

Emerging Socio-Cultural Identities in Great Andaman: An Anthropological Understanding of Island's Sacred Complex

Dr. D. V. Prasad, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU), Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh. email: dvprasada@gmail.com

Abstract:

In the era of globalization, no territory or tribe is left to isolation across the nations. The Andaman Islands and its original inhabitants are not exceptional to this argument. It is inhabited by four indigenous negrito tribal communities i.e., Jarawa, Onge, Sentinelese, and Great Andamanese and now they are marginalized by the migrated mainland India population and restricted them to few pockets of the island. Among them, Great Andamanese population is on the verge of extinction with only 48 surviving souls with the vices of modern civilization. In pre Independent India, the colonial rulers started the process of annexation by establishing the penal settlement for the convicts who sent from mainland India and Burma. After Independence, they were allowed to settle down in the islands along with their kith and kin for development of these islands. In due course of time, refugees from East Bengal were settled in Middle and North Andaman's by clearing major chunk of forest area for human habitation and cultivation. Later on, people from different parts of the country immigrated to these islands in search of better economic opportunities. As a result 'mini India' scenario was developed and built a new social system wherein inter caste, creed, and religious marriages, Lingua Franca, and national character are catalytic in creating a separate identity for locals in Andaman. But due to expanding communication network and infrastructural facilities, a new trend has been emerging by integrating social identities among the settler population of the islands. This situation can be best illustrated from the mushrooming community guilds and the emerging 'sacred complex' of Port Blair town to manifest distinct cultural characteristics in a geographically isolated area i.e., Andaman Islands. Hence, the present study attempts to focus on the integration of different social identities with the emerging sacred complex in Andaman Islands.

Key words: Globalization, social identity, sacred complex, geography, and performances.

Introduction:

The advent of globalization and industrialization had brought many changes not only in economic sphere but in the social milieu of the millions of people in the developing nations. The growth of cross cultural

contacts resulted in overlapping many identities for the sake of better standard of living. Despite of this fact, cultural identities of cross sections of people in India are still being facilitated by the age-old traditions of that particular region where they inhabit. It is being demonstrated that the observance of various sacred performances, specialists and geography as a whole constitute sacred complex of great tradition which unites the people under pan-Indian identity (Vidyarthi, 1961). Thus 'sacred complex' concept is catalytic in highlighting various facets of Hindu spiritual life, source of livelihood to dependent communities, trade, and tourism etc., in India. Apart from this, the sacred centers are spreading the message of cultural ethos to even remote places through several cultural performances like Car festivals, *Jataras*, and *Ustavas*. The identity of a particular sacred complex was being perpetuated by adopting modern innovations in its wider form of adjustment to the ever changing situation through networking the people of Indian culture. Peaceful coexistence of multiple belief systems, traditions, and ways of life at these centers reflects the principle of unity in diversity.

The empirical studies of sacred complex in India began in 1960's by delineating methodological perspectives in understanding complex network of social relations in sacred centers. Based on the analytical concepts of Robert Redfield and Mckim Marriott, Vidyarthi (1961) initiated the beginning of systematic study of these centers by using anthropological approaches for the comprehensive understanding of the Indian civilization. Vidyarthi's formulated concept of sacred complex, which is a synthesis of sacred geography, sacred performances, sacred specialists, sacred segments, sacred zone, and sacred geography, is an attempt to describe social organization of the temple and its people. He is further argued that sacred complex of Hindu Gaya is applicable to tribal and rural religions of this country. Through his methodology and empirical data, Vidyarthi rescrutinized the western scholar's concepts like little and great tradition, cultural specialists, performances, and media and reframed them in Indian context. In the course of time various anthropological works on these sacred complex has been undertaken by Makhan Jha (1971), Saraswati (1975), Sahay (1975), Patnaik (1977), Goswami and Morab (1975). These studies analyzed the dynamics of sacred complex of Hindu pilgrim centers by using the concepts of Vidyarthi.

In line with above hypothesis, the present study is made to understand the emerging patterns of sacred complex in physiologically and geographically isolated town in Andaman Islands. Port Blair town is the capital of these enthralled islands which is inhabited by the people from different states of the Union of India and diverse cultural backgrounds of both great and little traditions of Hinduism, Christianity, Muslim, Jainism etc. The emerging temple traffic and ongoing cultural performances of the people in these islands prompt the researcher to test the conceptual framework of sacred complex in Island

situation. At this juncture, it is also essential to understand the historical transect of the study area to understand the emerging sacred complex in the Islands.

