

LACCADIVE, Minicoy and Amindivi, the coral islands in the Arabian Sea, are famous for their natural beauty and for their rich resources like coconuts, fish, phosphates and calcium carbonate. The islanders are noted for their cleanliness, discipline, hard work and navigational skill. Isolated from the outside world, except for the periodic visitations of pirates and storms, the people had for centuries lived amidst injustice, poverty, ignorance, ill-health and apathy. Since Independence, they are making rapid progress in all fields. Wing Commander, Murkot Ramunny, IAF (Retd), IAS, who has worked and travelled in this Union Territory, gives an interesting and informative account of the islands and their inhabitants.



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GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

STATES OF OUR UNION

LACCADIVE MINICOY AND AMINDIVI ISLANDS



States of Our Union

**LACCADIVE, MINICOY
AND
AMINDIVI ISLANDS**

M. RAMUNNY

**PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA**

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ABOUT THE SERIES

This is the thirteenth book in the series "States of Our Union." The twelve books already released are on Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Assam, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Maharashtra and Gujarat. The object of the series is to promote greater awareness and understanding of different regions of the country.

The books seek to provide a factual account of the life, culture and economic development of our States and Union Territories and the contribution of each of them to India as a whole. They are addressed to the general reader and would thus serve as an introduction of a State or Territory to other parts of the country.

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1. NATURE'S AFTERTHOUGHT

UNKNOWN and neglected by the outside world, the people of the coral islands in the Arabian Sea stood still for centuries. After India's Independence in 1947, contact with the mainland increased. From 1956 onwards when the Union Government took over the administration, the islands have made rapid strides in all fields of development.

The coral islands of the Arabian Sea known as Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi islands are nineteen in number excluding the bird island of Pitti. Out of these, ten are inhabited and others are dependent islands and are cultivated. They lie about 192 to 320 km. off the Kerala coast between 8° and 12°-30' north latitude and between 71° and 74° east longitude.

These islands lie generally from north to south except Androth which lies east to west. They are long and narrow and are thickly populated in the widest part. Every island has a lagoon on its western side and a storm beach on its eastern side. The lagoons protect the islands on their most exposed side from the fury of the south-west monsoon. No part of the islands is more than 3 to 9 metres above sea level.

All the islands are coconut gardens. Bread fruit trees also grow in abundance. In fact, these fruits are known in Kerala as the "island jack fruits". In some places the tamarind, the banyan, a few lime trees and areca palms are seen. Screwpine grows luxuriously in most of the islands. There are no wild animals, but rats are a menace to coconut cultivation. There are no poisonous snakes in the islands. Fish are abundant around the islands and the smaller ones in the lagoons have very brilliant colours. The world famous Tuna, particularly the Skip Jack, is found in large shoals in the deep seas around all the islands.

The group of coral islands in the Indian Ocean belongs to the chain of coral islands built on a submarine crystal platform running roughly north-south through Laccadive, Maldives and Chagos islands

group in the extreme south. The Laccadives consist of a series of irregularly scattered reefs of which nine are atolls, having in general a ring-shaped disposition. The atoll of Minicoy is somewhat triangular.

Geologically, the Laccadives are considered to be a continuation of the Aravalli system of rocks of Rajasthan and Gujarat through the banks of the Gulf of Cambay and through the Agaria banks further south. Little is known about their sub-surface geology. Their tops are built up of coral reefs from late tertiary times. Accumulation of corals is being continued even now.

Origin

The origin of the Laccadive and Maldivi coral islands group is an issue of controversy. Of the many theories put forward, that of Sir Charles Darwin is the most satisfying. Darwin assumed that the corals commenced their growth at a suitable level, round some peak or volcanic crater during subsidence. While land commenced to subside, the corals grew upwards till they reached the surface. The action of the sea, the wind and the tide formed a circular ring with a lagoon on the leeward side.

The islands are all identical in structure and formation. They rise not more than 9 metres above the sea and their coral reefs encircle lagoons of varied sizes, some measuring 9.6 km. across, others some metres across. The lagoons are on the western side of the islands. They are saucer-shaped and are 3.6 to 5.4 metres in depth. All of them have passages for boats through the coral reef, but they are not sufficiently deep for large boats. In Minicoy, the entrance is deep enough for small ships to enter the lagoon. On the eastern side, the slopes from the reef flat are very abrupt. In some islands, there is no marked reef platform and the 182 metre line is found hardly at a distance of 137 metres from the shore.

On the outline map of India, the Laccadives look like one of nature's afterthoughts. Far-flung and isolated, they provide a protective barrier to the 3,218 km. long west coast of India. Though the islands suffer natural isolation from the rest of India for a major portion of the year, mutual contacts between the two have been continuous.

The Islands

Chetlat is the northernmost inhabited island of the group. The shoal on which this island stands is extensive, the lagoon is large and very perfect and the shores are well protected. Along the eastern side of the island is a wide belt of coral debris evidently the result of some severe storm. This belt broadens out at the south till it covers the whole southern end of the island. The lagoon has only one entrance, and a sailing vessel loaded with cargo can enter at spring tide.

The island seems to have suffered greatly at the hands of the Portuguese pirates during the 16th century. Sheikh Zeinuddin in his book *Tofut-ul-Mujahiddin* records that before their descent on Amini the Portuguese visited Shatelakum or Chetlat. A major part of the inhabitants were put to death and many were taken prisoner. In 1787, Chetlat joined with the rest of the Amindivis and defected from allegiance to the Rajas of Cannanore.

Chetlat is an important island because of its situation; being the one to which vessels from Mangalore usually sail direct. The people are reckless navigators and have been losing their way occasionally and drifting in the sea. Inhabitants of this island generally served in Arab vessels as Sarangs. They are good boat-builders also. Chetlat used to make the sailing crafts needed for other islands. In the matter of fishing also Chetlat islanders lead the rest, except Minicoy.

Bitra is the smallest of the inhabited islands with the largest lagoon in the whole of the Laccadive islands. Once entirely covered by thick brushwood and shrubs, the island was the breeding ground for flocks of sea birds. Disturbed by human intruders, the birds gradually evacuated the place. When Sir Robinson visited the islands in 1848 he heard the people say that the birds had left Bitra almost a decade earlier. There are no records to show the type of birds which sought sanctuary in this island. Most probably they belonged to the same species of the Tern group which is found on the Pitti sand bank even now. People from the neighbouring islands regularly visited this island to collect the eggs of these birds and sometimes were able to gather 30,000 to 50,000 eggs a day. During the fishing season the extensive shoals of Bitra provided a rich supply of a variety of marine fauna.

Kiltan is situated about 48 km. north-east of *Amini*. The island is about 3 km. long and 594 metres wide at the broadest point.

Kiltan lies on the international trade route. Ships plying between Colombo and Aden pass along this island. A lighthouse was constructed in 1960 on the northern storm beach of this island. Previously kerosene lights were erected here for the benefit of passing ships. In 1960, an American oil tanker, the *National Peace*, went aground on the northern extremity of this island. The ship was later removed and salvaged.

