

Minicoy: The Island and Islanders

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Abstract

India is the country of diversity, variations and a bunch of different ethnic stock. The country consist 28 states and 7 union territories. Union territories controlled by central government. In the seven Union territories “Lakshadweep” which is the tiniest union territory. The Lakshadweep built on ancient volcanic formation. There are in all 27 island; 3 reefs and 6 submerged sand bank. Only 10 islands are inhabitant.

Minicoy is southernmost island of Lakshadweep. The people of minicoy are culturally akin to the Maldives and speak the same language known as Mahal. The matrilineal system exists in the Minicoy Island. Until recently real estate was retained by women and passed in the female line. Both men and women took on their mothers surnames. Upon marriage the husband took the wife’s surname. The people of Minicoy are different race which is said to be allied to primitive Singalese. The status of the society are divided in four major groups i.e Bodun or Manikfans are considered leisured class alone have owned property, Mallimin or Thakurfans were sailors, Medukembin or Takurus worked in the boats and raveri were considered as labourer. In the last few decade the traditionally work and the business depend on their natural resources decrease down as the young generations had least interest and low income. The traditional healing medicinal systems are on extinct, the fishing culture and the food habit based on the ecological products replaced by the foreign foods.

In the present paper is a part of a research work done on the people of Minicoy Island. An attempt has been made to compare the island traditional life style not only in their socio-economic but also on their health perspective with the present time.

Key Words: *Lakshadweep, Minicoy, Ethnic, Singalese, Matrilineal.*

The tribal people of India constitute 8.08 percent of the total population of India. They generally inhabit in different ecological and geo-climatic conditions mostly inaccessible to other people. Each tribal group is distinct from the other in ethnic affinity and social practices. They are having some salient features which make them unique. The cultural identification or way of living is still strong among them (Majumdar 1958).

Being at the crossroads of several disciplines such as geography, economics, sociology or epidemiology, demography offers tools to approach a large range of population issues by combining a more technical quantitative approach that represents the core of the discipline with many other methods borrowed from social or other sciences.

India with the one of the largest population in the world made a distinct space in the field of ethnic study. The country holds diverse stock under one identity "Indian". This is the country where the cultural accumulation and beliefs are found different in few hundred miles. With the 28 states and 7 union territories the country reflects more than the given numbers in the life style and cultural activities. Now a day's with the advancement in the technology to interact with other world, the cultural beliefs was somehow found change as compared to the older ones. Here the states is controlled by the state government opted by the residents and the Union territories controlled by central government. In the seven Union territories "Lakshadweep" which is the tiniest union territory. The Lakshadweep built on ancient volcanic formation. There are in all 27 island; 3 reefs and 6 submerged sand bank. Only 10 islands are inhabitant.

The Island

Lakshadweep

The Lakshadweep built on ancient volcanic formation. Lakshadweep means a hundred thousand Islands. The union territory of Lakshadweep comprises of a group of Island in the Arbia Sea between 8° and 12° - 30' North latitude and between 71 ° and 74° east longitude at a distance ranging from 200 kms to 400 kms from mainland. There are in all 27 Island; 3 reefs and 6 submerged sand banks. Only 10 Island are inhabitant. The Islands lie directly in the trade route between Africa, Arbia and Malabar. The erstwhile group of Island known as "the laccadive, Amindivi and Minicoy group of Islands" was formed into a Union Territory in 1956 and renamed as Lakshadweep in the year 1973. It is a uni-district territory with its capital at Kavarati

The main language spoken in Lakshadweep is officially considered a dialect of Malayalam but sounds more like Tamil. Both Tamil and Malayalam are Dravidian languages spoken in all southern parts of mainland India. Malayalam is spoken in the entire Island except Minicoy, where people speak Mahallanguage. The people of Lakshadweep are indigenous and belong to Shafi School of Sunni section of Muslim religion.

Minicoy

Minicoy or Maluku is the southernmost Island in the Union territory of India. It lies between 8°15' to 8°20' N and 73°01' to 73°05' E with an area of 4.4 Sq km including the attached islet of *Viringli* also known as small pox Island. Minicoy is separated from the Maldives by the 8° or Vangaaru channel and the rest of Lakshadweep by 9° channel. It is considered an independent oceanic Island that does not belong to either Maldives or the Lakshadweep bank. This is an atoll Island like the rest of Island of Lakshadweep that rests on an underwater platform of about 100 fathoms deep. The rim of the atoll can grow only a height, which would prevent exposure during low tides. The vegetation found on the Island over the course of time gets compressed into soft sand stone. Generally the height of the land is around 1-2 m above mean sea level.

