

# Is Democracy and Decentralisation the Answer for Lakshadweep?

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Tensions are simmering in the union territory of Lakshadweep over a series of anti-people regulations issued by the present administrator. While everyone in the island and their supporters in mainland have been protesting against the draconian proposals, no one is discussing about the role of the deficit in democracy and decentralisation in the islands that led to the present crisis. It is crystal clear that the controversial regulations brought by present administrator of Lakshadweep are not in the best interest of a democratic society.

The idyllic Lakshadweep, an archipelago of 36 islands and the smallest union territory of India, is in the midst of a turmoil due to a slew of anti-democratic proposals and decisions by the present administration. Islanders in Lakshadweep who are generally peace loving people are now forced to carry out protests as the proposals put forward by the Lakshadweep administration threaten their livelihoods, landownership, culture, identity and even the fragile ecology of the islands. The controversial proposals include taking over the land belonging to the locals for the “purpose of development” without safeguarding the interests of landowners, imposing preventive detention on persons without reason for one year under Goonda Act, that too in a union territory that has lowest crime rates in the country,<sup>1</sup> usurping the administrative powers of the panchayats, disqualifying people with more than two children from contesting elections to panchayats and interfering in the food habits of the islanders.

It all began with the arrival of Praful Khoda Patel<sup>2</sup> as the administrator of Lakshadweep. Patel, a political leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was given the charge of Lakshadweep in December 2020. He is also the administrator of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu. The political appointment of Patel did raise a few eyebrows within the island and mainland. Though earlier senior civil servants were appointed as administrators of union territories, since 2014, it has been alleged that the union government has been handpicking politicians and confidantes of the ruling regime for top posts like that of the administrator. The islanders had apprehension that Patel would use his

political clout as a way to oppress them to satisfy the interests of corporates and to model Lakshadweep on the lines of Maldives. It appears that their fears were not completely baseless as Patel has proposed a slew of measures that can be dubbed as “anti-people, anti-democratic” regulations and proposals in the first five months of his tenure.

After Patel took charge as the administrator of Lakshadweep, his administration came out with drafts of several regulations, such as Lakshadweep Prevention of Anti-Social Activities, 2021, Lakshadweep Animal Preservation Regulation, 2021, Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation, 2021, and Lakshadweep Panchayat Regulation (LPR), 2021. Amongst these, the draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation (LDAR), 2021 has triggered the maximum controversy and protest from the islanders. It gives sweeping and arbitrary powers to the administrator to take over land and forcibly relocate people and proposes harsher punishment against those who refuse to budge. While the Lakshadweep administration maintains that it is all about development of the tiny islands and has no malice towards its residents, the draft regulation refers to “development” as activities, including “building, engineering, mining, quarrying or other operations in, on, over or under land, the cutting of a hill or any portion or the making of any material change in any building or land, or in the use of any building or land, and includes subdivision of any land.” The most worrying aspect is that there is no scope for judicial remedy as “a development plan shall not, either before or after it has been approved, be questioned in any manner, in any legal proceedings whatsoever.” The islanders fear that if uncontrolled development takes place on a large scale, it will not only destroy the fragile ecosystem of Lakshadweep but also their lives and livelihoods. Thus residents will have to forever live in fear of their property being snatched away from them anytime by the administration.

At present, both islanders, activists and politicians are calling upon the union

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government to recall Patel. Patel is being blamed for turning Lakshadweep into a COVID-19 hotspot as it was his administration that changed the standard operating procedure (SOP) for COVID-19 prevention by reducing the quarantine days, which in a way led to a spike in COVID-19 cases. The island did not have a single COVID-19 case till January 2021. As on 3 June 2021, there are more than 8,000 cases and 35 deaths. While the pandemic was slowly making inroads into the island, Patel came up with a slew of anti-people regulations to panic people who were already placed under lockdown due to the outbreak of pandemic. To prevent people from conducting any protest, the Patel administration came up with draft Lakshadweep Prevention of Anti-Social Activities, 2021 under which anyone can be locked in prison without reason up to a year.

