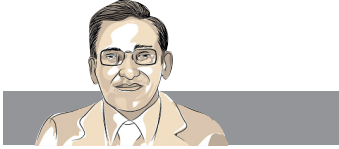


State interventions, Lakshadweep's future

The archipelago's integration into the mainstream should not lead to emotional alienation and physical damage



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The Lakshadweep Administration, which is now facing a storm over its draft rules introduced by its Administrator, has now provided a fresh rationale for its proposals, shifting from public policy to public purpose ignoring public interest, whereas the strategic issue is the interplay of ecological fragility, insular cultural geography and strategic location. There are two competing visions for its future. **NITI Aayog, in 2019, identified water villas and land-based tourism projects as the development issue faced by the islands, suggested zoning based on land acquisition and focused on sustainable development ignoring the fragile environment and culture.** The Integrated Island Management Plan prepared under the guidance of the Supreme Court and National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, in 2016, had rejected 'home stays' in view of the strict social customs and strong resistance of the vast majority. **It stipulated that development programmes be implemented in consultation with the elected local self-government bodies adhering to scientifically determined plans** (<https://bit.ly/3v4sdrO> and <https://bit.ly/2T5q81I>).

Questionable public purpose

The rationale, or thinking, of the appointed Administrator of the

Union Territory, planning for flight loads of tourists, **through four controversial proposals – the Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation, Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Regulation, Lakshadweep Panchayat Regulation and Lakshadweep Animal Preservation Regulation – as “regulations of peace, progress and good government”**, has apparently not even been able to convince the Union Home Minister. For the local people, and across the political spectrum, these changes are arbitrary, authoritarian and will destroy the way of life. The Administrator's fresh response is reliance on the power of government or 'public purpose' for acquiring private land, unnecessarily opening the door to conflict and the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court in the case of *Dev Sharan vs State of Uttar Pradesh*, in 2011, pointed out that, **“Any attempt by the State to acquire land by promoting a public purpose to benefit a particular group of people or to serve any particular interest at the cost of the interest of a large section of people especially of the common people defeats the very concept of public purpose...”**

The proposals have been challenged before the High Court of Kerala, which had, in 2019, in a separate case, recognised the special status given to the inhabitants for protecting their ethnic culture and traditions, and to maintain the serene atmosphere in these islands without unnecessary interference by mainlanders.

Lakshadweep is unique. It is an egalitarian coconut tree owning society, with little economic in-



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equality, a very high level of both literacy and unemployment. The Muslim community is designated as Scheduled Tribes. The land area is fully covered with coconut trees, the main agricultural crop, and fisheries is the main economic activity employing a quarter of the working population. Electricity generation is mainly through diesel generators and is expensive and solar electricity has limitations as it requires a large land area. They need employment in the mainland.

Review tourism strategy

The Lakshadweep Administration has framed the development issue as the development of the islands on the lines of the Maldives, whereas the fact is that it is adopting a very different strategy without any real consultation.

In the Maldives, tourism since the 1970s is centred on water villas in uninhabited islands, ensuring that very few coconut trees are cut with limited home stays introduced in 2015, and few cultural and other conflicts. Second, a 'one island, one resort' policy has kept pressure on reefs low due to a wide distribution of the tourist population. Third, the business

model is about giving coral reefs economic significance where rich and healthy reefs are essential for private capital's economic returns. Fourth, tourists come because of the natural beauty and the sheer amount of marine life; resort owners commit to conserve the reefs and divers at the resorts are quick to report illegal activities. Fifth, regulation is limited to ban on reef fishing and collection of corals, having no centrality to land acquisition.

In Lakshadweep, the separation of resorts from villages, including for drinking water, sewage disposal and electricity, gives priority to the fragile ecosystem, socio-economic conditions and well-being of the inhabitants. Groundwater occurs as a thin lens floating over the seawater and is tapped by open wells replenished by the monsoon; all the inhabited islands have a scarcity of drinking water supply. The conventional method of sewage treatment is not feasible because of the coral sandy strata and high water table. The existing water balance is already under stress and inhabited villages cannot accommodate tourism. Why the Ministry of Environment is quiet about this is not clear.

Political insensitivity

Meanwhile, public interest is being re-defined, shifting the debate from private tourism to urbanisation, both inappropriate for inhabited islands. **Despite inhabited islands being defined as 'cities' in the Census, they do not need to be developed as 'smart cities' with a focus on infrastructure requiring large-scale construction and land acquisition.** The irony is that the

Administration has anticipated public opposition and, despite there being no case of murder, robbery or local involvement in smuggling, the new draft legislation seeks preventive detention for 'anti-social activities', and covers "cruel person" and "depredator of environment".

The relation between state and society is being arbitrarily changed, despite the constitutional protection. The powers of the panchayats have been withdrawn on grounds of corruption, an unusual step. The two-child policy for those seeking election to panchayats does not exist in other Union Territories or States. A ban on beef has been instituted, contrary to the practice in Northeast India. Liquor is being permitted for tourists in inhabited islands.

Innovation needed

Lakshadweep is a uni-district Union Territory with a top-heavy administrative system of more than half-a-dozen All-India Service officers essentially creating work for themselves.

Interventions should be limited to setting boundary conditions for both resorts and development institutions, with income from taxing resorts given to the inhabitants. **Active state intervention should be limited to generation of electricity in partnership with public sector units, and water, sewage and health as well as education, technology-enabled employment in call centres and future employment in the mainland.**

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