Historical Background

The people of Minicoy are culturally akin to the Maldives and speak the same language. They refer to their Island as *Maliku*. This language is known as Mahal and they use the *Thaana* script for writing. Little is known about the history of Maluku; the chronicle of the Maldivian sultans informs that Maluku was detached from their rule as early as AD 1500. It then came under the rule of the Ali Rajas of Cannanore and thereby lumped together with the Laccadive and Amandivi group of Islands. Historical sources show that these have always been dealing in trade and even marriage relations between the Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Sultan of Maldives. Maluku has alternatively been under the dominion either of the Maldivian Sultan, the house of Ali Rajas of Cannanore or the Mammali (Naval Chieftans). From the diary of Pyrad de Lavel (1906) Cannanore house controlled 30 Islands of the group and that the Ali Raja of Cannanore had married Maldivian Sultan's sister; officially it remained under the rule of the Ali Rajas, along with the Laccadive Islands since 1767 and became a dominion of the British Empire in 1905. Ali Raja Imbichi Bibi, the last ruler in the line of the Ali Rajas, was reluctant to part with Maluku during her negotiations with the British for Laccadives. She claimed that it could not be taken into account as common territory, since it was her private property. However, in 1905 Imbichi Bibi finally signed over Maluku along with Laccadives to the British. Following which it came under Indian Administration and

is now a part of Union Territory of Lakshadweep (Ellis 1924).

Population

The total population of Minicoy is 9495 according to the Census of India 2001, in which the number of male is 4616 and female is 4879. The sex ratio of Minicoy is 1057 per thousand males.

Islanders

The village and social profile

The basic communal unit is the household presided over by a senior woman. The households are grouped into villages called *Avah* wrongly reported as *Athiri* in the Lakshadweep Gazetteer (Mannadiar, 1977). *Athiri* is simply the western beach and boat landing site of each village. Currently there are ten *Avah* in the Island and each one has their own symbolic colour.

The *Avah*, is an economically active unit and raises its own income by carrying on tuna fishing and coconut cultivation. The village owns its own tuna fishing boat, country crafts, land and coconut trees. Common feasts are conducted at the village house during the celebration of Eid and other festive occasions. Every fit person belonging to the *Avah* is expected to contribute labor towards carrying out the *Avah*'s economic and other activities. Two *Bodukaka* (headman) and two *Bodudatha* (headwoman) administer each *Avah*. The first *Bodukaka* looks after in internal matters and the second looks after external affairs. They also administer all the male duties such as hauling the boats onshore, fishing, collection of boulders for safe guarding and marking the boundary of the village. Similarly the *Bodudatha*, administer all the female duties and are in charge of keeping the village area clean, preparing the village feasts, carrying out all the post harvest tuna work, preparing copra, coir rope making etc. The female duties were carried out in a female village house called *Varhange* and the males had their own space in a common house called *Avarthuge*. The village assembly is called *baemedu* and an Island assembly of all the villages is called *Havaru*. The village head can call the *baemadu*, but only the *veringh* could demand a *havaruh*. An announcement would be made for the Islanders to gather together. The gathering could be called for any purpose from hauling or launching of an *Odi* (sailing ship) or announcing an accident/ death or to discuss a matter of common concern.

People

The people of Minicoy are different race which is said to be allied to primitive Singalese. In appearance they are strikingly different from the Malayalis of Lakshadweep. The face is round and flat and is