In 1948, a little girl playing on sand near a sandstone quarry in *Kadmat* unwittingly laid her hands on a gold coin. That coin and many others discovered subsequently around the place were later identified as belonging to the Roman emperors of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. The revelation was curious. It could be the prized possession of some stranded mariner who found it useless on this island or it could be the hard-earned fortune of some islander who probably wanted to conceal it from the dreaded sea pirates. But it is strange that this should have occurred at *Kadmat* which was perhaps the last major island of the group to be inhabited.

When Lt. Bentley visited *Kadmat* in 1795 he found it uninhabited. Fifty years later, Sir Robinson found inhabitants on this island, but the people were very poor, shy and spiritless. He reported that the island was once in a more flourishing state, but a sudden epidemic spread and thinned their numbers.

Kadmat is long and narrow. It is only 548 metres wide at the broadest point.

Along the middle of the island is a solid lime substratum and lime-stones are cut for building purposes. *Kadmat* now supplies all the stones required by the Public Works Department for the numerous buildings coming up in all the islands.

Amini was one of the first islands to be peopled. Vasco Da Gama on his second voyage round the Cape is said to have visited this island and noted the superior variety of coir it produced. In a thwarted deal to secure the safe passage of the island vessels from the onslaught of the pirates, the Portuguese emperor demanded 1,000 candies (1 candy=20 maunds) of *Amini* coir every year. This was in 1530. Having failed to secure this trade by peaceful means the Portuguese

seem to have established their authority on the entire Amindivi group of islands by force. Sheikh Zeinuddin records that the Portuguese slew a vast number of its inhabitants and made captives of more than four hundred souls, men and women. They also plundered everything of value and burnt the greater part of the mosques and houses that were on this island.

Amini, which is about 3 km. long by over 1.6 km. wide, almost completely fills the interior of the ring reef and only a very small lagoon is left on the western side. The beach on all sides is free from any bank of coral debris. On the sea-shore opposite the Kut-cherry is a raised stone platform with a flight of steps leading down to the beach, and mounted on the platform are two old cannons said to have been taken from *Mohomed*, a pilgrim ship wrecked at Amini in 1594. It is said that the Portuguese had a fort on this island, all traces of which have now vanished.

The uninhabited islands of *Bangaram*, *Tinnakara* and *Parali* were originally in the hands of Agatti islanders. These islets were confiscated by the Pandaram (treasury officer) for the murder of an obnoxious agent of the Cannanore Raja stationed at Agatti. This was in 1764. Winterbotham visited the island in 1878 and declared it unfit for habitation.

In 1881, the ship *Mahabaleshwar* was lost off the Bangaram reef during the monsoon. The crew succeeded in escaping to Bangaram where they lived for about three months until some Agatti fishermen discovered them at the close of the monsoon.

People from neighbouring islands frequently visited these islets for fishing and also for obtaining Cheruthalam wood which is used for securing the planks of island boats. This wood is hard and heavy and it is also used for beating coir into fibre. Another plant that requires special mention is *Ittila* that grows on Bangaram. From the root of this "a kind of Tapioca" is obtained, which is used as diet for invalids. *Ittila* grows on Minicoy also.

The lagoon surrounding these islets is the favourite turtle-hunting ground of the Agatti men. Two kinds of turtle are found, the green turtle and the Hawkabill. The green turtle is killed for its fat which yields a very valuable oil. It is caught in the night with nets when it comes into the shallow water to feed. The female turtle comes up at

night to the sand above high water mark and lays eggs, from 100 to 200 in a neat little pile at one spot in a big excavation, which she digs in the sand 4.5 to 6 metres long and 1 to 1.5 metres deep. The eggs have a white parchment-like shell and are the size and shape of a ping-pong ball. The young turtles all hatch out at much the same time and immediately make for the sea. Major Alcock in his *A Naturalist in Indian Seas* gives an interesting account of the hatch which he witnessed : "There was a tremendous commotion in the dry sand and out of it there emerged a swarm of little objects looking like beetles, which all with one consent made for the sea. Even when we caught them and started them off in the opposite direction some unerring instinct caused them at once to turn towards the sea again."

Agatti is the most westerly of the Laccadive group of islands. The reef forms an ellipse 8 km. in length and 5 km. broad. Along its eastern arc and lying slightly north-east and south-west is the island itself, a little over 5.6 km. long and 914 metres wide at its broadest point.

Agatti possesses a singularly beautiful lagoon. In the translucent turquoise green water can be seen multicoloured fishes. The many gaps in the reef cause the ripples on the beach to be very strong for easy coir soaking. Husks are therefore put in fresh water pits, which provide a splendid abode for anopheles larvae. But the mosquito is a comparative stranger. The explanation offered by Maj. Alcock is that the pits are full of small species of fresh water carp which live upon the larvae.

While conditions have been rather unfavourable for agriculture the inhabitants of this island had never hesitated to take to other professions. Fishing offered good prospects in the lagoon and in the adjacent reefs of Bangaram. For a long time there was a fish-curing yard at *Agatti* but it did not succeed. Cod liver oil is also processed as a small-scale industry here.

Of all the inhabited islands, *Kavaratti* is the most diversified and picturesque. There is a small inland lake at the northern end. At this end the lagoon is shallow and provides a beautiful pool for swimming. The southern part of the island is a long and narrow strip only 46 metres wide. It would appear to have been a separate island in olden days but is now connected.

Kavaratti which lies between Androth and Agatti is perhaps the most centrally situated island of the group and has rightly been chosen as the headquarters of the Union Territory. It is about 5.6 km. in length and its greatest breadth is about one km. The lagoon is about 1.6 km. wide.

The people of Kavaratti have considerable skill as stone masons and wood-carvers and their mosques are architecturally superior to those found on other islands. The Ujjara Mosque with its intricate carvings in wood is a fine example of the skill of the Kavaratti craftsmen. The patterns are most intricate and have been picked out in harmonious shades of pale green and dark red that are very effective. The Jamath Mosque is a large building and possesses the largest tank of any mosque in the islands. The headstones in the graveyards are in stained green or blue with arabesque design and Koranic texts are carved on them revealing the most delicate skill in stone-carving.

The great storm of 1847 left only 900 people on this island; the population prior to this was estimated at 2,576. A large number of survivors migrated to other islands where they were eventually settled on Government lands.

Androth has no lagoon and the island occupies the whole interior of the atoll. Round the whole island, except at the north-east extremity, the reef flat is exposed at low tide. On the northern side, there is a small boat harbour and it was once totally blasted in 1909. Round the harbour are built the big sheds for housing the sailing vessels. Androth witnessed the first success of Islam in these islands and the religious leadership Androth retains even today. Before the gale of 1847 this island was considered the most flourishing one. Androth produces the best copra among all these islands.