The islanders and legal experts alleged that the administration failed to conduct a proper pre-legislative consultation over these draft regulations, especially the LDAR, 2021 and it has denied them the right to life and amounts to violation of natural justice of the people of Lakshadweep. Though islanders were given an opportunity to put forward their suggestions, they were not able to do so because of the lockdown imposed in the union territory. It has been reported that the islanders were permitted to furnish their concerns and inputs through email but due to poor internet connectivity it also did not take place. Islanders also alleged that the draft regulations were not accompanied in a language that local people can understand. Meanwhile, the Kerala High Court directed the union territory administration to issue a fresh public notice, accompanied by an explanatory note outlining key legal provisions of LDAR, 2021 in Malayalam and give 30 days time to the public to submit their concerns and suggestions. While the protest over anti-people regulations erupted within and outside Lakshadweep the Patel administration changed the SOP for emergency evacuation of patients. As per the new SOP, all uncomplicated orthopaedic cases, including hip fracture, should be sent by ship. Medical officer should ensure that no cases other than emergency ones

are referred to for transfer by special sortie helicopter. In addition to that, services of hundreds of contract labourers working under various departments were terminated. Dairy farms operated by the animal husbandry department have been shut down. The island administration has demolished huts erected by fishing community along the coastline alleging violation of Coastal Regulation Zone and Coast Guard Act.

### **Democratic Governance and Union Territories**

The present administrator of Lakshadweep can be blamed for his anti-people policies and regulations as of now while some say he is just doing all these at the behest of the ruling political regime. But the bigger underlying issue here is the deficit in democracy and decentralisation or in other words, poor democratic decentralisation. However, no serious discussion on this aspect is taking place and all the narratives put the blame on the present administrator, his politics and everybody wants the union government to recall him. But, will the exit of Patel solve all the problems in the islands? How can we be sure that the next administrator, who will also be appointed by the union government, will not dare to resort to the path embraced by his predecessor? The only practical solution to prevent administrators becoming autocratic is by strengthening democratic ideals and institutions in Lakshadweep. However, that is not an easy one as Lakshadweep is a union territory.

In India, union territories are small administrative units controlled and administered directly by the union government. The union territories were created based on the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) and while it provided representation of the union territories in Parliament, it admitted that “democracy in these areas should take the form of the people being associated with the administration in an advisory rather than a directive capacity.” From this one can understand that democracy is some sort of an ostracised entity in union territories. There has been widespread criticism that union territory curtails the democratic rights of

the people there. Though Delhi and Puducherry have its own legislative assemblies and elected members of legislative assemblies which in a way gives them partial statehood, the final decision is taken by the lieutenant governor/administrator, appointed by the union government. The union territories were never given a fully democratic set-up with the much-needed autonomy. Therefore, a complete democratic society may not be possible within a union territory but it does not mean democracy has no space there. The Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in *NCT of Delhi v Union of India* (2019) has observed that the administrator should not misuse the power to disrupt or frustrate the functioning of the elected government in the territory and use it after all methods have failed to reconcile the differences between the administrator and the council of ministers (Achary 2021). The Supreme Court also observed that though the administration of the union territories is by the union government it does not mean union territories became merged with the union government (Achary 2021). The union territories are centrally administered but that does not mean they are not independent entities. Moreover, the preamble of the Constitution promises political justice and equality of status and opportunity to every citizen. The right to a democratically elected government at all levels is the foremost expression of this promise (Shah 2016) and thus democracy has still some hope left even in a union territory.

### **Democracy and Decentralisation in Lakshadweep**

Lakshadweep became a union territory in 1956 and was given the present name in 1973. Union territories in India are governed by an administrator appointed by the President of India and the same

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applies to Lakshadweep. To advise the administrator, an advisory council and an advisory committee were constituted in the mid-1950s in Lakshadweep. The advisory committee attached to Union Ministry of Home Affairs was constituted on 12 June 1958. The administrator, the single sitting member of Parliament (MP) from Lakshadweep and five other non-officials were members of this committee. The non-official members were appointed by the President based on the recommendation of the administrator for a period of one year. The committee met twice in a year and gave suggestions and recommendations with regard to planning and budgeting of the administration. The advisory council was constituted by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs on 29 June 1957 and the main responsibility was to advise the administrator in carrying out the day-to-day administration of Lakshadweep. The 13-member council comprised of the single MP from Lakshadweep and the members of the advisory committee. The members were nominated by the President on the recommendation of the administrator for a year. The council used to hold three sittings a year to discuss development activities and suggest measures for the effective functioning of the administration.