Historical Background:

During colonial annexation, the Britishers thought of peopling Andaman Islands to seek refuge of naval fleet during distress conditions, to prevent the smuggling from Malaya and to make friendly contacts with native settlers. As a part of this strategy, the convicts were sent to develop this island for human habitation to protect the imperial interests due to its strategic location on sea route. After Independence, the policy of immigration is continued for a quite longer period in view of development of these remote islands. Initially refugees from East Pakistan, settlers from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Karnataka settled in various islands. Later on people from diverse cultural, linguistic and geographical backgrounds migrated to these islands on account of government service, business, and allied occupations. As a result of this, the original inhabitants of Andaman Island i.e., Great Andamanese, Jarwa, Onge and Sentenelese became minority and the immigrants emerged as the dominant group (Singh, 1994). Since then later settlers started living together and participating in one another's cultural activities. This sort of cultural mosaic facilitated inter-caste or creed marriages between the immigrants and local born islanders and on the other hand different communities formed separate guilds to protect their regional identity too.

With the emergence of various Hindu shrines of local, regional and national significance in and around the Port Blair town, institutionalized socio-cultural organizations like, *Utkal Samaj* (Orissa), *Atul Smriti Samity* (Bengali Club), *Andhra Association* (Telugu), *Kerala Samajam* (Malayalam), *Rajasthan Manch* etc., were formed to provide common cultural consciousness besides protecting their nativity identities. These institutions are playing a pivotal role in creating cultural consciousness by organizing cultural performance on festive occasions in the form of extravagant pandals, reading of sacred texts, bhajans, and other regional cultural programmes. Thus sacred geography and its related institutions provide the base for elucidating new identities in the emerging sacred complex.

The Study Area:

The Andaman Islands are located in Bay of Bengal with a distance of 1190 km from Chennai and 1255 km from Kolkata on sea. It is having 3106 sq. kilometer area. The Andaman Islands are classified into three divisions i.e., South, Middle and North Andaman for administrative convenience. Andaman Trunk Road (ATR) is connecting all these three divisions that can also access through sea route. Port Blair is the

capital town for the entire Andaman and Nicobar Islands as it harbour people from different socio-cultural backgrounds. It is the entry point or gateway to the rest of islands.

Of the total population, Hindus are predominant in the study area followed by Christian and Muslim. Though Hindi is official language in Port Blair, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Santhali and other regional languages of the Union of India are well versed in the respective areas. As a part of territorial expansion, various religious centers come up to cater the philosophical needs of the immigrant population in due course of time. This situation led to the emergence of sacred complex in the islands. Under these circumstances Port Blair town is selected to understand the emerging patterns of sacred complex in the island situation.

Methodology and Data Collection:

The present study is basically an outcome of intensive fieldwork from 2005-09 by visiting sacred centers of Port Blair. The data was collected through observation, extensive case studies, key informant interviews and verbal discussions etc. For collection of quantitative data, secondary sources like records of A&N Administration, the data from State and government departmental libraries were used for analyzing the demography of the study area.

Demography:

As per 2011 Census, the total population of Andaman Island comes to 3,80,581 consisting 2,02,871 male and 1,77,710 female. Of which, the rural population representing 2,37,093 and urban population comes to 1,43,488. Out of the total population Hindu (246589), Christian (77178), Muslim (29265), Sikh (1587), Buddhist (421), Jain (23), and others are representing the different socio-cultural and ethnic background immigrated to the islands. The population has been increasing continuously with the influx of migrants from mainland India.

Sacred Geography of Port Blair Town:

Port Blair town is not only a tourist paradise, but a place for cultural conglomeration surrounded by a multitude of sacred geography of diverse religious faiths. Territorial expansion of the settlement area during the last few decades witnessed the enormous growth of temples along with the development of educational, commercial, transport sectors for practical purposes constitutes this Islands a baseline for

cultural heterogeneity. The immaculate architectures like Police Gurudwara at Bazaar, Bhuddhist monastery at Phongy Chowke, Churches of diverse denominations located in the vicinity of Gholghar, Mosque at Supply Lane, Dignabad and spiritual center like Ramakrishna Mission at Marina Beach, Chinmai Mission at Police Lane and various Hindu temples like Murugan temple, Ayyappa and Radha Govind temple at RGT road etc., are demonstrates the emerging sacred complex. Observance of cultural performances at these places by the different communities at regular intervals is catalytic for development of religious tourism in recent past. Hence it is a melting pot of diverse traditions and belief systems.

