



Navigating Isolation and Modernity: The Socio-Economic Odyssey of Scheduled Tribes in Lakshadweep, India

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Abstract: *The Scheduled Tribes (STs) of Lakshadweep inhabit a unique socio-economic landscape shaped by geographic insularity, ecological fragility, and the complex interplay of tradition and modernization. While post-independence policies have catalyzed significant advancements in literacy and healthcare, these island communities continue to grapple with economic stagnation, gender-based occupational disparities, and a persistent dependency on primary sector livelihoods. This paper provides a comprehensive sociological analysis of the developmental trajectory of Lakshadweep's tribal population, examining educational achievements, occupational structures, and the impact of governmental interventions. Drawing upon census data, governmental reports, recent scholarly literature, and contemporary policy debates, this study situates the Lakshadweep experience within broader discourses on tribal development in India. It critically evaluates the efficacy of existing welfare mechanisms and proposes a multi-pronged strategy for sustainable development that integrates ecological preservation, economic diversification, and cultural sensitivity. The findings reveal that while Lakshadweep has achieved remarkable literacy rates, the translation of educational attainment into meaningful economic mobility remains constrained by infrastructural deficits and limited vocational training. Furthermore, emerging land rights controversies and the tension between development imperatives and indigenous rights underscore the need for a paradigm shift from generalized welfare approaches to context-specific, community-centric models of empowerment.*

Key-words: *Scheduled Tribes, Lakshadweep, socio-economic development, educational attainment, occupational structure, tribal welfare, island development, land rights.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Lakshadweep, India's smallest Union Territory, represents a distinctive sociological laboratory where the forces of geographic isolation, cultural preservation, and developmental aspiration converge. Comprising 36 islands—of which only 10 are inhabited—this archipelago lies scattered in the Arabian Sea, between 200 and 400 kilometers off the southwestern coast of India. The territory's population, predominantly classified as Scheduled Tribes due to economic and social backwardness, presents a unique case study in tribal development. Unlike the mainland tribal communities who often inhabit forested or hilly terrains, the islanders of Lakshadweep have forged their existence in a marine ecosystem, developing livelihoods intricately tied to the sea and coconut palm.

The constitutional categorization of Lakshadweep's inhabitants as Scheduled Tribes stems from their geographic isolation and socio-economic marginalization. According to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List (Modification Orders) of 1956, individuals born in these islands to parents also born there are classified as Scheduled Tribes. This designation has been instrumental in directing affirmative action policies toward the islands. However, the classification itself raises sociological questions about the relationship between geographic insularity and tribal identity, particularly in a context where the population shares linguistic, religious, and cultural affinities with mainland Kerala.



Since the territory's formation on November 1, 1956, the Indian government has undertaken various initiatives to uplift the tribal communities. The transformation from a remote outpost of the erstwhile Madras State to a centrally administered Union Territory marked the beginning of systematic developmental interventions. However, the geographical realities—the islands' dispersal, their ecological vulnerability, and the logistical challenges of governance across vast stretches of ocean—have consistently complicated policy implementation.

This paper examines the socio-economic structures of Lakshadweep's Scheduled Tribe population, analyzing how historical marginalization, geographic isolation, and contemporary policy frameworks intersect to shape developmental outcomes. Through a sociological lens informed by structural-functionalism and dependency theory, we explore the interconnectedness of education, occupation, and social institutions in facilitating or impeding socio-economic mobility. The study also engages with contemporary debates surrounding land rights, as recent controversies over land reclamation and tourism development have brought the islands' developmental challenges into sharp focus.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Tribal Development

The conceptualization of tribal development in India has undergone significant evolution, reflecting shifts in both academic discourse and policy paradigms. Mishra (2021) provides a comprehensive overview, arguing that tribal development remains uneven across the country, with geographic isolation playing a decisive role in limiting access to opportunities. This unevenness is particularly pronounced in island territories, where the constraints of insularity compound the challenges faced by mainland tribal communities.

Jeya Mary and Sugumar (2025) offer a nuanced perspective, defining tribal development as "the phased, time-bound process of improving the socio-economic and cultural well-being of tribal communities". They argue that the core objective is achieving equality and social justice by eliminating exploitation and bringing tribal communities to parity with the broader national society through targeted programs. This conceptualization is particularly relevant to Lakshadweep, where the islands' unique socio-cultural context—characterized by a predominantly Muslim population with matrilineal kinship structures—requires culturally sensitive development approaches.

The distinction between "protectionist" and "assimilationist" approaches to tribal development has been a recurring theme in Indian policy discourse. As Jeya Mary and Sugumar (2025) note, effective tribal policy requires a bifurcated approach: "strict protection and non-interference for critically small groups" and "intensive, target-oriented development focusing on self-management and empowerment for the large, disadvantaged populations". This duality is particularly relevant to island territories, where the imperative to protect indigenous cultures must be balanced against the need for modernization and integration with the national mainstream.