The great storm of 1847 convulsed and reshaped *Kalpeni*. "The sea rose and flooded the whole island, but across the narrow part of the main island it seems to have had tremendous velocity. All the trees with the very soil and between 50 and 60 houses were washed away into the ocean with upwards of 200 persons, while along the whole length of the shore a flood of loose coral has been deposited. The storm lasted for about an hour in all its violence. Then a sudden lull came and the wind soon sprang up briskly from the westward and the flood subsided leaving the island in the most perfect state of deso-

lation. Of the 348 houses standing before the storm not one escaped. The population of Kalpeni prior to the hurricane is reckoned at 1,542. Of these 246 were drowned or washed away during the storm, 112 perished in the ensuing five months from famine or from the diseases engendered by unwholesome and insufficient food. Three hundred and seventy-six escaped to the coast, leaving in the island 908 of whom four-fifths are women and children."

The storm separated *Cheriam* from the main island of Kalpeni. A sea bank of coral stones was formed along the east and south-east shore. About 3.6 m. high and more than 18 m. in width at the base, it now provides a natural barrier against the recurrence of such a disaster. At the south-east corner the waves break at the base and large boulders are hurled upwards, and when they roll down with the reflux the noise caused is tremendous. A similar phenomenon, though on a smaller scale, occurs at the north end of *Cheriam*. A reef is now forming between *Cheriam* and Kalpeni; in low water it is practically dry, and one can walk across from one island to the other. Action of the sea has subsequently split the two islands of *Thilakam* and *Pitti* on the south-west of the main island. Today they consist of five islands. All these tiny islands together with Kalpeni are enclosed in the same lagoon which is very expansive. Minicoy might have been the 'female island' in the Indian Ocean mentioned in his 13th century travel diary by Marco Polo. Logan also concludes that this was the same island. Most of the men even now leave the island to work in the merchant navies of the world.

2. LEGEND AND HISTORY

NO ONE has tried to write the history of the Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi islands. All that now passes for history are legends passed on by word of mouth which a few historians have tried to piece together.

Ever since Hippalus in A.D. 45 sailed with the monsoon wind to discover the direct route across the Arabian Sea from Arabia to the west coast of India, the Laccadives must have been put on the ocean map of the world. *Periplus Maris Erythraei* attributed to the same period refers to the tortoise shells of Laccadives as one of the major exports from Limurike or Tamilakam (the Tamil region). The Arab geographers of a later era called this part of the Arabian Sea as the Sea of Larawi (Laccadives). Masudi, the great traveller, has recorded that amber grows in abundance in this area and that it was available in different hues—black, white and dark bay colour. The islands would thus seem to have been visited by coastal adventurers in search of marine wealth, even before permanent settlement took place.

The Mysterious King

Cheraman Perumal, the last of the Kerala kings, who ruled Kerala for 36 years from his capital at Cranganore (an old harbour town near Cochin) was reported to have been attracted by Islam. He came under the influence of the Muslim priests who used to visit his court. He did not disclose his intention of becoming a convert to Islam even to his closest relations or friends. He only said that he desired to go into seclusion. At a ceremony held at Thirunavay, he partitioned his country among his kinsmen and retired to his palace. In the seclusion of his palace he came into closer contact with Muslim priests and Arab merchants. On a dark night he set sail for Mecca in a ship belonging to an Arab merchant. When the day dawned, it was found that the king has disappeared; and so had all the ships of the Arabs anchored at Cranganore port. His people be-

came suspicious and large parties voluntarily went in search of the king. The brave soldiers of Udaya Varman, Raja of Kolathunad embarked in sailing boats in search of the Arabs who had left obviously for the shores of Mecca with the king. A large party of soldiers and sailors started from Cannanore, the capital of the Raja of Kolathunad, in a ship manned by daring sailors of the time. They were reported to have sighted an Arab ship in the distance and hurried after it, but a fierce storm overtook them and swept them off their course. After being tossed about for many days on the Arabian Sea, they finally sighted a small island where they landed. The island is now known as Bangaram, one of the Laccadives group.

They waited for many days on this lonely island and also moved to a nearby island which is known today as Agatti. Finally when the weather became favourable, they decided to return home. On their way back they sighted other small islands also. They were sorry to report to the Raja the failure of their mission but happy to give the news of the discovery of many small uninhabited islands, far away in the Arabian Sea. The adventurous and far-sighted Raja Udaya Varman persuaded some of his equally adventurous and spirited followers to proceed to the newly discovered islands and to see whether they could be occupied by his people. He extended all help to them and persuaded them to settle on these islands. In a few months a mixed group of brave sailors and adventurous labourers sailed for these islands.

The first island the new group hit was not Bangaram, but another which they named "Amini". Gradually these ancient seafarers in their sailing boats discovered, one by one, many more islands in the infinity of the Arabian Sea. The only island that is reported not to have been occupied by them was Minicoy which is about 180 km. south of Kalpeni, the southern most island occupied by them. Some islands were found not healthy for permanent settlement. On a few, fresh water was not available at all. Many people fell ill and died and others who felt homesick and tired, returned home. Raja Udaya Varman was not happy and was intent on getting these islands for himself and his people. He announced that those who cultivated the lands in the islands would become their owners. Immediately the people took the Raja at his word and started cultivating the islands

and settling there permanently. There is no doubt that those who went there were all Hindus, and they carried with them their caste system, which even today, when hundred per cent of the people are Muslims, is practised. Moreover, even now broken bits of idols of the Hindu pantheon made of lime mortar are sometimes found below the sub-soil. The landlords who invariably belonged to the same caste as the ruling prince were either his relatives or his close friends. The cultivators, the original inhabitants of northern parts of Kerala and the sailors who took them there toiled to turn these islands into small paradises.

They belonged to three castes : the landlords who with the power of the Raja behind them claimed that the land belonged to them; the sailors who belonged to the famous adventurous group of fishermen and the merchant navy of Kerala; and the main tillers of the soil who worked in the fields and planted coconut palms and other plants which they had brought from Kerala. Thus grew the three classes, *viz.*, the landlords, the sailors and the cultivators which now continue as Koya, Malmi and Melachery. Thus, the legend says, there grew up a small society in each of these little islands. Amini, Kavaratti, Androth and Kalpeni were the first to be occupied and later the smaller islands of Agatti, Kiltan, Chetlat and Kadmat.

The story of the king of Kerala disappearing to Mecca has not been fully substantiated. There are even stories that he went to Madras, where St. Thomas, one of the Apostles, met him and baptised him. Whatever the truth, the story of his desire to change his religion seems to have gone round and he went either to Mecca to become a Muslim or to Madras to become a Christian. It is likely that the Chirakkal Raja sent people in search of him not knowing where he had gone. It is also very probable that he sent ships in search of him. Even if the king had not gone with the Arab merchants, suspicion must have been aroused in his kinsmen when the Arab fleet had also suddenly disappeared. It is likely that some of the ships sent in search of him got wrecked on the islands. Otherwise there was no chance of the islanders having such close connection with the people of north Malabar. In their customs and manners even to this day they resemble more the people near Cannanore than anyone else in

Kerala. The period of their occupying the islands can be traced fairly accurately if research is done on their language. There are many Tamil words in their day-to-day conversation which show that they left the shores of Kerala at a time when Tamil and Malayalam were very close to each other.