considered to be primitive Singalese type modified to some extent by an admixture of Arab blood. The somatoscopic features of males are fair to dark complexion having round to rectangular face, fiat waved to narrow waved hair and in medium stature. The females are fair in complexion than men and other somatoscopic features are not different to the females of south India. Within the status group system of Minicoy, the *Bodun* or *Manikfans* are considered to be of the highest class. They alone owned private property and were the leisured class. The *Mallimin* or *Thakurufans* were the sailors who mainly piloted sailing vessels. *Medukembin* or *Takurus* worked in the boats during voyages while the *Ravens* were the labourers. Women of the four status groups are known as *Manikka*, *Beefan*, *Bebe* and *Kambilo* respectively. In between *Thakurufan* and *Thakuru*, there is a sub-caste known as *Bebe*. According to local oral tradition, the four status groups correspond to those among the passengers and crew of a ship carrying two Maldive princesses Kamboranin and Kohoratukamana that came to Minicoy sometime in antiquity. Those who sailed in the ship displaced the previous inhabitants of the Island and became the ancestors of modern Minicoy Islanders. Marco Polo referred to Minicoy as the "female Island" because of its matrilineal society. Until recently real estate was retained by women and passed in the female line. Both men and women took on their mother's surnames (house names). Upon marriage, the husband took the wife's surname. All affairs of the household were managed by the senior female member. The Minicoyans are very strict in their rules and regulations, but they are very co-operative in nature.

Dress and Ornaments

In the past the ordinary dress of a turban of red cloth with a large chequered pattern of narrow white lines upon it, a pair of white or butcher's-blue trousers and a white cloth tied round the waist and falling to well below the knees. The upper part of the body is bare. when out fishing in their mas boats, the men wear cloth hats of all colours and of extraordinary shapes which give them a most picturesque appearance but in the present scenario the dress of male is very fashion and same as the modern dress i.e. trouser, Shirt, Jeans, T-shirts etc.

The women of the upper classes wear, over the silk cloths similar to those worn by the richer Moplah women, a long red silk overall with short sleeves, opening only at the neck where it is fastened together by two loops, one on each shoulder known as *Libas*. The silk is a particular kind, which is brought from Bengal. The hair is worn in a peak at the back of the head and over this is tied a dark blue kerchief covering the head, known as *Doli*. The males and female both are very fond of ornaments, they preferred gold jewelries.

Religion

The people of Minicoy are following Islam and they are Muslims and they follow the Rules of Islam. Islam enjoins 5 duties upon its followers - the recitation of the *kalma* (an express in fully believe in God and in Mohammad), offering of Namaj (prayers) 5 times a day, Roza (fasting in the month of Ramzan), Zakat (a contribution in cash or kind for charitable purposes) and Haj to Mecca. The people of the Islands are very sincere in all their religious observances. Eid, Bakrid are the main religious festival celebrated as per Islamic norms, but the celebration starts one week before, in which they prepare communal feast.

Religious Services

The religious heads for each mosque is called "Kateeb". He maintains birth and death registers; performs marriages and divorce and offers counselling on all legal matters relating to divorce and property according to shariat. His role includes giving advice to the people during Juma and Eid prayer called (Kutuba). The *kateeb* has a staff of six. Three females to keep the surroundings clean and wash the dead bodies of women and three men (known as *Hiniva bemiha*) who take care of the funeral rites.

Marriage

Minicoy society does not permit polygamy, like the Giraavaru people of the Maldives who are now extinct. Strict monogamy IS enforced. Arranged marriages are not the rule but do occur in in some families. Palliseri *Athiri* (village) is well known for courting and romance. As in the Maldives, non-arranged marriages are the rule rather than the exception. The major part of the expenses relating to marriage is born by the bridegroom. The marriage ceremony is known as *Kaveni* (Nikah).

The Kateeb of Minicoy officiates at the wedding. The aristocracy and the upper middle classes have the marriage ceremony performed at the bride's house, with the *Kateeb* in attendance. Lower class weddings take place at the Kateeb's office.

Divorce

There is no stigma attached to divorce and remarriage. Divorce is not very common but if the wife does not want husband, he is bound to divorce her, but may take back all the clothing and jewelry which he has given her and also a portion of the *bir*. If the husband wants the divorce, he, has to relinquish to the wife all that he may have given her, including the *mahar*.

Present Scenario

The present investigation is based on the aboriginals of Minicoy, Lakshadweep. Out of ten villages of Minicoy nine villages have been covered. One sample has been selected randomly from available each household. In this regard representation of approximate total population of Minicoy has been covered. The data have been collected mostly from the women of fertile age group.

The present investigation has been conducted through interview schedule. Simultaneously, group discussion and formal interview methods have been used. The observations have been conducted through semi participant and participant observations.