2.2 Island Territories and Tribal Development

Research specific to island territories, including the work of Saigal (1990), Koya (2004), and Sharma (2020), has highlighted the unique socio-economic structures of island communities. These studies emphasize the heavy reliance on marine resources and coconut-based activities, the minimal industrial development due to isolation and lack of natural resources, and the peculiar challenges of governance in geographically dispersed territories.

Sundar (2019) contextualizes the Lakshadweep experience within broader patterns of tribal development in India, noting that while mainland tribals benefit from land-based livelihoods and industrial opportunities, island communities remain dependent on environmental resources subject to fluctuations [citation:17]. This dependency creates particular vulnerabilities in the context of climate change, as the islands' low-lying coral reef formations are susceptible to rising sea levels and changing marine ecosystems.

Recent scholarship, including Sethi (2022), has drawn attention to the challenges of policy implementation in remote regions like Lakshadweep. Despite the existence of comprehensive welfare schemes, the logistical complexities of reaching far-flung islands, the limited availability of trained personnel, and the cultural distance between policy framers and island communities often result in suboptimal outcomes.



2.3 Education as a Catalyst for Development

Education has been a focal point of tribal development programs across India, and Lakshadweep has emerged as a notable success story in terms of literacy rates. The introduction of free education, scholarships, and hostel facilities has significantly improved literacy rates among the tribal population, reaching 91.85% in the 2011 Census. This achievement places Lakshadweep far above the national average of 74.04%, demonstrating the effectiveness of focused educational interventions.

However, as Rajan and Gupta (2021) observe, high literacy rates do not necessarily translate into meaningful educational outcomes or economic mobility. In rural and remote areas such as Lakshadweep, the quality of education remains a concern, with limited availability of trained teachers, inadequate advanced educational infrastructure, and a curriculum that may not adequately prepare students for diverse employment opportunities. The establishment of the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) in Kavaratti in 1990 represented an important step toward addressing these challenges, providing pre-service and in-service training for elementary school teachers and developing locally relevant teaching materials.

Kumar and Singh (2023) argue that education in remote tribal areas often falls short of fostering employability due to inadequate vocational training and infrastructural limitations. Similarly, Gupta and Ramesh (2023) emphasize the need for context-sensitive vocational education programs tailored to the unique socio-economic realities of island territories. These critiques highlight a crucial gap: while Lakshadweep has achieved impressive literacy statistics, the translation of these gains into economic diversification and sustainable livelihoods remains incomplete.

2.4 Land Rights and Indigenous Sovereignty

Emerging scholarship has drawn attention to the complex issues of land rights and indigenous sovereignty in Lakshadweep. Recent controversies have brought these issues into sharp focus, particularly following the issuance of notices by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) regarding land reclamation and displacement. A petition filed by civil rights advocate Radhakanta Tripathy alleged that the Collector of Lakshadweep issued an order reclaiming 575 hectares of land from 19,522 SC/ST natives, violating existing provisions and the residents' human rights.

The petition highlighted that land was allocated by the Malabar Collector during British rule between 1865 and 1930, and although the lease expired 59 years ago, no tribal land had been reclaimed by the government without compensation. The Supreme Court has previously ruled that occupancy rights cannot be revoked under the Land Revenue and Tenancy Regulations (LRT) of 1965. This legal history underscores the importance of land rights as a fundamental aspect of tribal welfare and the potential for development initiatives to inadvertently threaten indigenous land tenure.

The tension between development imperatives and indigenous rights is further complicated by the approval of tourism development proposals by the Island Development Agency, chaired by the Union Home Minister. While such initiatives promise economic opportunities, they also risk displacing tribal communities and disrupting traditional livelihoods. The NHRC's intervention, directing authorities to take action and submit a report within four weeks, reflects the growing recognition of these complexities in policy circles.

3. Conceptual Framework

This paper employs a dual theoretical lens to analyze the socio-economic status of Scheduled Tribes in Lakshadweep, integrating structural-functionalism and dependency theory to capture both the internal dynamics of island society and the external forces shaping its development trajectory.

3.1 Structural-Functionalism

The structural-functional approach, as articulated by theorists such as Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, emphasizes the interconnectivity of social institutions and their contribution to societal stability and development. In the context of Lakshadweep, this perspective illuminates how government interventions in education, healthcare, and occupational structures interact to impact the overall development of the ST population.

Education, for instance, functions not merely as an instrument of individual advancement but as a mechanism for social integration and cultural transmission. The remarkable literacy rates achieved in Lakshadweep can be understood as a functional response to the need for social cohesion in a geographically dispersed community. Similarly, the persistence



of traditional occupational structures—primarily fishing and coconut farming—reflects both the ecological constraints of the islands and the functional integration of these activities into the social fabric.