While it is not easy to fix the exact date of habitation of the islands it can be safely concluded that people had been visiting the islands even prior to the 10th century. The reference found in Arab travel books written between the 6th and the 9th centuries supports the theory that the islands were visited at least seasonally. People from the coast used to go there to collect cowries and conch shells. The navy maintained by the coastal chieftains also perhaps found them useful resting places. Perhaps it was for these reasons that South Indian rulers, the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas, laid claims on these islands. The Chera king Perumchottuthiyan is said to have invaded Tulunad and Laccadives in order to control the trade in tortoise shells. Raja Raja Chola is also said to have conquered Laccadive and Maldivi groups of islands.

These great South Indian rulers declared themselves masters of the ocean, and maintained considerable navies to safeguard their trading interests. But these duties were generally entrusted to viceroys in-charge of smaller principalities along the coast. When these kingdoms broke down, the viceroys asserted their authority and established themselves as sovereigns. Thus we find at the beginning of the 10th century the Kolathiris controlling the entire north Malabar and the Laccadive islands from Mount Eli. They had trading contacts with the Arabs and carried considerable maritime trade with the Maldivi islands group. Their trading interests were looked after by the Muslim house of Arakkal of Cannanore who were their traditional naval chieftains. These chieftains seem to have wielded considerable influence on the Kolathiris, and were responsible for the naval victories of the kingdom over the Sultan of Maldives. According to tradition, around the 10th century, the Kolathiri recognised their naval chieftain as his vassal and as the overlord of the Laccadive islands.

The power and status of this Muslim family grew in stature after their control over the islands. It gave them virtual monopoly over coir trade of the Arabs which centred round Laccadives and Maldives

in those days. These chieftains subsequently came to be known as Azhi Rajas or kings of the ocean. The Sultan of Maldives was a tributary of this Muslim house during this period. The relationship between these two Muslim principalities were marked by frequent warfare, and the Arakkal house kept under their control several islands belonging to the Sultan.

Arrival of Islam

In the year 41 Hijri, one Ubeidulla, while saying his prayers at a mosque in Mecca fell asleep. He dreamt that Prophet Mohammed advised him to proceed to Jeddah, take a ship from there and go to distant places. He woke up and dismissed the vision as a mere dream; he fell asleep again and the dream was repeated. Thrice he dreamt it and finally decided to obey the command of the Prophet. He proceeded to Jeddah and found a ship about to sail for distant shores. Without enquiring where it was going or deciding where he wanted to go, he boarded the ship and spent most of his time in prayers. It was days, perhaps months, of sailing in the Arabian Sea, far to the south, when a storm overtook them and the ship was wrecked near some small islands. Ubeidulla holding on to a plank was swept by the tide towards the shores of one of the small islands, which was Amini. He fell asleep on the shore of the island and he again dreamt that the Prophet asked him to propagate Islam in that island. The storm was followed by the usual calm and the islanders saw a strange man, sleeping on the beach. He was produced before the headman of the island. Ubeidulla announced that he was a disciple of Mohammed, the Prophet, and had come to propagate his religion and convert the Hindus to Islam. The orthodox Hindus of the island got enraged and ordered him to leave the island at once. Ubeidulla stood firm, and in the name of the Prophet threatened to set fire to the whole island. On the other hand, the headman decided to kill him. When all this was happening a young Hindu woman fell in love with the stranger and decided to join him. He is supposed to have given her the name Hamidat Bibi and married her at dead of night. When the headman heard of this he decided to kill both of them. At this stage, it is believed, a number of miracles took place.

As the headman and his people surrounded Ubeidulla and his wife, he prayed to God to protect him and his wife. At once, the story goes, the headman and other people lost the power of sight and began to grope about. Taking advantage of this, Ubeidulla and his wife at once disappeared from that island and it was only after they had left in a small boat that the people regained their eyesight.

The story continues that the little boat arrived at the island of Androth.

The story of Amini was more or less repeated at Androth also. Ubeidulla's attitude to the headman enraged him and the people tried to kill the strange couple. Ubeidulla again called on God and the Prophet and the whole island rocked as in an earthquake. The people fell at Ubeidulla's feet and decided to abide by his advice. The entire people of Androth were converted to Islam; a mosque was built, and a house constructed for Ubeidulla and his wife. Even today in one of the biggest mosques in Androth one can see the grave of Ubeidulla. A rich and influential family today claims to be the descendants of Ubeidulla. The family of Hamidat Bibi has lands in Amini and Androth.

Androth which was converted first has ever since been looked upon with sanctity. In 1846, Robinson reported that it was customary for all boats passing this island to repeat the "Fatiah" as a mark of respect to the great religious leader.

The religious leadership Androth retains even today. Androth is the headquarters of the Rifai sect of Islam and preachers from this island go to the mainland, conduct prayers and give talismans to cure diseases of the body and mind. They claim disciples all over South India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Burma. Some of them are said to be great scholars in Islamic theology and Arabic literature. Hundreds go on "Safar" to distant places.

Slowly Saint Ubeidulla moved from island to island. One by one, Kavaratti, Amini and other islands fell to his enchanting preachings and Islam spread to the entire inhabited islands of the Laccadive group.

There is a difference of opinion regarding the visit of Saint Ubeidulla and the date of conversion. The tradition ascribing this to 41 Hijri (or 7th century) is based on a folk song current in some islands.

But this date clashes with the Cheraman legend which is ascribed to the 9th century. According to Robinson, the conversion to the new faith took place sometime in the 13th century. His contention is based on the claims of the Kazi of Androth, at the time of his visit in 1848, that he was twenty-second to hold that office in direct line from Saint Ubeidulla. W. Logan also fixed the date to the same period, which also synchronised with the rise of the Ali Raja family in Cannanore which, being the only Muslim dynasty in Malabar, took keen interest in the propagation of Islam, and was responsible for the construction of many mosques in the islands. They also patronised several religious preachers belonging to the islands.

Portuguese Plunder

With the arrival of the Portuguese on the Indian seas the Laccadives attained added importance. In the bloody sea battles fought in the Arabian Sea between the west coast rulers and the Portuguese, these islands provided a vantage point for military operations and for dodging the enemy.

An oceanic people, the islanders have been essentially good sailors. Trading relations with the coast seem to have been established early, and island vessels visited Surat, Muscat and other ports. Minicoy vessels went further round the Cape and had a flourishing trade with Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bengal. Trading vessels from the mainland also came to these islands, but this was prohibited when the Rajas of Cannanore brought the entire trade of the islands under their control by the middle of the 18th century. The alliance with the Cannanore Rajas was beneficial to the islands against the ocean pirates, but it restricted their trade channels and consequently their wider outlook and contacts.