In July 1970, the Islands and Union Territory Level National Integration Councils were constituted in Lakshadweep. The administrator served as the chairperson of the union territory level council. These councils were entrusted with the task of assisting local administration and police to maintain law and order and to look after the security needs of the islands. *Karanavans* (village elders) were consulted in matters of administrative importance along with members of the advisory committee and advisory council. It has been reported that previous administrators like Moorkothu Rammunni, K D Menon, Omesh Saigal and Wajahat Habibullah were open to incorporate the suggestions given by the members of the advisory committee and advisory council. However, the main problem with the committee and council were the fact that none of these were elected and their participation was limited to window-dressing. In other

words, democracy in these areas took the form of the people being associated with the administration “in an advisory rather than a directive capacity” (Bhargava and Samal 2001).

As a result, the demands to set up representative institutions aimed at participatory governance also rose. In 1986, two regulations, Lakshadweep (Administration) Regulation, 1988 (No 3 of 1988) and Lakshadweep Island Councils Regulation, 1988 (No 4 of 1988) were promulgated to form island councils at the Island level and Pradesh Council at the union territory level. They came into force in 1990. This is considered to be the first democratic set-up taken in Lakshadweep after 40 years of independence (Shekhawat 2002).

**Experience of island councils:** Introduction of Lakshadweep Island Councils Regulation, 1988 paved way for constitution of island councils in all the 10 islands with elected members. The size of these councils in terms of their number of members varied depending upon the population of the island groups. These members were directly elected from the territorial constituency in each island group. These island councils replaced the citizens’ committees at the island level. They were entrusted with

the responsibilities of sanitation and public health, public works, planning and development, administration, and social welfare. The island councils were empowered to levy various taxes (Bhargava and Venkatakrishnan 1996).

Though the list of functions to be performed by the island councils and their taxation powers were matching with those of the panchayats in the mainland, these councils could not exercise powers in a reasonable manner for various reasons. The reluctance on the part of the bureaucrats to share the powers with the democratic institutions was one of the major reasons. Second, the elected representatives did not have any experience in handling the powers and functions entrusted to them. It was also felt that the absence of training to the elected members in governance was another reason. It has been observed that the island council had limited functions. There have also been criticism that the Island Council Regulation, 1988 only prescribes advisory functions on health, education, and matters relating to social and economic well-being of the people on the islands. There has also been widespread criticism that the various provisions in the regulation were designed and incorporated to put the bureaucrats in the apex on the one side and control the democratic

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aspirations of the people on the other (Chathukulam 1996). It can be argued that though the constitution of island councils was an improvement over the previous system of citizens' committee, it failed to measure up to the expectations of the people. Meanwhile, the biggest contribution of the island council was the fact that it deviated from the line of appointing members on the recommendation of the administrator and adopted the practice of people electing their representatives (Kurian and Chathukulam 1996).

**Experience of pradesh council:** The introduction of Lakshadweep Administration Regulation, 1988 paved the way for the formation of pradesh council with elected members. It came into force in 1990. The pradesh council was constituted for the entire union territory of Lakshadweep. It consisted of 21 elected members who were indirectly elected from the island councils, the lone MP from Lakshadweep constituency in the Lok Sabha, the administrator, and the district collector-cum-development-commissioner-cum-district-magistrate. There was a provision to nominate one woman, if no woman is elected. The administrator was the chairperson and, in their absence, the collector, who is also the vice chairperson, used to preside over the meetings. Three members from the 21 elected members were appointed as counsellors by the administrator. It has been said that these pradesh councils used to function like "Mini Legislative Assembly"<sup>3</sup> and the three counsellors were allocated various development departments. However, matters concerning police and public order, vigilance, judiciary, election, and matters relating to foreign nationals, restriction on entry and residence in Lakshadweep were not allocated to these three counsellors. Moreover, files relating to development departments were moved to the administrator via these three counsellors. It had to a certain extent empowered the administrative profile of the counsellors to the status of ministers. Though generally the period from 1990–95 was considered by some as golden period of governance in Lakshadweep under pradesh council, the general consensus is that it eventually downsized the council to an

advisory body instead of self-generating into a legislature and cabinet of three. There was also criticism that the appointment of the administrator as the chairperson of the pradesh council was against the principles of democracy, citing that it narrowed the "self-realisation" and "self-determination" of the people of Lakshadweep (Singh 2002). The island councils and pradesh council were dissolved on 5 May 1995 following the promulgation of LPR on 23 April 1994. As a result,

the Pradesh Council and Island Councils with the potential to be converted into a legislative assembly at the union territory level and mini legislative assemblies at the Island levels were reduced into panchayats.<sup>4</sup>