However, the structural-functional approach also reveals dysfunctions in the current system. The limited economic diversification, gender disparities in employment, and challenges in translating educational gains into economic mobility can be understood as structural weaknesses that undermine social stability and development. The failure to integrate vocational training effectively into the educational system, for example, represents a dysfunction that limits the ability of the tribal population to adapt to changing economic conditions.

3.2 Dependency Theory

Incorporating elements of dependency theory, as developed by scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, allows us to explore how Lakshadweep's reliance on mainland India for resources, education, and employment opportunities has shaped its economic development. Dependency theory posits that the economic development of peripheral regions is constrained by their integration into unequal relationships with core regions.

In the Lakshadweep context, dependency manifests in multiple dimensions:

1. **Economic Dependency:** The islands' reliance on primary sector activities—fishing, coconut farming, and copra extraction—limits their integration into more diversified economies. The absence of significant industrial development, limited entrepreneurial opportunities, and the dominance of subsistence-level activities reflect the constraints of a peripheral economy.
2. **Administrative Dependency:** As a centrally administered Union Territory, Lakshadweep's development is heavily shaped by policies formulated in New Delhi, often with limited input from island communities. The centralized nature of governance, while facilitating resource allocation, can also lead to a disconnect between policy prescriptions and local realities.
3. **Educational Dependency:** The need for higher education and specialized training necessitates migration to mainland institutions, creating a brain drain of talented individuals and perpetuating dependence on external expertise.
4. **Cultural Dependency:** The influence of mainland Indian culture, media, and lifestyles has implications for the preservation of indigenous cultural practices and identities.

The application of dependency theory highlights the limitations faced by the ST community in achieving socio-economic mobility without addressing the structural relationships that perpetuate underdevelopment. It underscores the need for localized development strategies that build on indigenous knowledge, promote economic diversification, and empower local communities to shape their own development trajectories.

4. Study Area

4.1 Geographical Context

The Lakshadweep archipelago, located in the Arabian Sea between 8°30' and 12°30' North Latitude and 71° and 74° East Longitude, comprises 27 islands, 3 reefs, and 6 submerged sandbanks. The total area of the territory is a mere 32 square kilometers, with the largest inhabited island, Andrott, covering 4.9 square kilometers and the smallest, Bitra, spanning only 0.1 square kilometers. The islands are scattered across approximately 20,000 square kilometers of ocean, creating significant challenges for governance and service delivery.

The islands' coral reef structure and calcareous soil pose significant agricultural limitations. The porous nature of the soil and the absence of perennial rivers means that agriculture is restricted primarily to coconut cultivation, with limited opportunities for diversified crop production. This ecological constraint has historically shaped the islands' economic activities, with the population relying on fishing, copra extraction, and coconut-based products for their livelihoods.

4.2 Demographic Profile

According to the 2011 Census, Lakshadweep's population stood at 64,473, with the majority classified as Scheduled Tribes. The population growth rate has been stable but has slowed in recent decades, reflecting broader demographic



transitions. Table 1 illustrates population growth trends from 1901 to 2011, revealing significant fluctuations in growth rates over time.

Table 1: Population Growth in Lakshadweep (1901-2011)

Year Period	Total Population Growth (%)	Male Population Growth (%)	Female Population Growth (%)
1901-1911	+4.85	+8.87	+1.06
1911-1921	-6.31	-8.16	-4.43
1921-1931	+17.62	+19.59	+15.70
1931-1941	+14.43	+13.06	+15.81
1941-1951	+14.60	+13.18	+16.00
1951-1961	+14.61	+15.93	+13.34
1961-1971	+31.95	+34.71	+29.24
1971-1981	+26.53	+26.74	+26.32
1981-1991	+28.47	+30.63	+26.25
1991-2001	+17.19	+16.91	+17.49
2001-2011	+6.40	+6.44	+6.35

Source: Census of India (2011); Registrar General of India, New Delhi.

The demographic trends reveal several notable patterns. The negative growth during 1911-1921 reflects the devastating impact of disease or environmental events on the small island population. The steady increase in growth rates through the mid-twentieth century reflects improvements in healthcare and nutrition, while the decline in the most recent decade (2001-2011 to 6.40%) suggests the onset of demographic transition. This pattern is consistent with broader national trends, where improved access to family planning and changing social norms have led to declining fertility rates.

4.3 Family Structure

Lakshadweep exhibits larger-than-average family sizes compared to mainland India, reflecting traditional family structures where extended families often cohabit. Table 2 presents data on family sizes across various islands, revealing significant intra-regional variation.