In addition to these sacred centers, there is another important sacred zone located in South Point, which is most venerated Muslim graveyard known as '*Mazhar Pahad*' distance ranging from 2 to 3 kilometers. This place is noted for the burial memorial of a Muslim saint, *Hajrat Allama Fazul Haque Khairabadi*, who belonged to the court of the last Mughal Emperor of Delhi and a freedom fighter, worshipped by large number of people irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. It is a popularized pilgrimage for Hindus, Muslim, Sikh and Christians in the Union Territory. People who kept *mannath* (vow) visits this place and organizes grand feasts after sacrificing goat and fowls in complying their vows. Besides this, people from different cultural backgrounds tie sacred thread to existing *Ficus* (baniyan) tree which is in typical Hindu style at *Mazar*.

The Kali Mandir on the way to Shippy Ghat is also a popular sacred centre which is also visited by cross section of islanders to worship Goddess Kali. It is located on the Hillock and having 6 kilometres from Port Blair town. The animal sacrifices by the officiating Nepali priest with his mouth and sucking the oozing blood in possessive state resembles the tantric aspects Hinduism at this sacred center.

Phonghy Khyongi (Andaman Buddhist Mission) is a major religious centre for the Burmese settlers in the islands. It is located nearby market centre which is popular as *Phonghy Chowke*. During Burmese festive occasions like *Tankem* (Holi), *Pavarana* (Deevali), and *Buddha poornima* they throng to *Phonghy Khyongi* situated at Port Blair, *Memio* at Wandoor, Mayabunder and express their solidarity through celebration of their festival including feasts.

The Murugan temples located on the way to Shadipur and its peripheral worshipped by Tamil people are thronged by cross section of devotees from the islands to gaze '*Panguni Uttaram*'. It is being organized once in every year by carrying decorated *kavidi* and inserting *vel* into the bodies of the devotees who undertake *vratam* (vow) and walk across the fired charcoal.

Besides this, little traditions of different communities who represent various regions of the country are also started to gain prominent at various *mohallas* of Port Blair town like anthills, statues of village god and goddesses, and so on.

The Sacred Complex of Rajasthan Temple:

Out of the above stated sacred centres, Rajasthan Temple is one which is emerging center for sacred complex in the study area. It is located on the hillock of Great Andaman Island besides Gandhi Park in Shadipur locality of Port Blair. It is having two kilometers distance from Airport and one and half kilometers distance from inter island and mainland jetty. In view of its proxy location, people from all walks of life i.e., tourists, businessmen, and different ethnic groups who live in different parts of Andaman Island throng to this place and offer worship (Plate 1).

This temple rising to a height of average 100ft. to the sea level gives a majestic appearance to the visitors and thus provides sanctity to the place. A Unique interior architecture facilitating people from diverse backgrounds to offer worship in such a way by installing the idols in different portions of the sanctorum for the purpose of worshipping all the regional gods and goddesses. The main sanctorum consists of nine divisions having raised construction (*vimanas/gali gopurams*) of each room resembles a distinct North Indian temple architecture. In Ground floor (starting from right side), deities of Lord Shiva, Parvati and the Phallic, Goddess Durga, Lord Satyanaraya and Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Rama and Sita, Lord Krishna accompanied by Radha, Lord Hanuman, and Lord Venkateswara. Statues of Lord Ganapati and Baba Ram Devji (Peer Baba of Rajasthan) are located in either side of the sanctorum in a guarding position to the main deities. In First floor (starting from left side) Lord Jagannath, Malabhadra and Subhadra of Orissa, Bhagavan Katu Shyamji of Rajasthan were installed for worship (Plate 2).