Various scientists studied the socio demographic characteristics like occupation, income, type of marriage pattern, education, sex ratio, mortality and fertility rates etc. (Fortes, 1954; Hu, 1955; Deka Mahapatra, 1972; Praksh et al., 2000). For any population, age and sex are the building blocks of the family composition. Education is another important characteristic of population which develops employment opportunity and affects way of living. Another important factor of population is occupation. Socio-demographic features of the people of Minicoy are given in the following tables:

Table 1: Type of family found in the sample

S. No.	Type of family	Percentage
1	Nuclear family	8.7
2	Joint family	91.3
Total		100.0

It was found that the joint family is predominant feature of the people of Minicoy (Table 1), it is because of after the marriage the groom reside in her maternal home and husband live with her, and by this reason in a single house there are several families live together. This feature shows that they retain their traditional life style of livelihood.

Table 2: Educational profile of the studied population

S. No.	Educational status	%
1	Illiterate	10.0
2	Primary	17.3
3	Middle	50.0
4	Higher Secondary	19.4
5	Graduate	2.0
6	Post-graduate	00
7	Technical Diploma	1.33
Total		100.0

It is evident from the table that 50.0% of the sample attained education up to middle, 19.4% of the sample attained education up to higher secondary, 2.0% samples are graduate and only 1.4% of the sample attained the diploma programme. In this way 90.0% of the sample are literate and only 10.0% are illiterate (Table 2). The literacy of the Minicoy is second highest among the other islands of Lakshadweep (93.05), after Bangaram Island where the literacy rate is 98.0% (Census of India, 2001).

Table 3: Means for taking information about rest of the world

S. No.	Means of information	%
1	Television	90.0
2	Radio	0.0
3	News paper	3.4
4	Dist. information centre	6.6
Total		100.0

As shown in the table 3 that majority of islanders getting information from rest of the world by Television which connected via cable connection (90.0%) rather than District Information Centre (6.6%) and News paper (3.4%). In Minicoy the news paper were read by the public are Haveeru Mahal (Mahal), Huvas Mahal), The Hindu (Eng), The Week (Eng.), Times of India (Eng.) and the Lakshadweep Times (Eng. & Malayalam).

The table 4 reveals current occupational profile of the respondents as 56.6% are Sea man, 21.3% are engaged in Fishing, 10.0% are engaged in Government Job, 5.0% are in other business. As the people of Island were considered as Fisher man and coconut cultivator but in the present scenario the practice of fishing is in decline position. Here the occupations of the respondents are the male people who are the bread-earner of the family.

Table 4: Occupational Profile of the sample

S.No	Occupation	Percentage
1	Private job	3.3
2	Sea man	56.6
3	Fisher man	21.3
4	STD owner	2.0
5	Government job	10.0
6	Panchayat worker	1.4
7	Others	5.4
Total		100

The nutritional status of any group can be improved by nutritional counseling. The prenatal patient represents an ideal opportunity for nutrition counseling. People of Minicoy called their meals in following languages Breakfast Lunch Dinner-Appan, Naashta- Mcdurubye Regandubye. Nearly cent percent of the islanders are nonvegetarian.

Table 5: Showing information regarding intake of different food items

S. No	Combination of food	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
1	Roti, vegetable, meat/ fish	46.6 %	0.0%	0.0%
2	Rice, pulse, vegetable, fish/meat	0.0%	60.0%	60.0%
3	Rice, Pulse, Fish	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%
4	Rice, Vegetable, Fish/Meat	33.4%	0.0%	0.0%
5	Roti, pulse, vegetable	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
6	Roti/ Paratha, vegetable, fish/meat	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 5 reveals information regarding usual intake of different food items according to daily schedule. The different combinations of food items have been made as per the response collected during the span of survey. It could be clearly observed from the table that maximum number of individuals like combination of roti, vegetable, meat/ fish (46.6%) and rice vegetable fish/ meat in the morning breakfast followed by those who take roti, paratha, vegetable, fish, meat (20%) in the breakfast. It may be stated that people of Minicoy manage their items from the local market and sea resources. Thus their nutritional status is satisfactory up to a certain extent.

Several measures have been taken in the last five decades for the development of rural health services and reforms, primary health care services. Primary Health Central and sub-center become an integral part of socio-economic development frame work at block and village levels (Bose 1971). Utilization of any kind of available health and welfare services depends on the awareness, availability and faith of the local inhabitants. The rapidly growing population and improvement in the quality and quantity of health services have been continuously engaging attention of the government of India. Efforts are being made to make health and family welfare services easily accessible to all people.