Table 2: Family Size in Urban Areas of Lakshadweep (2011)

Island	Average Family Size (2011)	Average Family Size (2001)	Average Family Size (1991)	Average Family Size (1981)
Amini	5.57	6.24	6.36	6.55
Kadmat	5.09	-	-	-
Kavaratti	4.99	5.63	5.81	6.21
Andrott	6.20	-	-	-
Kalpeni	4.73	-	-	-
Minicoy	7.24	7.01	7.14	6.66



All towns	5.68	6.23	6.47	-
India	4.66	5.10	5.30	5.40

Source: Census of Lakshadweep (2011); Registrar General of India.

The larger family sizes in Lakshadweep, particularly in islands like Minicoy and Andrott, reflect the persistence of extended family structures and kinship-based social organization. These family patterns have important implications for development: they provide social support networks that buffer against economic shocks but can also perpetuate economic dependence and limit individual mobility. The decline in family sizes over the decades suggests gradual changes in family structures, consistent with broader patterns of social change.

4.4 Cultural and Linguistic Landscape

Lakshadweep presents a distinctive cultural landscape shaped by its geographic isolation, Islamic traditions, and matrilineal kinship structures. Malayalam is spoken in all the islands except Minicoy, where the inhabitants speak Mahl, a language written in Divehi script and also spoken in the Maldives. This linguistic diversity reflects the islands' historical connections: while the northern islands maintain strong links with the Malabar Coast of Kerala, Minicoy's cultural and linguistic affinities align with the Maldives.

The population is predominantly Muslim, with approximately 95% following Islam, yet elements of pre-Islamic social structures persist. As noted in the NHRC petition, the islands' inhabitants are descendants of migrants from the Malabar Coast who arrived before the 7th century and later converted to Islam. Despite this conversion, "elements of the original Hindu migrants' social structure, including a matrilineal kinship system and caste-like social groups, remain". This cultural hybridity complicates simplistic classifications and demands culturally nuanced development approaches.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Data Sources

This study is based on secondary data obtained from multiple sources to ensure comprehensiveness and triangulation. The primary data sources include:

1. **Census of India (2001, 2011):** Providing comprehensive demographic, literacy, and occupational data for the Lakshadweep territory. Census data enable comparative analysis across census years and with other regions of India.
2. **National Sample Survey (NSS):** Offering supplementary data on employment, consumption patterns, and socio-economic indicators.
3. **Ministry of Tribal Affairs Reports (2022-23):** Providing policy perspectives, program details, and evaluation findings related to tribal welfare.
4. **Governmental Publications:** Including annual reports of the UT Administration of Lakshadweep, particularly the Department of Social Welfare & Tribal Affairs, which implements central and UT-sponsored schemes aimed at inclusive development.
5. **Recent Scholarly Literature:** Incorporating contemporary research on tribal development, island studies, and socio-economic analysis.
6. **Contemporary Policy Documents:** Including materials related to the NHRC intervention, land rights controversies, and ICAR-NBFGF programs for sustainable livelihoods.

Additionally, the researcher has interacted with the Lakshadweep community for six years, providing valuable insights and contextual understanding that enrich the analysis. This prolonged engagement enables a nuanced appreciation of the social dynamics, cultural context, and lived realities of the island communities, complementing the quantitative data with qualitative understanding.



5.2 Data Analysis

The analysis employed a multi-method approach:

1. **Quantitative Analysis:** Demographic, literacy, and occupational data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, percentages, and comparative tables. Historical trends were examined to identify patterns of change over time.
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** Secondary qualitative data from literature reviews, policy documents, and field studies were analyzed thematically to identify key issues, challenges, and opportunities in tribal development.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** The development of STs in Lakshadweep was compared with tribal populations in other remote areas of India, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, to identify common challenges and distinctive factors. This comparative dimension enables the identification of factors specific to Lakshadweep versus those shared by island territories more generally.
4. **Policy Analysis:** Government initiatives were critically examined, considering their design, implementation, and impact, with particular attention to the role of the Department of Social Welfare & Tribal Affairs, established in 1978 as the nodal agency for welfare programmes targeting vulnerable sections .

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Educational Attainment and Its Socio-Economic Implications

Education among the tribal population of Lakshadweep has improved significantly since independence. Before the 1950s, formal education was almost nonexistent on the islands, with traditional Quranic schools (Madrasas) being the primary mode of education. Post-independence efforts led to the establishment of schools and educational institutions, culminating in remarkable literacy achievements.

Table 3: Literacy Rate by Gender in Lakshadweep (2011)

Region	Total Literacy (%)	Male Literacy (%)	Female Literacy (%)
Urban Areas	91.92	95.84	87.79
Rural Areas	91.58	94.53	88.50
Total (All)	91.85	95.56	87.95
India (2011)	74.04	82.14	65.46

Source: Census of Lakshadweep (2011); Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023) Annual Report.

The literacy rates in Lakshadweep, reaching 91.85% in 2011, represent a significant achievement, particularly when compared with the national average of 74.04%. The relatively narrow gender gap (7.61 percentage points) compared to the national average (16.68 percentage points) reflects relatively equitable access to education for both sexes. However, the female literacy rate of 87.95%, while impressive by national standards, still lags behind male literacy, indicating persistent gender-based disparities.

