

BETWEEN THE SEA AND A HARD PLACE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

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In December 1961, Jawaharlal Nehru despatched a fighter pilot-turned-civil servant to a tiny group of islands located southwest of mainland India in the Arabian Sea with the 'challenging' mission of steering it into the modern era.

Moorkkoth Ramunni, who took over as the fourth administrator of the Union Territory of Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi islands formed in 1956, quickly won the hearts of minds of the islanders. He walked with the people, accustomed himself to their ethos, marvelled at the atolls surrounding the tiny landmasses and spent several nights on their sprawling sandy beaches.

The island chain witnessed a new dawn as Ramunni brought in some path-breaking reforms. Land was apportioned between tenants and landlords, with the tenants receiving three quarters of a parcel. At village meetings held in the glow of kerosene lamps, historic decisions were taken, including the one to float cooperative societies for marketing island merchandise such as coir, copra and fish. The relocation of the Dweep administration office to Kavaratti from Kozhikode, then Calicut, gave momentum to the administrator's initiatives to eradicate leprosy and to set up schools.

"To improve their means of livelihood, he introduced them to tuna fishing using live bait which was until then not known to the islanders except those of Minicoy," recalls Ali Manikfan, 83, marine researcher and ecologist from Minicoy. When Ramunni left the archipelago in the summer of 1965, he took a slice of it with him. So much so, that his home in Thalassery near Kannur was named after the smallest of the islands in the chain, Bitra.

Sixty years later, the same islands that embraced Ramunni and his reforms are up in arms against a host of proposed policies by another administrator, a political appointee. A 'Save Lakshadweep' campaign is gaining strength and the Chief Ministers of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, among others, have pledged their support to it.

Myths, ballads, facts

The archipelago's early history is anchored in a sea of myths, legends, ballads and facts that are inseparably entwined. It's believed that the earliest known reference to the island chain was in *Mushika-Vamsa*, an 11th century work in which a king is said to have ruled some islands in the western ocean. Among the several legends about its discovery is one about a search party for a king who went missing while on a voyage to Mecca accidentally spotting these isles. "A Kolathiri king is believed to have sent people, mostly farmers, from north Kerala to settle down here. They came under the rule of the Arakkal family in Kannur whose origins are mired in local legends. There's this tale about a Musalman rescuing a drowning princess who subsequently marries him, taking away with her suzerainty over these isles and Kannur," says M. Mullakkoya, former secretary of the Lakshadweep Sahitya Kala Academy and a resident of Kiltan island.

The islanders fell on bad times as the Arakkal family's interest was predominantly in filling their coffers using their *karyakars* (revenue collection agents) on these islands. When an Arakkal king tried to monopolise coir trade by asking the islanders to only sell it in Kannur, the Amini group of islands revolted and sought the help of Tipu Sultan, who entered into a pact with Arakkal and

secured rights over the Amindivi group of islands. However, when Tipu fell in the battle of Seringapatam in 1799, this group came under the British rule. Meanwhile, the Arakkal family, which remotely governed the Laccadive and Minicoy islands, fell into a debt trap laid by the British and the inability to pay off debts and the tribute forced it to forfeit control over these islands to the British in early 20th century.

In an island chain with over 96% of Muslim population, the advent of Islam is traced to the legend of a saint named Ubaidulla, who landed following a shipwreck on the shores of Amini in AD 7. On the Androth island, the largest in the group with just 4.9 sq. km. area, is a tomb in his name. News of India's Independence came to the islands about three months later. The southwest monsoon was raging and the ships remained at berth. When the islanders who left for the mainland after mid-September returned, they broke the news of India's freedom triggering celebrations, recalls Dr. Mullakkoya.

The British system of having two separate collectorates — Malabar for the Laccadive group and Mangalore for the Amindivi group — continued till 1956 when it was all united to form the Union Territory. It was renamed Lakshadweep in 1973. If Ramunni had laid the foundations of a modern Lakshadweep, Omesh Saigal, who was administrator in the early 1980s, cut through bureaucracy to bring helicopter service mainly for evacuation of seriously ill patients to Kochi for medical treatment.

The tourism potential of these emerald islands, 36 in total with an estimated population of about 70,000 people on the 10 inhabited islands and with vast lagoons covering 4,200 sq km area, dawned on the administration in the 1980s when Bengaram island was leased out to a hotel chain. The arrangement, though an international hit, ran into rough weather some 20 years later with the government taking over the reins following litigation that went up to the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, tourism societies formed in all islands ensured that the UT, a notified Scheduled Tribes (ST) district with outsiders' entry limited by permits, conducted tourism in keeping with the ethos of the people and a ban on alcohol was fitting.

Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Independence, then administrator Rajeev Talwar brought a 'Kochi-Agatti-Goa-Agatti-Kochi' daily flight to further boost tourism. The Lakshadweep Development Corporation Ltd (LDCL), formed in the late 1980s, also began operating passenger ships and cargo barges.

Local elections

Though a Panchayat Regulation was notified in 1994 and the maiden local elections were held three years later, powers have largely remained with the administrator. The role of the district planning committee chaired by the collector and the sole MP as one of its members is to draft a development plan.

In 2015, following a Supreme Court order, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change notified an integrated island management plan (IIMP), which sought to enhance the productivity of the UT without compromising on its coral reef ecosystem or the people's customs.

Life in the UT was peaceful and at a languid pace, free of COVID-19 for nearly a year, thanks to a quarantine stipulation for inbound travellers in Kochi when in December 2020, a new administrator, a former BJP leader named Praful Khoda Patel, set foot on Kavaratti following the demise of the incumbent. In one stroke, he reversed its success against COVID-19 — the UT has seen over 7,000 cases since — and proposed a slew of draft pieces of legislation ranging from a beef ban, a law to cut back the powers of elected representatives of panchayats, an

arbitrary Goonda Act regardless of the low rate of crimes in the UT and a law for the creation of a land development authority with sweeping powers for eviction.

The UT is in the throes of an unprecedented agitation now with appeals for the repeal of these proposals and recall of the administrator resonating across the country. "It's a life and death situation for us," says an islander.

In Focus

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sq km

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