

A 'REFORM WAVE' LAKSHADWEEP COULD DO WITHOUT

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

Praful Khoda Patel, a former Gujarat Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Minister who took additional charge as Administrator, Lakshadweep, in December last year, is in the news for having [introduced a slew of draft legislation](#) that will have a wide-ranging impact on the islands: [the Lakshadweep Animal Preservation Regulation, 2021](#); [the Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Regulation \(PASA\)](#); [the Lakshadweep Panchayat Regulation, 2021](#) and [Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation 2021](#). Addressing the media in the face of widespread criticism of these measures, Mr. Patel says [he intends to develop Lakshadweep like neighbouring Maldives](#), “a renowned international tourist destination”.

Adding to this, the [Collector of Lakshadweep, S. Asker Ali](#) (a young IAS officer from Manipur) says, “It was only in 2017 that the Centre constituted the [Island Development Agency](#) under the Home Minister for the development of the islands. Since then, we have been working on developing town and country planning norms.”

Lakshadweep | Between the sea and a hard place

Mr. Ali should be aware that a specially constituted Island Development Authority (IDA) for the island territories of India, chaired by no less than the former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had, in Kavaratti in 1988, approved a framework for the development of India's island territories. It held the view that “an environmentally sound strategy for both island groups hinges on better exploitation of marine resources coupled with much greater care in the use of land resources”. Published in 1989, the report carried six recommendations for Lakshadweep (Cecil J. Saldanha, *Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep: An Environmental Impact Assessment*). At this point, I must highlight that Lakshadweep was an assignment that I consider to be the most enriching in my career — I was Administrator, Lakshadweep, 1987-90.

Upon the conclusion of my term, the Union Territory had its own decentralised political entity from the adoption of panchayati raj much before the constitutional amendments of 1993, in which the Island Development Council, at the apex of the local government, was mandated to advise the Administrator on development; its own airport, and a flourishing tourist industry, with an international tourist resort in Bangaram. According to its first franchisee, Jose Dominic, this facilitated ecotourism in Kerala.

A paradise set in the Arabian Sea, the archipelago of Lakshadweep also gives India a vast and exclusive economic zone with three distinct ecosystems: land, lagoon and ocean. Fishery is a primary occupation here. The language, except in Minicoy, is Malayalam; in Minicoy, Mahl is spoken, a language akin to the 17th century Divehi of the Maldives.

Bitter turf war unfolding in Lakshadweep

The society in all islands is matriarchal. The religion is Islam of the pristine Shafi school of law. When Islam came to the islands is debated. According to Prof. Lotika Varadarajan, “The thesis... that Islam was introduced not from Malabar but from Yemen and Hadramaut may be accepted in relation to the Maldives but not Lakshadweep... On the other hand, social conventions, dress and the position accorded to Thangals within the community all point to the Mappilas of Malabar

as progenitors of present-day Islam in Lakshadweep.”

Vatteluttu was the earliest script used with its heavy Sanskrit component and this system of autography is in evidence in the sailing manuals of local pilots (*malmis*), on inscriptions on tombstones and those in some mosques/*pallis*. With the introduction of Islam, Arabi-Malayalam, with Malayalam in Arabic script and associated with the literature of the Mappilas that developed on the mainland, also came into use on the islands.

Editorial | [Imperious missteps: On Lakshadweep restrictions](#)

I was a part of the team accompanying Rajiv Gandhi while on his first visit to Lakshadweep in 1985. Together with his visit to the Andaman and Nicobar islands, Rajiv Gandhi was concerned about the development agenda for these ecologically fragile territories — an agenda hitherto dictated by a faraway government to a design set by the Union Planning Commission, and without so much as a reference to the people most concerned, the residents of the islands.