The establishment of the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) in Kavaratti in 1990, under the recommendations of the National Policy on Education (1986), has been instrumental in addressing educational quality. DIET's functions, including teacher training, curriculum development, and academic support, are particularly crucial given Lakshadweep's geographical challenges. The institute's role in developing teaching-learning materials adapted to the local context, language, and culture is especially significant .

However, the translation of high literacy rates into economic mobility remains incomplete. The persistence of occupational structures dominated by traditional activities—fishing and coconut farming—suggests that education has not yet created sufficient alternative employment opportunities. This gap between educational attainment and economic diversification reflects broader challenges in translating human capital into productive employment, particularly in regions with limited industrial development.



6.2 Occupational Structure and Livelihood Patterns

The economy of Lakshadweep remains primarily based on primary sector activities, with coconut plantations, fishing, and copra extraction being the main sources of livelihood. The islands' coral reefs and calcareous soil make agriculture difficult, and industrial development is minimal. In 2011, only 28% of the population was part of the workforce, with significant gender disparity in employment—women are largely involved in household-based activities, while men dominate fishing and copra extraction.

Table 4: Occupational Distribution in Lakshadweep by Gender (2011)

Occupation	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Household Workers	0.90	0.79	1.52
Other Workers	99.10	99.21	98.48

Source: Census of India (2011); Registrar General of India, New Delhi.

The occupational data, while limited in granularity, reveal the dominance of non-household work categories, with 99.10% of the workforce categorized as "Other Workers." This broad category encompasses fishing, coconut farming, copra extraction, and service sector employment. The minimal representation of household workers reflects the nature of employment on the islands, where women's productive work is often not captured in formal categories. Sharma and Verma (2022) argue that addressing gender disparities in employment requires focused interventions to empower tribal women through skill-building and economic inclusion.

Recent initiatives, such as the Live Germplasm Resource Centre for Marine Ornamental Organisms at Agatti Island, operated by ICAR-NBFGR, represent innovative approaches to sustainable livelihood development. This facility, which integrates scientific conservation with community-based development, provides hand-holding support to Community Aquaculture Units managed by local women beneficiaries. These units rear captive-bred marine ornamentals to marketable size as an alternative income-generating activity. The Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food Processing, in a January 2026 visit, appreciated the institute's innovative approach of generating supplementary income for women beneficiaries through entry fee collection from visitors .

Such initiatives align with the broader vision of sustainable development that integrates ecological preservation with economic opportunity. The Tribal Sub-Plan programme of ICAR-NBFGR, under which the Marine Ornamental Display Unit was established, demonstrates the potential for science-driven conservation to simultaneously advance societal development through native biological resources .

6.3 Government Initiatives and Policy Frameworks

The Government of India has launched various schemes targeting the development of Scheduled Tribes in Lakshadweep, operating through multiple institutional channels. The Department of Social Welfare & Tribal Affairs (SW&TA), established in 1978, serves as the nodal agency for welfare programmes targeting vulnerable sections, especially persons with disabilities, the elderly, women, and marginalized communities . The department's vision of fostering socio-economic and cultural development encompasses several key initiatives:

1. **Social Security Schemes:** The UTL State Pension Scheme, providing monthly pensions of ₹1500 to eligible categories including old age, widows, abandoned individuals, and persons with disabilities, with 3,481 beneficiaries as of May 2025 .
2. **Disability Empowerment:** Implementation of the RPWD Act 2016, provision of free assistive devices through ADIP/RVY camps, and operation of day care centres for children with disabilities at Kavaratti, Androth, and Kadmat .
3. **Support for Voluntary Organizations:** Grant-in-aid to registered NGOs for awareness, rehabilitation, and skill development programs, with ₹2.00 lakh granted in 2023-24 to the Lakshadweep Differently Abled Welfare Association .



4. **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP):** The TSP, implemented through multiple departments and agencies, aims to ensure that tribal communities benefit equitably from development programs.
5. **Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP):** Focusing on comprehensive development interventions in tribal areas.

Despite these initiatives, implementation has been hampered by the geographical isolation of the islands, limited infrastructure, and technical expertise constraints. The Report of the Study Team on Tribal Development Programmes for L M and A Islands, prepared by the Planning Commission's Committee on Plan Projects, highlighted these challenges as early as the 1970s, noting the peculiar difficulties of implementing tribal welfare programs in island territories.

Recent initiatives under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023), such as skill development programs and eco-tourism projects, aim to create sustainable livelihoods for the islanders. However, as Sethi (2022) argues, effective implementation is still hindered by a lack of infrastructure and technical expertise on the islands. The tension between centrally designed programs and local implementation capacity remains a persistent challenge.