### Panchayat Regulation

Though advisory committee, advisory council, citizens' committee, island councils and pradesh councils, each one designated to facilitate people's participation and ensure decentralised administration, the indirect elections (only island councils had direct elections) and bureaucratic control by administrator appointed by the President of India, robbed these bodies of their democratic content. As a result, these institutions were not able to conform to strict democratic norms and proved inadequate in providing proper representation to the people.

To fulfil the urge of the people for self-determination, the people of Lakshadweep had to wait till 1994. The 73rd amendment to the Constitution in 1992 paved the way for panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). Accordingly, in Lakshadweep, the President in exercise of powers conferred by Article 240 of the Indian Constitution, promulgated LPR, 1994.

A two-tier system of panchayats at district and village (Dweep) level was constituted. Lakshadweep has one district panchayat and 10 village (Dweep) panchayats (VDPs). Despite the provision that election be held within six months of dissolution of existing local governments, elections to panchayats were held in Lakshadweep two and half years later towards the end of 1997. Meanwhile, the first VDPs were constituted in December 1997 and district panchayat in January 1998.

The district panchayat was constituted for the entire Lakshadweep and it consists of 25 directly elected members and the chairpersons of 10 VDPs. In addition, the MP representing Lakshadweep is also a member of the district panchayat. The district panchayat is headed by a president cum chief counsellor and two vice presidents cum counsellors and the VDPs are headed by chairpersons. The district panchayat has been assigned the responsibility of implementing the matters specified in the Fourth Schedule of the LPR, 1994. Gram sabhas were instituted following the promulgation of LPR, 1994.

The actual status of devolution in Lakshadweep found that though gram sabha is recognised as the forum to ensure direct and participatory democracy, the de jure provisions in the legislation to deal with the functioning appears to be fragile. This is reflected both in the regulation, 1994 and the Business Rules, 1997 and 2000. The provisions on functions and responsibility of the gram sabha were absent in the legislative framework. However, it was found that the gram sabha has empowered itself and in many cases the quality of conduct of the business of the gram sabhas in the VDPs of Agatti and Kavarathi were better than the expected level. In one case, the Kavarathi gram sabha passed resolution against the encroachment of private land by the Indian Coast Guard and the Lakshadweep administration. The other one was the resolution against the Integrated Island Management Plan (IIMP) of the Agatti Island. In both the cases the gram sabhas acted as potent arms to protect the interest of the local citizens against the infiltration of the administrative machinery.<sup>5</sup>

It was found that as part of the fifth phase of devolution in Lakshadweep, which came in to effect from 1 April 2012, five major departments, namely education, health, fisheries, agriculture, and animal husbandry were transferred to the district panchayat. However, it was also found that in proportionate to the level of devolution of functions had not made any reflection in the planning domain of Lakshadweep in general and decentralised planning process of the