Deliberations of the IDA wanted that Lakshadweep, with its land ownership constitutionally protected, be opened to international tourism not as a means of generating wealth for investors from the mainland but to bring prosperity to the islanders. Specifically rejecting the Maldives model, the plan for Lakshadweep required that the industry had to be people-centric and enrich the fragile coral ecology. Lakshadweep today has rainwater harvesting facilities, first introduced in government buildings on every island and now accessible in every home. Solar power, which covers 10% of lighting needs, makes Lakshadweep a pioneer in India's present flagship initiative. All islands have been connected by helicopter service since 1986, and high-speed passenger boats were purchased in the 1990s by an international tender. A study by the National Institute of Oceanography found practical applications, helping a redesign of the tripods reinforcing the beaches against sea erosion, and ensuring piped water supply especially designed to draw from the fresh water lens that, in every coral island, floats on the saline underground seawater at the core of every coral island, so as not to disturb the slim lens.

‘Corporate mindset’ driving administrator’s action, says Lakshadweep MP

The islands boast total literacy. Minicoy had among the country's first Navodaya Vidyalayas. Kadmat has a degree college that was designed by K.T. Ravindran, an authority on vernacular building traditions, who was to become dean and professor and head of the department of urban design at New Delhi's School of Planning and Architecture. Vernacular building traditions are the theme of all government housing projects undertaken in the islands in the 1980s, with leading architects providing the designs. Kavaratti has a desalination wind-powered plant gifted by the Danish government. And although the poverty line in terms of GDP is only slightly higher than the World Bank's poverty threshold, Lakshadweep today has no poor people; they have a high calorific consumption from plentiful foods harvested from the lagoons and islands.

The office of the Administrator, Lakshadweep was also among the first in India to be computerised with a mainframe and fax machine; every island in Lakshadweep had a computer by 1990. Endorsed with outlays by the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Finance Commissions (1984-2005), this established, in the words of the last of these Commissions “speedy and accurate generation of accounting information that might be needed for purposes of better planning, budgeting and monitoring”.

Data | Beef ban, liquor sales, 'goonda act': a storm over Lakshadweep islands

Admittedly, there is much room for improvement. Today, long lines and refrigeration have aided the expansion of the fishing sector but income disparities have grown. Indiscriminate trawling

endangers the coral, as experienced in the Maldives and now banned there. The Government recognises the need to develop policies for enhancing employment opportunities, environment-friendly management of fisheries, sanitation, waste disposal and widening access to drinking water, with the youth, having acquired a modern education, preferring salaried jobs over pursuing traditional occupations. None of this requires any of the measures announced by Administrator Patel.

Revenue from tourism has declined with the closure of resorts (including at Bangaram) from litigation. A clear policy must include conservation and natural resource management arrived at after wide consultation, eminently possible within the existing infrastructure of the Union Territory, and also taking into account climatic compulsions. Maldives is hardly a suitable model. Water bungalows — an expensive concept and also hazardous to the coral — favoured by the NITI Aayog, would collapse in Lakshadweep's turbulent monsoon. It should be noted that a wooden jetty installed at the diving school in Kadmat needs to be dismantled every monsoon.

But, ostensibly, in the pursuit of 'holistic development', using the 'claim' that there has been no development in Lakshadweep for the past 70 years, Mr. Praful Patel has proposed a cow slaughter ban in a territory where there are no cows (except in government-owned dairy farms), a preventive detention law where there is no crime, and also steps to undermine tribal land ownership, with judicial remedy denied, with also plans for road widening on the islands where the maximum road length is 11 km. More insidious is the provision to allow the mining and exploitation of mineral resources which could convert the islands into a hub for cement manufacture.

Also read | [Lakshadweep's proposed two-child norm for panchayat polls 'flawed'](#)

Other initiatives by Mr. Praful Patel include panchayat rules designed to restrict the population growth in a territory where, according to the National Health and Family Survey-5 (2019-20), the total fertility rate is 1.4 (which is far behind the national average of 2.2) and relaxing prohibition, extant in the Union Territory because of public demand. Worse still is the relaxation of quarantine restrictions for travel which have introduced the novel coronavirus into a pandemic-free archipelago. The developments only lead one to suspect that there is something sinister being planned. Is the game plan to altogether supplant Lakshadweep's human habitation with cement factories?

Wajahat Habibullah, a former IAS officer, was India's first Chief Information Commissioner, and thereafter Chair, National Commission for Minorities

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