6.4 Land Rights and Development: Emerging Controversies

The issue of land rights has emerged as a critical dimension of tribal development in Lakshadweep, with recent controversies highlighting the tension between development imperatives and indigenous rights. The National Human Rights Commission's intervention in September 2024 brought these issues to national attention, following a petition by Supreme Court lawyer Radhakanta Tripathy.

The petition drew attention to the alleged displacement of approximately 50,000 people living across various islands, with the Collector of Lakshadweep issuing an order reclaiming 575 hectares of land from 19,522 SC/ST natives. The land in question was allocated by the Malabar Collector during British rule between 1865 and 1930, and although the lease expired 59 years ago, no tribal land had been reclaimed by the government without compensation.

The case raises fundamental questions about indigenous land rights, the constitutional protection of Scheduled Tribes, and the balance between development and human rights. The Supreme Court has previously ruled that occupancy rights cannot be revoked under the Land Revenue and Tenancy Regulations (LRT) of 1965. The NHRC has directed the relevant authorities to take action and submit a report on the issues raised within four weeks.

The controversy also involves the Island Development Agency, chaired by the Union Home Minister, which approved a proposal for tourism development on five islands to grant occupancy rights to Scheduled Tribe populations. This was notified on March 18, 2020. However, a subsequent regulation issued on October 25, 2023, is said to contradict the objectives of Article 240 of the Indian Constitution and is deemed unconstitutional.

This tension between tourism development and indigenous rights reflects broader debates about the nature of tribal development. Advocates of tourism development argue that it can create economic opportunities and improve infrastructure, while critics contend that it threatens traditional livelihoods, dispossesses indigenous populations, and undermines cultural integrity. The resolution of these tensions requires a nuanced approach that balances economic development with the protection of indigenous rights and cultural preservation.

6.5 Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecological Preservation

The ecological fragility of Lakshadweep adds an additional layer of complexity to development challenges. The islands' coral reef systems, low elevation, and limited land area make them particularly vulnerable to environmental changes, including climate change-induced sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and changing marine ecosystems. Sustainable development strategies must therefore consider environmental constraints and prioritize eco-sensitive approaches.

Recent initiatives, such as the ICAR-NBFGR's Live Germplasm Resource Centre for Marine Ornamental Organisms at Agatti Island, demonstrate the potential for integrating conservation with community-based development. As Dr. Kajal Chakraborty, Director of ICAR-NBFGR, highlighted, this initiative represents "a unique model in which science-driven conservation and societal development are progressed simultaneously through native biological resources".

The Parliamentary Standing Committee visit in January 2026 underscored the importance of such approaches. The Chairman's launch of the upscaling of seed production of a high-value ornamental shrimp species (*Stenopus hispidus*)



by introducing a breeding pair into the rearing system symbolizes the potential for ecologically sustainable economic development. The Committee's appreciation of the institute's innovative approach of generating supplementary income for women beneficiaries through entry fee collection demonstrates recognition of the importance of both ecological and economic sustainability.

Mishra and Thakur (2022) highlight the potential of integrating traditional knowledge systems with modern sustainable practices to create resilient livelihoods. In Lakshadweep, this might involve combining traditional fishing knowledge with sustainable aquaculture techniques, promoting eco-tourism that draws on indigenous cultural practices, or developing value-added products from coconut that build on traditional processing methods. Rao and Nair (2023) argue that sustainable eco-tourism and small-scale industries could diversify income sources while preserving the ecological balance.

6.6 Comparative Perspectives: Island Tribal Development

The challenges faced by tribal communities in Lakshadweep resonate with those in other island territories, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. As Jeya Mary and Sugumar (2025) note, the approach to tribal development varies significantly based on the specific characteristics of each community. The Nicobarese, for instance, have become "a well-developed and flourishing tribe," while the Sentinelese and Jarwas remain at the "primitive stage of hunting and food gathering and are at the verge of extinction".

This variation reflects the complex interplay of factors including:

1. **Degree of Contact with Mainstream Society:** Communities with higher levels of contact have experienced more rapid social change and development, sometimes at the cost of cultural loss.
2. **Ecological Factors:** Differences in resource availability, environmental vulnerability, and population size shape developmental opportunities and constraints.
3. **Historical Factors:** The legacy of colonial administration, the timing and nature of contact with external groups, and the history of policy interventions all influence current conditions.
4. **Cultural Factors:** The willingness to engage with external systems, the preservation of traditional practices, and the adaptability of cultural systems shape responses to development.

The Lakshadweep experience demonstrates the possibilities and limitations of development in island contexts. While the islands have achieved notable success in literacy and basic healthcare, economic diversification and sustainable livelihoods remain significant challenges. The comparative perspective with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where tribal communities have experienced varying trajectories, underscores the importance of context-specific policies and culturally sensitive approaches.