Table 6 : Information regarding frequency of home visit of health workers

S.No.	Frequency of visits	Percentage
1	Once in three days	0.0
2	Once a week	14.7
3	Once a month	85.3
4	Not visit	0.0
Total		100.0

The table 6 shows the frequency of home visit of health workers. It has been observed from the table that maximum number of respondents (85.3%) reported that health workers visit their home once a month rather than once in a week (14.7%).

Table 7: Showing information regarding number of visit to health centre during last one year

S.No.	Response	Percentage
1	Visited	70.0
2	Not visited	30.0
Total		100.0

Table 8: Reason for visiting health centre

S.No.	Reasons	Percentage
1	Normal fever	20.0
2	Baby checkup	13.3
3	Post-natal checkup	26.7
4	Routine health checkup	40.0
Total		100.0

From table 7 it could be observed that a maximum number of respondents visited health centre during last one year (70.0%) rather than who didn't visited (30.0%). It could be observed that the people of Minicoy are very careful about their health. As observed from the table 8 that the maximum percentage of the people visited health centre for their routine health checkup (40.0%), followed by post-natal checkup (26.7%), baby checkup (13.3%) and also for the seasonal health problems like fever (20.0%).

Health care and utilization of health and family welfare services is the most important of all human endeavors to improve the quality of life. Utilization of proper medical and health services is one of the main fundamental rights of every individual. The people of Minicoy were also took a serious view for that as it is evident from the table 9 all the respondents are aware about the family planning methods.

Table 9: Awareness about Family Planning methods

S.No.	Response	Observation	Percentage
1	Yes	150	100.0
2	No	00	0.0
Total		150	100.0

Table 10: Family Planning methods known to people

S.No.	Methods	Observation	Percentage
1	Sterilization	16	10.6
2	Oral Pills	14	9.3
3	Condom	40	26.7
4	All the above	80	53.4
Total		150	100.0

Table 10 exhibits information regarding awareness about family planning methods. It has been

observed from the table that maximum people of Minicoy are known about all the family planning methods (53.4%).

In the present research it was found that advancement in the lifestyle education and health status occurred in the last three decades but minicoyans are very protective to retain their cultural identity. As this is a society which was distinguished by the matrilineal system and in the present scenario it was not affected by the outer sources. They feel it is prestigious for them that they were identified by their female counterparts. In our country when we are at the way to made a law where we identified by mothers name, these Minicoyans not only preserved but given to their successor.

Minicoy which were categories into higher to lower sub groups, but in present scenario people of Minicoy has a fairly an equalitarian society where everybody is treated equal. The literacy rate of Minicoy is very high and female literacy is almost high as compared to any other Indian states. The drift in the traditional occupation was found in the island as the main source of income now are from working on ship as Seaman, Tuna fishing and Government jobs are secondary option for them.

All the people of Minicoy collect Tuna fishes as sea products along with Cowry and Shells. They generally collect all these sea products for their personal rather than the earning resource found in the older days.

All the people of Minicoy are non-vegetarian and they usually consume fishes and meat. The maximum number of people of Minicoy takes combination of roti/paratha rice vegetable and fish/meat, vegetable as their daily diet. It may be stated that people of Minicoy manage their items from the local market and sea resources. Thus their nutritional status is satisfactory up to a certain extent.

The health centre (District Hospital) is located very near from the villages; therefore all the beneficiaries do not face any problems regarding primary health problems. In case of major problems District hospital refers to mainland or any other suitable places for the treatment, for this they face lots of problem regarding transportation and lodging. Maximum persons visit health centre for their routine health checkup, maternal and child care. Most of the people of Minicoy are aware about Family Planning methods. Being very religious maximum people do not use any family planning method. Majority of Islanders do not know about any indigenous family planning method. From last decade the people of Minicoy made a social law that whenever a Islander return back from his job as sea man and other in which he spend his time outside the Island, he will go through the HIV test specially in the term of

youngsters. This is also done before the marriages.

In all it could be concluded that the people of Minicoy are changing their life style according to mainstream of life as well as they are continuing their traditional heritage. Their social life is very cooperative in nature, village houses play an important role in their social organisation and awareness programmes, their economic aspects are very satisfactory but transportation and the health are the major problems. Government is also making efforts for their betterment in comparison to other parts of the country, but also there is a need to make some plan according to their need and requirements.

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