A few island vessels are reported to have called at Goa every year to bring duty-free salt from that port till about the end of the last century. The Bengal trade survived in a salutary manner till the beginning of the present century.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian seas marked the beginning of an era of plunder for the islands. The Portuguese

interest in the islands was the finely spun coir which was ideal for making ropes required for their ships. They started plundering island vessels. A treaty was patched up during the governorship of Albuquerque, under which the Kolathiris agreed to supply 2,000 bars of coir to the Portuguese every year. The treaty, however, came to an end with the exit of Albuquerque.

During the time of Henry Menezes, the Portuguese governor, European ships with modern weapons arrived at Amini to procure coir by forcible means. The Portuguese are reported to have killed the Karyakar (the local administrator) and the leaders of the islands. They settled on the island and all the people had to work for them. They built an embankment on the eastern side of the island. From Amini they ruled the islands of Kiltan, Chetlat, Kadmat and Bitra. The news reached Cannanore but the Raja was not strong enough to oppose the Portuguese. He, however, found other means. He chose a very clever man from his staff called Purakat and sent him to destroy the Portuguese. He is reported to have gone in a sailing vessel with a lot of clothes and foodstuffs which the Portuguese would require, and just before anchoring on the eastern side of Amini, he threw out all the drinking water from the vessel. The Portuguese boarded the anchored vessel and told them they had no right to be there. The leader asked for drinking water. While the drinking water was being fetched, the Portuguese found the large amount of merchandise which could be of use to them. They bargained for it and the sailing vessel stayed on. The crew of the sailing vessel were permitted to land and given a house to stay. While the merchandise was being sold to the Portuguese, the leader invited the Portuguese for a party and he is reported to have mixed cobra poison in the drinks, and while the Portuguese, in the western custom, raised their glasses together to drink to the health of the captain of the sailing vessel they collapsed and died. Thus the story goes that all the Portuguese were killed. At that spot now stands a mosque called "the mosque of the snakes" and this story is connected with it. The leader then went back to Cannanore and gave the good news to the Raja. The Raja gave him land on the island and asked him to go back. Thus ended the short history of

the Portuguese stay on the island. The land allotted to the hero of the story is still called Purakat Bhumi, meaning 'the land of Purakat'.

Arakkal Misrule

Even after the conversion of the entire islanders to Islam, sovereignty remained in the hands of the Hindu Raja of Chirakkal. Apparently, the Raja did not interfere in the administration, but according to Dr. H. Gundert a Muslim member of the staff of the Chirakkal Raja was sent to the islands to collect 18,000 Fanams (Fanam was about one-third of a rupee) every year to be paid to his treasury, being the tribute due from the Arakkal family. At that time all the islands were under the house of Chirakkal and the names Laccadive or Amindivi had not come into being.

Life in the islands seemed to have been peaceful and nothing is mentioned in any of the books except that the administration of the islands was passed on to the Muslim house of Arakkal of Cannanore, around the middle of the 16th century.

The house of Arakkal ruled the islands for many years. But slowly the administration deteriorated. During the days of Chirakkal rule the islands were administered locally by the people themselves. There were no crimes and no courts. But with the advent of the Arakkal rule, a mainlander was appointed in each of the islands as Karyakar (administrator). To help him in the administration, leading islanders were appointed as jurors, but these jurors were the high caste Koyas, each of whom had paid Rs. 404 to the Arakkal palace to get the post. Even among them there were three different grades. With the help of the jurors the Karyakar administered the islands. There are many stories of atrocities committed by them. The poor people were punished by being made to stand in the sun or being given hard labour. The rich were punished by being deprived of a part of their lands. At that time the entire land belonged to the people as ordained by the Raja of Chirakkal, but with the confiscation, a particular category of land belonging to the Government, came up. These were called 'Karayma' lands. Even today in the mosques and the mosque tanks,

one can see a separate space allotted to the old Karyakars. If anybody else uses them, he is punished.

Agatti island was the first which suffered under the then military might of Arakkal. But the Karyakar there was a good man and he refused to extort money from the poor. He received many warnings from the palace of Connanore and finally the Raja sent some soldiers to Agatti. The Karyakar stood up to the soldiers and was killed along with his whole family except a little girl who ran away and hid herself under a rock in the nearby little island. That little rock is known as the 'rock under which Bibi Kunhi hid'. The bodies of the Koya (Karyakar) and the other members of his family were not allowed to be buried and were thrown into the sea. There is a little channel in one corner of Agatti island which continues to be known as the channel that took the bodies of the Koya and his family.

During the long regime of Arakkal many dacoits and pirates came in sailing vessels to the islands and committed rape and plunder. One of the leading pirates was called Kutty Ahmed. In many of the islands, there is a little hillock, called the hillock of Kutty Ahmed. It appears that the pirate stayed at this hillock for a few days while his followers did what they liked in the islands. The vessels of the pirates had only one sail while the island boats had many. It was thus possible for the islanders to recognise the pirates' boats long before they approached the islands. It became the custom for the first man who saw the pirates to shout in a shrill voice. This was taken up by the others till all the islanders knew about it. This was the sign to hide all the valuables and move the women to one side of the island. And thus slowly the pirates found that they could not get what they wanted and they gradually gave up their visits. The custom of the shrill cry in the islands when any time any boat is seen from the hillock continues. It is almost like the sound of an air-raid siren. But since 1964, as almost every week a ship touches the islands, this custom has been slowly disappearing. As the wind of modernisation blows, the shrill cries that once warned the islanders of the impending disaster and the memories of the dacoities of the Arakkal regime are fading away from the minds of the people and are replaced by the shouts and laughter of children welcoming ships from the mainland.

Tipu Interlude

In course of time, Arakkal rule became unbearable. Finally the Amini islanders got hold of the Karyakar, tied him up, beat him, put on a boat and landed him on the Cannanore beach. This is supposed to have been in the year 1783 or thereabout when the islanders went to Tipu Sultan at Mangalore, narrated to him the rule of Cannanore Bibi of Arakkal, fell at his feet and requested him to take over the administration of the Amini group of islands. But at that time Tipu Sultan was on friendly terms with the Arakkal Bibi. He, however, met the delegation at Seringapatam, sent a letter to the Bibi not to take action against the Amini islanders till he had discussed the matter with her. By that time she was about to send her soldiers in sailing boats to take revenge against Amini islanders, but this was stopped. After long deliberations, in 1787, the islands of Amini group were handed over to Tipu Sultan in return for his territory in Chirakkal. Thus the 18 islands came to be divided, five under Tipu Sultan's regime and the rest under Arakkal ruler. This division continued till 1947 when India became free.