The temple is maintained by a committee which is known as 'Rajasthan *Manch*' formed in 1972 to bring together migrants of Rajasthan people at one common platform through their cultural activities such as celebration of Holi, Deewali and their State festivals. Initially it is organized for maintaining and coordinating its members for a common cause through their collective effort, later it expanded its activities to the organization of various Hindu religious activities in Port Blair town. As a part this, the need for a major sacred centre is felt which can help in retaining a relatively high degree of diversity and pluralism reflecting the vast regional, linguistic, socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity of the Bay Islands at one place as well as strengthening filial bonds among its members. The members of the *Manch* attributed that the main reason behind this idea to develop temple as a one of the major pilgrim centre in

Islands for the attraction of tourists from all walks of life in turn for the augmentation of charity works on behalf of this centre. Core member of the *Manch* (service personnel, businessmen, and contractors) succeeded their efforts in bringing it to the notice of the Administration and land allotment for the proposed temple. In 1998 temple construction was started by voluntary contribution of its own members in the form of money and material. All the idols were imported from Jaipur except Lord Jagannath, which is donated by *Utkal* Cultural Association to maintain the sanctity in the long run. The construction was completed by the end of 1999 and opened up it for the public for worship. Apart from its routine worship of the installed deities, *Melas*, *Utstavs*, and *Jatras* of different cultural groups of the mainland India are held on auspicious occasions like Lord Jagannath Rath Yatra, Durga Puja, and Holi etc. All the cultural festivities of regional significance will take place in collaboration with the temple committee.

The *Manch* had its own Executive Committee to look after the sacred activities of the temple. At present the committee consists of 25 nominated members, of which 11 executive members were elected once in every two years by voting. The membership is strictly given to those who hail from Rajasthan and majority of them businessmen. Committee members assembled every Tuesday evening in the premises of the temple and discuss the matters pertaining to temple development and its maintenance. In the beginning it has 35 members representing one person from each family of 35 families. With the rise of population about 200 permanent and 200 nominal members those who are in government service, now they are conducting elections for the executive committee. But all households contribute generously for temple fund on monthly basis.

At present the temple is being maintained with one priest and four caretakers who arrange the needed materials for regular *puja* and preparation of *prasadam*. Besides their regular activities, every month caretakers collect donations from the merchants in Aberdeen Bazaar regularly on behalf of the temple and deposit the same at cashier of the Committee. This amount is being used for regular maintenance of the temple i.e. the purchase of groceries, oil, incense sticks, and payment of phone, electricity and water charges, etc. At present Executive Committee made arrangements within the sanctorum for boarding the priest and caretakers of the temple.

The functional importance of this Center is the arrangement of massive cultural performances of different States through out the Calenderical year with the assistance of existing cultural guilds. Observance of Car festival of Orissa, Durgah puja during Dasserah, Phallic worship during Maha Sivaratri, Sri Krishnastami etc., at one place reflects the sacred complex of Indian society at one side and the other it gives a plural

characteristic of the socio-cultural life of the Bay Islanders. Participation of diverse communities in these cultural performances at this center demonstrates the mutual coexistence of multiple cultural traditions of Hindu civilization at study temple in particular and the reflection of the same in the sacred geography of Port Blair town in general. Different segments of the temple related to each other in the sense that a worshipper goes from one segment to another to make offerings to the deities at a time. In between offering to major Hindu goddesses, worship of human divination stresses the importance of local traditions. Combination of sacred centers of this kind have become efficacious for the fulfillment of certain specific desires of the people i.e. securing mental peace in the secluded life, material possessions, suitable mates, safe delivery of new babies, get rid of sickness and so on. Cultural relativistic character of the sacred geography of Port Blair thus attracts the people from all walks of life including tourists at large.

Sacred Specialists:

There is an emerging trend of influx of priestly community to these Islands to cater the increasing spiritual needs of the Port Blair town as no specific established institutional arrangements are available during settlement time. The enormous growth of population and temple traffic may be the probable pull factor behind their immigration. All most all the temples had a sacred specialist (either Brahman or Sanskritised priest) of its own for usual worship and these specialists attend the rites de-passage for the local population.