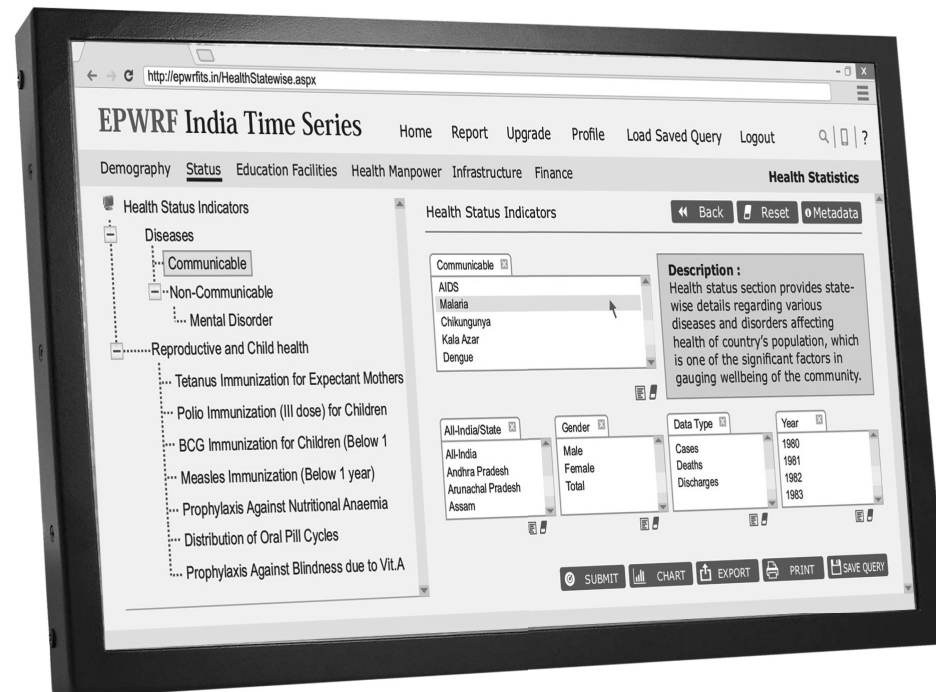
panchayats in particular. While the expectations were that the institutions of panchayati raj will ensure democracy at the doorstep and hoped that it will serve as an expression of general will of people at the grassroot level, which can eventually give further birth to democratisation process within the island, it did not succeed on a large scale. However, the panchayats did succeed in creating more political consciousness and democratic aspirations among the islanders.<sup>6</sup>

Among a slew of controversial draft legislation introduced by Lakshadweep administrator, which have led to widespread protests in the archipelago, is the LPR, 2021. On 25 February 2021, Lakshadweep administration issued draft LPR. The draft regulation proposes a ban for individuals to contest panchayat polls if a resident has more than two kids. Neither can a person with more than two children be a member of a panchayat. The reason cited for the two-child norm, according to district collector of union

territory is that Lakshadweep's population density, according to the 2011 Census, was 2,149 people/sq km, much higher than the national average of 382 people/sq km. But why does Lakshadweep, which has a low total fertility rate (TFR) and an ageing population, have to resort to such measures? According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS) 2019-20, Lakshadweep had a TFR of 1.4, which is far less than the national average of 2.2 and was a cause for concern instead. The overall population growth rate for Lakshadweep had also dropped to 6.30% during 2001-11 from 17.19% in 1991-2001. It is high time to understand that the low TFR is the direct result of women empowerment through female literacy and matrilineal culture in the Islands. The only positive thing in the draft regulation is that it provides for reservation of 50% seats in panchayats for women. However, the panchayats in the mainland had upgraded it to 50% much before and it is sad to note that Lakshadweep up until now was sticking to provision

for 33% reservation for women. Another disappointing matter in the draft regulation is that it finds no mention of a president cum chief counsellor and two vice presidents cum counsellors. The designation of chief counsellor and counsellors are very appropriate in the context of the political entity which does not have a legislature. It was a contribution of Lakshadweep Regulations, 1988 and 1994 which was a deliberate choice of the Indian Parliament. Unfortunately, many administrators failed to understand the politico-administrative context of the designation of chief counsellor and counsellors. The chairperson and vice chairperson of the VDPs have been named as sarpanch and *upa-sarpanch*—both terms unfamiliar to the islanders.<sup>7</sup> The same is the case with nomenclature of "VDPs" in to "gram panchayats." The beauty is that in the islands, each VDP has evolved its own identity in many cases, including its own official emblem. The draft regulation is attempting to reduce the heterogeneity of the VDPs.

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In addition to that, Lakshadweep administration issued a notification by which the subjects that were handled by the district panchayat, including education, health, agriculture, animal husbandry and fishing were transferred to the administrator. These powers of panchayat were revoked in May 2021 and were brought under the jurisdiction of the administrator. Earlier, under the fifth phase of devolution in Lakshadweep, which came into effect from 1 April 2012, departments, including education, health, fisheries, agriculture, and animal husbandry, were transferred to the district panchayat. Now under the new notification it has been reverted to the administrator.

