental plant, which uses the temperature difference between warm surface seawater and much colder seawater at 500m depth to generate potable water as well as energy, was slated to produce 100,000 litres/day of potable water from seawater. Production costs in 2005 were ₹220-250/m<sup>3</sup> (€4.1-4.6/m<sup>3</sup>); the cost was supposed to drop to ₹ 30-60/m<sup>3</sup> (€0.55-1.11/m<sup>3</sup>) with increased capacity. The technology was developed by the National Institute of Ocean Technology. It can be used to produce drinking water and also for power generation and air conditioning. In addition, the deep seawater contains extra nutrients for fish, an important source of food and income for the local population. The government plans to set up desalination plants with a capacity of 10 million litres/per day on all islands and coastal areas. In 2009, the NIOT announced plans to build plants on Minicoy, Agatti and Andrott.

### Transport and tourism

Agatti Aerodrome on Agatti Island is the only airport in Lakshadweep. Air India Regional, a subsidiary of the state-owned carrier, serves Agatti and flies to Kochi on the mainland. Kingfisher Airlines, had flights connecting Kochi and Bangalore to Agatti before the airline ceased operations. The other islands are linked by the Pawan Hans helicopter or boat service.<sup>[44]</sup> Six ships connect Kochi and Lakshadweep, they are Kavaratti, M.V Amindivi, M.V Minicoy, M.V Arabian Sea, M.V Lakshadweep Sea and M.V Bharath Seema.

Tourists need a permit to visit the islands; foreign nationals are not permitted to visit certain islands. According to the current alcohol laws of India, consumption of alcoholic beverages is not permitted in the Lakshadweep Archipelago except on Bangaram Island.

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