7. Discussion

7.1 The Paradox of High Literacy and Limited Economic Mobility

One of the most striking findings of this study is the paradox of high literacy rates coexisting with limited economic diversification. Lakshadweep's literacy rate of 91.85% far exceeds the national average, yet the occupational structure remains dominated by traditional primary sector activities. This suggests that education, while essential for individual empowerment and social development, has not yet translated into significant economic transformation.

This paradox can be understood through the lens of structural-functionalism, which emphasizes the interdependence of social institutions. Education in Lakshadweep functions as a mechanism for social integration, transmitting cultural values and facilitating access to government services. However, the educational system's integration with the economic system remains incomplete: there is insufficient alignment between the skills imparted through education and the employment opportunities available on the islands.

The geographical constraints of the islands contribute to this disconnect. The absence of industrial development, the limited service sector, and the dominance of primary sector activities mean that educational qualifications do not automatically translate into diverse employment opportunities. As a result, educated youth face limited options: they



can pursue traditional livelihoods, seek government employment (which is limited in scope), or migrate to the mainland for work.

The establishment of DIET Kavaratti and other educational institutions represents an important step toward addressing these challenges. However, the continued emphasis on formal education at the expense of vocational training and skill development perpetuates the disconnect between educational achievement and economic opportunity. Future educational policies must therefore prioritize vocational education and skill development, aligned with the ecological and economic realities of the islands.

7.2 Gender, Development, and Social Change

Gender disparities in employment and economic participation represent a significant challenge in Lakshadweep. While literacy rates show relatively narrow gender gaps, the occupational data reveal significant differences in women's economic participation. Women are largely involved in household-based activities and are underrepresented in formal employment, while men dominate fishing and copra extraction.

These gender disparities reflect both structural constraints and cultural norms. The matrilineal kinship system, which persists despite the islands' predominantly Muslim population, complicates simple generalizations about gender roles. While matrilineal systems traditionally afforded women certain rights and status, contemporary economic structures may not fully incorporate women's productive capacities.

Sharma and Verma (2022) argue that addressing gender disparities in employment requires focused interventions to empower tribal women through skill-building and economic inclusion. Jha and Sinha (2023) emphasize that gender-inclusive policies must go beyond addressing literacy to create platforms for active economic participation. For Lakshadweep, fostering cooperatives and self-help groups could provide women with a more equitable share in the workforce.

Recent initiatives, such as the Community Aquaculture Units managed by local women beneficiaries under the ICAR-NBFGR program, demonstrate the potential for women's economic empowerment. The inclusion of women in sustainable livelihood programs not only generates income but also enhances community resilience and social stability. Scaling up such initiatives and ensuring their replication across islands could significantly address gender-based economic disparities.

7.3 Dependency, Autonomy, and Development

The dependency perspective provides valuable insights into the structural constraints on Lakshadweep's development. The islands' reliance on mainland India for resources, policy support, and expertise has created a pattern of dependency that perpetuates economic stagnation and limited local agency.

This dependency manifests in multiple dimensions:

1. **Economic Dependency:** The islands' integration into the Indian economy as a periphery limits their economic diversification. The absence of significant industrial development, limited entrepreneurial opportunities, and the dominance of subsistence-level activities reflect the constraints of a peripheral economy.
2. **Administrative Dependency:** As a centrally administered Union Territory, Lakshadweep's development is heavily shaped by policies formulated in New Delhi, often with limited input from island communities. The centralized nature of governance, while facilitating resource allocation, can also lead to a disconnect between policy prescriptions and local realities.
3. **Technological Dependency:** The lack of indigenous technology and expertise necessitates the importation of both from the mainland, perpetuating dependence on external actors.

Krishnan and Kumar (2023) argue that such dependency perpetuates economic stagnation unless supplemented by localized capacity-building initiatives. In Lakshadweep, this calls for a shift toward empowering local governance structures and community-driven development models. The recent controversies over tourism development and land rights underscore the need for greater autonomy and self-determination in shaping the islands' development trajectory.



Patel and Sundar (2022) argue that decentralized governance mechanisms are crucial to addressing developmental gaps in remote tribal areas. For Lakshadweep, this might involve strengthening local governance institutions, enhancing community participation in decision-making, and developing local capacity for policy implementation. The Department of Social Welfare & Tribal Affairs' role as a nodal agency for welfare programmes could be strengthened with greater local autonomy and fiscal devolution.

7.4 Sustainability and Ecological Preservation

The ecological fragility of Lakshadweep imposes fundamental constraints on development strategies. The islands' coral reef systems, low elevation, and limited land area make them particularly vulnerable to environmental changes, including climate change-induced sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and changing marine ecosystems.