### Possibility of PESA

Would Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) have strengthened democracy in Lakshadweep is a pertinent question. The PESA Act of 1996 came after the 73rd Amendment of 1992. It extends to the scheduled areas of 10 states.<sup>8</sup> The Constitution of India provided for special powers to certain regions to decide upon their local governance, according to their traditions and culture. The Constitution created two such categories through Article 234<sup>9</sup> under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules: scheduled areas and tribal areas, respectively. These categories were created to safeguard the culture and traditions of tribal community in India and ensuring more autonomy to them.

However, it was surprising to note that Lakshadweep, a union territory with a 94.80% tribal population is not listed under Article 244 of the Constitution under Fifth Schedule and does not figure in the PESA Act. In scheduled areas where PESA has been implemented, gram sabhas were envisaged as the central institutions to some extent. Decisions within the scheduled areas were to be directed to gram sabhas for consultation. If the PESA was implemented in Lakshadweep, it would have strengthened at least the grassroots level democracy, particularly the traditional 10 village institutions (*Baemedu*) in Minicoy Islands.<sup>10</sup> However, it is also important to note that any regulation or act that intends to balance the indigenous rights and democratic decentralisation also needs to balance the

indigenous government structures and those that were conceptualised as part of the 73rd amendment.

In 2019, National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (STs) had asked Lakshadweep administration to examine if the union territory can come under the Sixth Schedule tribal areas. According to the 2011 Census, Lakshadweep has a total population of 64,473, of which STs comprise 94.80%. With around 95% of the population being tribals, the commission is of the view that locals should have more say in their financial affairs and should have more autonomy.

### In Conclusion

Earlier there was a hope that the presence of PRIs or local governments will foster democracy and strengthen democratic institutions in union territories. But panchayat draft Regulation 2021 by Lakshadweep administration has disempowered the local governance in Lakshadweep. There is nothing surprising in it as even in the mainland which boasts of rhetoric on democracy, things are no different as states are capturing and disempowering local governments. While there are arguments that a legislature for Lakshadweep may at least partially ensure a democratic society, the Delhi experience speaks otherwise. Hence, local governance is more viable for the functioning of democracy in Lakshadweep, and PESA for that matter is a good option. However, Lakshadweep is still an “administrator’s own island” where they reign as “demigods” and democracy is an outcast in such a scenario. Hence, the fight for self-governance is essentially a fight for the expression of democratic aspirations and cultural identity for the islanders against the majoritarian hegemony.

### NOTES

- 1 According to National Crime Records Bureau, only 121 cases of crimes were registered on the islands in 2017, 86 in 2018, 186 in 2019 and 89 in 2020. Meanwhile, Lakshadweep Collector S Asker Ali in a press conference held in Kochi said that in March, about 300 kg of heroin and five AK 47 rifles and 1,000 live rounds were confiscated in Lakshadweep. Ali also said that many cases of illegal smuggling of marijuana and liquor and POCSO have also been reported in the islands. However, he failed to give further details though he was challenged by many from islanders.

- 2 Praful Khoda Patel is a BJP leader and had served as a minister of state for home under Narendra Modi’s chief ministership in Gujarat for two years.
- 3 The first author interviewed E P Attakoya Thangal, the former Director of Planning and one of the most influential public intellectual from Lakshadweep Islands on 1 June 2021.
- 4 The comment was made by a serving bureaucrat who has more than 25 years of administrative experience in domain of decentralisation under Lakshadweep administration. He was interviewed on 2 June 2021 but requested his identity to be withheld.
- 5 Centre for Rural Management, Kerala, 2015.
- 6 It is reflected in the Devolution Report, 2016–17 prepared by the Centre for Rural Management (CRM) Kottayam Kerala. As per the report, Lakshadweep is placed at the 25 position with a score value of 32.02 out of 100 in the Cumulative Devolution Index.
- 7 Note submitted by the district panchayat of Lakshadweep Islands towards the Lakshadweep Draft Panchayat Regulation, 2021 and the first author interviewed Yousef Mydan, former vice president cum counsellor on 30 and 31 May 2021.
- 8 The Fifth Schedule designates tribal majority areas in 10 tribal minority states within India including, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Rajasthan.
- 9 The provisions of the Fifth Schedule shall apply to the administration and control of the scheduled areas and Scheduled Tribes in any state other than Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.
- 10 The first author interviewed Ali Manikfan, renowned environmentalist from Minicoy on 27 May 2021.

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