For example the priest of Rajasthan temple hailed from Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh) on the advice of his friend for his better employment. Basically he is not a practicing priest at mainland. He started his priestly occupation only after arrival to these Islands with the domestic knowledge of regular practice of Sanskrit texts as a part of his daily routine. Initially he offered his priestly services at Britchgunj (Yamesh Mandir) more than a year and on the request of the Rajasthan Temple committee, he shifted to Port Blair and continuing his priesthood for the past few years. Apart from his regular job, he also attends religious fairs during festive occasions at other temples and performs marriages and other life cycle rituals in and around Port Blair.

During auspicious occasions at temple, sacred specialists (i.e., priests) of nearby temples in Port Blair town also invited to take part and collectively officiate the ceremonial functions ranging from offering of floral worship to *agni homa*, *abishekams* and so on and collects gifts and honorarium from the committee and the general public. At that time, affluent families do engage personnel priests to pay their vows

during these functions. It is evident from the successful performance of such sacred activities during Car festival of Lord Jagannath (popular as 'Rath Yatra') every year illustrates the above mentioned statement. Whenever the necessity arises, priests from other temples perform the regular *harati* by adjusting timings in case of absence of its permanent priest. Sanskritized or non-Brahmin priests are also found in the sacred geography of Port Blair who officiate *harati* and *puja* regularly at temples besides their routine occupations.

Sacred Performances:

All the major and minor Hindu festivals were celebrated with high devotional temperament by giving open invitation through local daily newspapers to the people of Islands. Splendid cultural performances or programmes would takes place during Deewali, Vijaya Dasami, Ganesh Chaturdi, Sri Krishna Janmashtami, Maha Shivaratri, Puri Jagannath Car festival, Ram Navami, Sankranti and so on. Number of devotes thronged during these festive occasions and offer worship including reading of sacred texts, *bhajans*, *keerthan*, *harikathas*, etc. Besides these performances, different cultural tradition oriented performances like traditional dance representing the regional, ethnic, linguistic were organized at the temple premises with collaboration of cultural organizations of the Andaman Island (Plate 3).

Recently held Car Festival of Lord Jagannath of Orissa illustrates the observance of sacred performances at the premises of Rajasthan temple. The famous Car festival was observed in line with the cultural pattern of Puri Rath Yatra in the Bay Islands. The Utkal Cultural Samaj of Port Blair with the help of Rajasthan temple committee and Chinmay Mission organized this massive event this year.

Prior to the procession, the wooden idols used for procession were imported from Orrissa as it is tradition to make the idols with the wood of specified trees. Thus ever year they make new wooden images and install those wooden idols in the sanctorum in place of old ones. Remaining wood for making new Rath is being procured from Andaman since it is very difficult to import the required wood from Dasapala where special team of carpenters venture and procure wood for making new chariots. On approaching the *Rath Yatra* day, the volunteers of Utkal Samaj initiates the process of making new Chariot (*Rath*) in front of the temple itself.

On the auspicious day, *puja* was held in traditional Oriya manner and organizers distributes *prasada* to the visitors at temple premises. Later on, they takes the decorated chariot to the streets after inaugurating this event by the first person of the islands i.e., Hon'le Governor after worshipping the *Rath*. The huge

crowd of people competes for holding the sacred rope as they state it will bring fortune in the life of human beings. The procession starts from the temple and goes around Port Blair town to glimpse everyone and eventually reaches Chinmai Mission for halt. The deities are being supposed to give hospitality at this place for nine days and afterwards they do observe formal returning of Car from Chinmai Mission to its originating place i.e., Rajasthan temple.

A large number of people participated in this Rath Yatra procession amidst ritual chantings and traditional bandwagon. The characteristic feature of this Rath Yatra is the participation of Non-Oriya communities (90%) including Hindu, Sikh, and Christian along with the Oriya families. Likewise Durgah *puja* and other regional and national festivals are been celebrated with utmost devotion and fervor. Sometimes this performance starts at the dawn of the day and continuous even midnight. Those who had vows about their family troubles, marriage, health and prosperity will offer floral worship, fire worship (*homa*), water and milk worship (*abhishekams*) with the help of sacred specialists during these sacred performances. Now a days mammoth pandals with beautiful electrification were undertaken during Goddess Durgah and Lord Ganesh festivals.