Das and Bose (2023) propose a framework that integrates ecological preservation with localized development policies. Sethi and Roy (2023) argue for adaptive strategies that mitigate coastal vulnerabilities while enhancing resilience through community participation and technological innovation. For Lakshadweep, this means that development must be pursued within ecological constraints, prioritizing sustainable practices that preserve the islands' natural resources and ecosystem services.

The ICAR-NBFGR initiative at Agatti Island exemplifies this approach. By integrating scientific conservation with community-based development, the initiative demonstrates that ecological preservation and livelihood generation can be mutually reinforcing. The upscaling of seed production of high-value ornamental shrimp species, while environmentally sustainable, also generates income for local women beneficiaries.

Eco-tourism represents another potential avenue for sustainable development. By drawing on the islands' natural beauty, cultural heritage, and indigenous practices, eco-tourism could generate income while promoting ecological preservation and cultural pride. However, as Rao and Nair (2023) caution, eco-tourism must be carefully managed to avoid the negative impacts of mass tourism, including environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and displacement of local communities.

7.5 Policy Implications and Future Directions

The analysis presented in this paper has several important policy implications:

1. **Context-Specific Policy Design:** The unique characteristics of Lakshadweep demand policies tailored to the islands' specific conditions, rather than generic tribal development programs. This includes considering geographic isolation, ecological constraints, cultural specificity, and the distinctive kinship structures of the islands.
2. **Vocational Education and Skill Development:** Addressing the paradox of high literacy and limited economic mobility requires an educational shift toward vocational training and skill development. Curricula should be aligned with the islands' economic opportunities, including sustainable fisheries, eco-tourism, coconut-based industries, and marine biotechnology.
3. **Gender-Inclusive Economic Participation:** Addressing gender disparities requires focused interventions, including support for women's cooperatives, entrepreneurial training, and the recognition of women's productive work. The success of programs like the Community Aquaculture Units should be expanded and replicated across islands.
4. **Local Governance Empowerment:** Strengthening local governance institutions and community participation is essential for effective development. Decentralized decision-making, fiscal devolution, and capacity building for local institutions can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of development interventions.
5. **Sustainable Livelihood Diversification:** Economic diversification must proceed within ecological constraints, prioritizing sustainable practices that preserve ecosystem services. This includes promoting sustainable fisheries, eco-tourism, value-added coconut products, and sustainable aquaculture.
6. **Protection of Indigenous Rights:** Development must respect indigenous land rights and cultural integrity. Recent land rights controversies underscore the need for transparent, participatory processes that protect the



rights of Scheduled Tribes. The NHRC intervention highlights the importance of accountability mechanisms and legal protections.

7. **Integrated Policy Frameworks:** Addressing the complex challenges of development requires integrated policy frameworks that connect education, economic development, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation. Siloed sectoral approaches are inadequate for addressing interconnected challenges.

8. Conclusion

The developmental struggles of the Scheduled Tribes in Lakshadweep illuminate the complex interplay of geographic isolation, ecological fragility, cultural resilience, and the challenges of modernization. Despite significant strides in literacy and access to basic services, the islands lag in economic diversification, gender equality, and infrastructural robustness. The high literacy rates, while commendable, have not translated into adequate economic mobility, reflecting structural constraints that demand fundamental policy reorientation.

This study has demonstrated the value of a dual theoretical lens, integrating structural-functionalism and dependency theory, to capture both the internal dynamics of island society and the external forces shaping its development trajectory. The structural-functional approach reveals the interdependence of social institutions and the dysfunctions that impede development, while dependency theory illuminates the structural constraints imposed by Lakshadweep's integration into the Indian economy as a periphery.

The recent land rights controversies, brought to national attention by NHRC intervention, underscore the fundamental importance of indigenous rights in development. The tension between tourism development, economic growth, and the protection of Scheduled Tribe rights reflects broader debates about the nature and purpose of tribal development. A balanced approach that respects indigenous sovereignty, protects cultural heritage, and promotes sustainable economic opportunities is essential.

Sustainable livelihoods, integrating traditional knowledge with modern practices, offer a pathway forward. The success of initiatives like the ICAR-NBFGR's Community Aquaculture Units demonstrates the potential for science-driven conservation to generate sustainable income while preserving ecological integrity. Scaling up such initiatives and ensuring their replication across islands could significantly contribute to economic diversification and resilience.

Future development efforts must address the disconnect between educational achievement and economic opportunity through vocational training, skill development, and the creation of sustainable livelihood options. Addressing gender disparities in employment and economic participation is essential for comprehensive development. Strengthening local governance, community participation, and local capacity for policy implementation can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of development interventions.

Lakshadweep's unique socio-economic and ecological context demands an adaptive governance framework that prioritizes collaborative planning, community engagement, and sustained monitoring of development programs. By addressing these multidimensional challenges with precision and commitment, Lakshadweep has the potential to transform its developmental struggles into a model of sustainable growth and inclusion, offering valuable insights for the advancement of tribal welfare across India.

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