Tipu Sultan continued to administer the Amini group till the last battle of Seringapatam. In 1801, all his land went to the East India Company and since then the islands were administered from Mangalore. But the Bibi continued to administer the other islands. In 1847, after her death, a cyclone of severe intensity sent up giant waves over the island of Androth leaving a trail of destruction behind. Most of the people died, all the coconut trees were destroyed and the houses collapsed. Some people came to Cannanore and the Raja decided to go and see for himself and give them help. At that time Sir W. Robinson decided to accompany the Raja to assess the extent of damage and render relief. The people needed many things which the Raja could not give. Robinson offered to help and send all the requirements in the Company's vessels to the islands in the form of loan to the Raja. For four years this was continued. When the loan increased to lakhs, the English asked him to pay it up immediately which the Raja could not. Finally, in 1854, the islands were handed over to the East India Company for administration in the name of the Raja.

British Rule

The East India Company changed the administration to the benefit of the people who began to look more towards it for their help than towards the Raja. They appointed an Amin (the trustee) as the administrator of each island. The Amin was chosen from one of the leading families of the island itself. In this way was stopped the administration of the Karyakars who came from the mainland. By 1908, the second group of islands had fallen into the hands of the East India Company and was administered by the Malabar collector stationed at Calicut; the other islands had already come under the collector of Mangalore in 1799. As the loan given to the Raja by the East India Company to look after the islands ran into lakhs of rupees, the four islands were known as Laccadive or "Lakshadweep", *i.e.*, the islands that cost lakhs of rupees, while the other group was known as Amindivi. The story of Minicoy is entirely different. All the three groups together today are known as the Union Territory of Laccadives.

3. RICH RESOURCES

THE SOIL of the islands seems to be peculiar. There are no white ants and no serpents. When I said this to somebody, he remarked : "You have no politicians, and no police either." But we have now introduced police in the island family though there never has been a theft in the islands. Elections have also since been held for the single-member constituency of Parliament. That meant introduction of politicians. We did try owls so as to eliminate the rats which live in thousands on the coconut trees and, as estimated by the agricultural department, destroy about 30 per cent of the nuts.

Coming back to the soil of the islands, we found that the coconuts grew on it very well, much better than on the mainland, though they were planted very close to each other. The agricultural department advised the islanders to plant them after proper spacing. But for hundreds of years the islanders have been growing trees close to each other and producing excellent crops. In the smaller variety, one could find 100 to 150 nuts on a single tree. This is perhaps unheard of on the mainland of Kerala.

Minerals

We sent the soil for testing at the Agricultural Research Institute, Trivandrum. The result of the tests surprised the scientists. They found a high percentage of phosphates in the soil. At our request an officer of the Bureau of Mines arrived in twenty-four hours. We spent the next twenty days surveying the islands and testing soil.

The tests were very successful. Only qualitative analysis was being done and it was found that the islands that were mostly uninhabited had larger percentage of phosphates. Certain parts of the uninhabited islands had large deposits of phosphates. But the island of Pitty which is completely uninhabited and has been the abode of birds during the monsoon had the highest percentage.

These tests were followed up by a team that came and stayed in the islands and a detailed report was submitted. Apart from phosphates

in the soil, the sands on the beach were 90 to 98 per cent calcium carbonate.

There are millions and millions of tonnes of calcium carbonate in the islands as they are coral islands. Under the lagoon, the sand is pure calcium carbonate, as white as sugar, in fine powdery form. Most of the islands have up to 26 to 52 square kilometres of lagoon.

Fisheries

Most of the fishes of economic importance of the Laccadives fall under the category of oceanic fishes to which belong the Tunas, Wahoo and Sailfish. Of lesser economic importance are the lagoon fishes like Rock Cod, *Lethrinus*, *Lutjanus* and Kingfish. The Manta (or Devilfish), Barracuda, Marlins and Swordfish are sporadic in their appearance. Sharks and Rays are ubiquitous.

Whereas the richest fishing along the mainland waters is located along the bottom of the sea (e.g., Prawns) in the Laccadives it is the surface and mid-water regions that yield fruitful results. Prawns are non-existent and so are shoaling fishes like Sardines and the Indian Mackerel.

Sea bottom suitable for trawling is as yet unknown or untried, except the experimental trawling by *S.T. Lady Goshen* in 1928. When such power boats and gear would be available for experiments, selected large areas of shelving banks like those surrounding Androth and the Investigator Bank north-east of Minicoy could be given a trial.

Broadly speaking the fishery areas of these islands could be grouped oceanographically into three, viz., the middle group of islands consisting of the islands of Kavaratti, Agatti and Amini; the north-eastern group of islands consisting of Kiltan, Chetlat and Bitra; and the comparatively isolated islands of Minicoy, Kalpeni, Suheli, Androth and the banks of Bassas de Pedro, Beliapani, Byramgore, Peremulpar and Eli-Kalpeni and the Investigator Bank.

In the year 1928 the Madras Fisheries' steam trawler *Lady Goshen*, while surveying the trawling grounds (sea bottom grounds) of the Arabian Sea, had operated over Bassas de Pedro Bank (Munialpar) 96.5 km. north of Chetlat. As the sounding had revealed a very rugged bottom, bristling with coral growths, Antipatharia and Gorgonids, the first trials were with only skeleton trawling gear (ground rope, head

ropes and other boards). Within an area thus cleared of obstructions a modified vigneron dahl net (trawl net more buoyant than normal gear by the addition of glass floats) was operated. The first haul was remarkably poor in fish. The Cod end was encumbered with several types and species of Echinodermata (Star Fishes, Brittle Stars and Holothuria). The last haul towards the southern end of the bank yielded a good haul of Kingfish (Carangidae, etc.).

The conclusion that could be drawn was that the sea bottom at coral-ridden regions when properly selected and freed from obstructions would yield good hauls even with bottom mobile nets like the otter trawls.

It is noteworthy that the *Lady Goshen* did not operate any mid-water or surface gear over the Bassas de Pedro Bank as all her operations were with trawl nets of the then standard patterns.

The belief has been current that the southern waters of the Laccadives between latitude 7° to 9° north are richer in fish, particularly the Tunas, than the northern waters. To a certain extent this is confirmed by the fact that the waters around Suheli yielded comparatively richer catches of fish during the years 1961-63.

Minicoy has been acknowledged to possess rich fisheries for the Tunas, i.e., Skip Jack and Yellow Fin Tuna. Even during breaks in the southwest monsoon Mas Odies of Minicoy venture out from the Leeward shore (north-eastern) and have been catching fish though in smaller quantities as compared to other seasons. At such times fishing in other islands is confined mostly to their lagoons and the hauls have been poor.

The Tuna, particularly Skip Jack (*Katsuwonus Pelamys*), is by far the most important fish of the Laccadives. From time immemorial Skip Jack, filleted, boiled and smoked, has commanded a very remunerative market as the Mas.

The newly started canning of Tuna (pilot scheme inaugurated at Agatti, December 1963) is the beginning of a new industry of even greater economic importance for the foreign market.