Analysis of Results and Conclusion:

The very complexity of the social composition of Port Blair and its increasing density due to influx of population from mainland India have affected the development of local cultural traditions to some extent but not in vogue. As such sacred centers of particular region exposed to people of diverse regions of India. Though the study temple representing Great Tradition in its appearance, worship of human divinity such as *Baba Ramdevji* and *Katu Shyamji* and others shows that the close interaction between local traditions of regional significance with the great traditions of which they are part. Apart from routine *puja*, various activities like mundane, festive processions, *bhajans*, *kirthan*, etc., are the major attraction of this sacred centre. The presence of Idols of various regional gods and goddesses of the temple enhancing the strengths of temporal and spacious diversity by exhibiting elements of unity in diversity which forms the base to secular character of our country from the ages. Regional identities expressed through performance of various sacred activities during festive occasions have been motivating the people for the survival of their age-old customs and practices to remember their upcoming generation in the present technological revolutionary world.

Socio-cultural practices of the inhabitants of Port Blair may vary in many ways apparently with their belief systems but geographical isolation from mainland providing a common bondage of regions in the

form of massive cultural performances. The exquisite curiosity of the splendid performances during festive occasions made all sorts of worshippers to appreciate and adoration irrespective of the region they belong to. Apart from this sacred complex, the functional contribution of inhabiting communities for such performances are explicit from the services of *Medar* (basket making community from Andhra Pradesh who offer sacred baskets for worship), carpenters, drumbeaters, traders to make the event a grand success. Interlocking of various traditions and belief practices at one place facilitating the relativistic and pluralistic tendency among the visitors of the temple. These tendencies demonstrate the fundamental unity of our country in the background of diversity of political, regional and religious aspects etc.

Socio-cultural adjustment among people of different ethnic communities have been reflecting in their collective participation during the performances by respecting each other beliefs with devotion and reverence towards all other cultural traditions of the people. This in turn is a positive sign of attracting tourists paving a way to creation of source of income to the native people those who depended on temple traffic for their eke out as well as for the development of tourism sector. The secular character of the temple gives a broader identity of the Indian culture by manifesting various dimensions of Indian civilization in particular and the other sacred centers in general i.e. *Mazar Durgah*. As a result of enormous growth of sacred geography of various traditions along with the major temples in recent times at Port Blair town has been encountering religious syncretism through a spiritual link with the widely accepted persona celebrities. Associated legends and myths of the sacredness of the other religious centers of cultural personalities spreading across its territorial boundaries by improved communication and transport facilities. With this people hailing from different parts get together and mutually exchange cultural elements. Thus the sacred networks evolved over a period of time not only strengthen the common bondage of diverse cultures that emerges in the participation of processions, bhajans, and other sacred performances.

Presence of large number of people is not purely to devotion oriented, but their purposes are based on their nature of association with the performance. They may consist of service personnel, political workers, volunteers, traders and casual visitors with different motives. Voluntary services rendered by different organizations (related to political parties) do not contain sacred in nature rather in conformity with the ideals of their organization, which they represent. Some of the charity activities like distribution of education kits consists of note books and pencils, clothes, and other needed material to the needy are entirely a personnel affair delinking with charity of the temple at large. The customary to participate in

the feasts or *prasada* distribution held at Mazar Pahad or else demonstrates the supplement of nutrition along with devotion for the settlers surround the temples.

Thus the sacred complex of Rajasthan temple demonstrates the increasing tendency of adaptation to the secular life in a new environment and avoiding the sectarian tendencies. This trend helps in narrowing the fissiparous attitudes among the people. At this juncture it is noteworthy to mention enormous growth of temple traffic in and around Port Blair city representing Great and Little cultural traditions that illustrate the hypothesis of Vidyarthi's theoretical proposition of sacred complex of a Hindu place of pilgrimage reflects a level of continuity, compromise and combination between Great and Little traditions.

Of course the religious structures of Port Blair town may represent the sects of different Hindu as well as other religious traditions, it does not encourage separate identities based on region, language or creed. It is illustrated in the widespread common *Lingua Franca* (i.e., Hindi) of this region which is catalytic behind the creation of new identity i.e. *Local*. People respect each other traditions and cooperate in times of cultural performances irrespective of caste, creed, sex and religion. In the course of time syncretic centers like *Mazhar Durgah*, Rajasthan Temple emerged to cater the spiritual needs of diverse population of these Islands. Eventually it assists in understanding the dynamism of Indian civilization through its internal process of adjustment and interaction among different cultural and religious groups.

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