The popular esteem for different types of fish at different regions of the islands is remarkably distinct. Minicoy islanders prefer Tunas to any other fish whether fresh or cured. People of Kalpeni, Androth and other northern islands esteem the sundried meat strips of Kotar

(Dircerobates Eregodu) which is never liked in Minicoy. Shark meat is also popular among many northern islands unlike Minicoy. Aya-koora, both Cybium and Acanthocybium, though very popular among all other islands, has not been recognised as such by Minicoy islanders. This unreasonable aversion is being broken down slowly since the Pablos started operating here. The demand for Digu Mas (Acanthocybium) for midday meals in the schools and hostels in Minicoy is increasing day by day. Tamarind fish or Padda made out of fried or dried Digu Mas pickled in vinegar and spices has become popular in Minicoy. It would be possible to popularise this cottage industry in all islands.

The islanders, except those of Minicoy, go out into the open sea in small coconut wood canoes, manned by two persons. One person has a dummy fish tied to a pole line and the dummy fish is dipped and moved about on the surface of the water to attract large fish like Shark, Seer or Sailfish. When the large fish come near, the second person spears them with a 3.5 metre long spear which has a coconut stem and iron-barbed blades at the end. On an average one or two fish are obtained after hours of toil in the tropical sun. The only other method of fishing in the deep sea outside the lagoon is by using the trolling line. They tie long lines at the rear of small canoes. The bait generally used is in a piece of coconut kernel.

The main catch is normally from the shallow lagoons on the western side of the islands. At dusk, the islanders carry a long pole with half a dozen spikes attached to the end. They stand in knee-deep water and spike the fish that come up. On dark nights, they go about in the lagoon in little flat canoes with a lighted torch to attract the fish and use the same spike to get at the fish. The results again are not very encouraging, but it is enough for an evening meal for the islander's family.

The major fishing operations are by using locally made nets. The usual cast net is common, but an unusual method is the use of 'ceandaly vala'. This is a local net with small meshes. The dimensions of the net are 61 to 183 metres and about 20 to 30 men are required to use it. Before the net is taken out for fishing, coconut leaves tied to long ropes are used as scare lines for driving the fish far out in the lagoon towards the shore. As soon as the coconut-leaf net (careline) reaches the shore

up to an area from where it can be covered with the above net, this area is encircled with the net. Afterwards, the net is hauled to the shore. The main catch are coral fish.

For hundreds of years they had used such primitive methods of fishing. Most of the successful methods of fishing that are followed along the seas near the mainland are ineffective in the islands. Trawling, for example, is a very profitable method of fishing for Prawns in the seas near the mainland. But the same is not possible in the islands owing to the depth of the sea immediately beyond the lagoon and the presence of corals at the bottom of the lagoon which can tear off the nets. Drift netting is also not successful. The sea waters near the islands are very clear and it is difficult to use drift nets. The fisheries department had to find out its own methods to improve the fishing in the islands.

No outsider had seen Tuna fishing by the Minicoy islanders. Tuna fishing was carried out only by the Minicoy islanders up to 1962. Even research scholars who had spent a year or so living with them knew not the problems that faced the island fisheries. But the Administration had to face a problem. Fishing was poor. The people were facing starvation. Their much-coveted gold ornaments were being prawned. Even bedsheets and cooking-vessels were being sold to the few mainland merchants who had the monopoly of the trade of dried Tuna or 'Masmeen' as they call it.

For a century the islanders did not know the actual price of 'Masmeen'. They bartered them for their daily needs. Some merchants of the mainland grew richer and the islanders poorer.

The men went far out in their open nine metre long sailing boats and brought in Skip Jack and Yellow Fin Tuna. They spent half a day collecting bait fish near the coral rocks in the lagoon. Bending over the side of the boats, they chewed coconut kernel and spat it into the water to attract the bait fish. A small meshed net was lowered with four poles and little fingerlings were hauled up from their abode under the coral stones. The bait fish were preserved alive near the shore in perforated rectangular wooden boxes which ensured supply of fresh sea water all the time and prevented the fish from getting out. A number of these boxes could be seen anchored near the Minicoy villages. Before going out for fishing the bait fish were transferred into a couple

of compartments in the middle of the Mas boat into which sea water flowed in through small holes. The Mas boat was a fast sailing boat made mostly of coconut timber with a large platform on the stern where about ten men could stand and fish. When the compartments were full two young boys constantly bailed out the water to keep the level constant. It was a hard and tiresome job.

On a fishing day—every day was a fishing day from October to April or May, except Fridays—the men collected very early much before dawn. The boats and equipment were invariably owned by the village or Athiri. The entire catch had to be shared by the village. The captain, the fishermen, the water bailers, the women who cured the fish, and even the blind and the infirm were allotted shares. When in 1962 China attacked India, one share was reserved for the Defence Fund. The large sail went up and the well-disciplined team mates took to their allotted tasks. None spoke except the leader. There was a calm dignity about the way they went about their work.

Suggestion that mechanised Pablo boats should be used for Tuna fishing was straightway rejected by the people. But within a year it was found that departmental mechanised boats brought in more catches. Slowly the islanders were converted to the idea of mechanised fishing. Minicoy islanders were appointed instructors in other islands and Tuna fishing spread all over. A canning unit as a pilot project was started in Agatti island. A larger one was planned in Minicoy. A boat building yard was established in Kavaratti. The canned Tuna of Laccadives is now available in the mainland market. It has a great future in the foreign markets also.

Coir Monopoly

Coir production is the main industry in the Laccadive and Amindivi group of islands. The coir produced by the islanders in these islands is purchased by the Administration on a monopoly basis in exchange for rice and this transaction is made at the coir-*cum*-rice depots of the Administration in each island managed by the Amins and Karanis who are local Government servants.

Sometime in the sixteenth century, the Cannanore Rajas levied an export duty called “sunkum” on coir and subsequently a similar duty

on rice imported for home consumption. This was the earliest form of duty levied on the people of the islands.

It was Bammaly, a Raja of Cannanore, who enforced the monopoly purchase of the principal produce of the islands. The authoritative introduction of coir monopoly took place in A.D. 1764-65 much against the will of the people of the islands.

The prices paid by the Rajas were eventually fixed at the low rate of Rs. 30 per candy. This was paid in terms of rice, less 20 per cent for export and import duties on coir and rice and some other deductions.

The rebellion of Amini in 1784 was the direct result of the compulsory introduction of monopoly on coir and arbitrary fixation of rate. This system was maintained till 1826.

Minicoy island was an exception, where no monopoly on coir had been introduced by the Rajas of Cannanore. This was not necessary as the entire coconut plantations of the island appear to have been confiscated and appropriated by the Rajas for themselves. The people of the island were further prevented from raising their own plantations. However, the Minicoy islanders were more interested in fishing Tuna, converting it into "Mas" and exporting it in large quantities to earn their livelihood. The coir monopoly was never introduced there as the people were not interested in producing coir except for their own use. This position continues even now.

When these islands were ceded to British India, monopolies on several products introduced by the Rajas of Cannanore were abolished except that on coir.

During the British rule, the islanders were given rice in exchange for coir made by them from the island at the exchange rate fixed by Government. For this purpose the Government established coir-cum-rice depots in all the islands except Minicoy, to collect the coir and to issue rice in exchange. The islanders were prohibited from selling their coir in the open market.

Since Independence, the exchange rate varied with reference to the market rates for coir and rice on the mainland. The object of the scheme has been to ensure to the poor islanders, whose main occupation was making coir yarn, a regular supply of rice at reasonable rates, thereby minimising the chances of middlemen profiteering at their expense. The rice obtained in exchange for coir satisfies only a fourth of

their total requirements. The rest of their requirements of rice and other necessities they purchase from the mainland markets out of their income from the sale of copra and other minor products.

The coir and rice involved in this transaction are transported by the islanders themselves in their sailing crafts. On the mainland this transaction is undertaken at Mangalore where the State Port Officer looks after the work with the aid of the Coir Superintendent and staff of the Island Administration. The sailing crafts (odams) of the islanders come to Mangalore with coir from the Government depots in the islands. The boat owners get a certain percentage for carrying the copra to Mangalore and rice to the islands.

The profit or loss in the working of the scheme depended on the price of coir and rice on the mainland markets which are often fluctuating. After the islands were constituted into a Union Territory, the Administration introduced the issue of Government central storage rice to the islanders in exchange for their coir. So one of the fluctuating factors taken into account in fixing the exchange rate has been eliminated as the central storage rice is sold at a fixed and subsidised rate. In 1962, it was decided by the Government of India to run the scheme on a no-profit-no-loss basis. This barter system is now a purely welfare scheme.

To encourage the islanders to produce better quality coir, the Administration established coir training-cum-production centres in the islands. Nine islanders who received special training for two years in improved methods of coir twisting at Beypore in Kerala State were appointed as instructors in these centres. About 600 islanders were trained in the courses of six months each in these training centres by the end of the Second Five Year Plan. Each trainee is given stipend during the period of training. At the end of the training they are given production implements and equipment free of cost for organising their own production units on co-operative basis. Co-operative supply and marketing societies in the islands have started coir production centres at which these trained islanders produce coir with the implements and equipment supplied to them by the Administration.

The islanders want this 'coir monopoly' system to continue as they are ensured of reasonable price for their coir and of rice stocks on the island itself.

4. ECONOMIC REFORMS

THE LANDLORD (called the Jenmi as in Kerala) was the proprietor of the soil in the islands. How he came by this land nobody knew. It may be that his forefathers were the early settlers. The Jenmi was invariably of the higher caste. The landlord gave possession of his land in bits to the tenants. The landlord-tenant relationship was most peculiar, a type that existed in the Laccadive islands only. The landlord made over to the tenant about 30 to 40 coconut trees with the land on which they were planted. The tenant would look after the existing trees and could plant more trees. In fact the landlord had no right to plant trees in such areas. The land became the absolute property of the tenant (Kudiyan), subject, of course, to the conditions set out by the landlord. These conditions had become customary and had all the force of law. The oral agreement was passed on from generation to generation. For the unit of 30 to 40 trees known as one 'Nadapu', the tenant paid in cash about Rs. 18 per annum to the landlord. This sum varied slightly, from island to island. The tenant had to work as a sailor for the landlord's sailing boats for a minimum of one trip to the mainland and back every year. He was not paid for it, and he had to make his own arrangements for food, etc. The tenant thatched the boat sheds, repaired and oiled the boat of the landlord and kept it in "ship shape" throughout the year. It was a custom in the island that only the landlord could own a sailing boat and the tenant had to take his own produce of coconuts to the mainland for sale only in the landlord's boat or, if he did not possess one, then in the boat in which the landlord also carried his produce. As freight, the tenant paid at least one-tenth of his produce to the boat-owner-cum-landlord. In addition there were many other conditions that the tenant had to fulfil. In certain islands the tenants had to thatch the houses of the landlords and make arrangements for the weddings and other festivities that took place in the landlord's house. If any goat was to be slaughtered by the tenant the best piece of meat had to be sent to the landlord. Thus, it was absolute misery for the tenants who formed the majority of the population.

It was the custom that the tenants, i.e., the lower caste people, called 'Melacheries', could not wear shirts. They had to be bare-bodied. They could not wear any shoes, nor use umbrellas. During the days of the British, one of the Melacheries went up to the court with a complaint that he was not allowed to use an umbrella by a higher caste man. He lost his case in all the lower courts which were invariably run by the higher caste people (Koyas). When it reached the district court the British judge delivered his judgement that an umbrella could be used, but only for protection from the sun and the rain. Thus he saved his British conscience and at the same time refrained from interfering with the customs of the people!

There were also other types of lands in the islands—lands that belonged to the Government and were called Pandaram lands. They were originally the private property of the Cannanore Raja. They were divided into small plots and were leased out for 40 years or so by the British Government on regular payment of rent. But when these were to fall back to the Government, after expiry of the lease, the tenant could not claim any compensation for improvements made or even for buildings constructed by him. Even though the lease was for about 40 years, it continued for many more years. Finally the tenant established the ownership of these lands subject to the Government's rights of resumption. The 'Cowle', or the agreement with the tenants, did not contemplate any other sub-tenancy but in many cases the tenants of the Government passed on their rights to sub-tenants on the same terms.

After 1947, people slowly realised their rights and there were hundreds of civil cases in the courts between the tenants and the landlords. In most cases, the landlord could never identify his land. No boundaries, no documents and no land records existed. A landlord recognised his land only through his tenants who did service and who paid him his rent. Some of the tenants had developed their lands considerably in the last century and there were many more trees than were originally handed over to them. It was also likely that the tenant's own land and the land that he got from the landlord had got merged with each other. The tenant, however, accepted that all land belonged to the landlord.

The only documents that could be produced by the landlord were those showing division of his ancestral property in which it was stated

that so many trees of that particular family in the hands of a certain tenant were given to a particular son or nephew. In all these transactions the tenant was left out. He knew nothing of what the landlord had done with his land. But he accepted every decision, without question. Even if he objected he found no justice. The village court was presided over by a landlord appointed by the Government and his assessors were also landlords. In the past no one but the landlords (Koyas) could be the Amin (the village chief) or his assessors. These courts invariably gave decisions in favour of the landlords. It is doubtful whether there was any case in which a tenant won against a landlord.

One of the saddest things was the method by which the landlord deprived the tenant of his coconut trees. When a tenant was flourishing with hundreds of coconut trees which he and his forefathers had planted, the so-called landlord would privately decide to smash him. He would produce a 'Raji', i.e., a written document, by which he handed over a part of the land of the tenant to some other person, normally a relative. This would be filed in the court of the Amin. Neither the tenant nor anyone else would know anything about it. After months or even years this paper would be dug up from among the old documents and the agents of the new landlord would encroach upon the coconut grove and start plucking the fruits. The tenant would come running and try to stop them. A fight would ensue. The village court consisting of the Amin and a few of his assessors, all of whom would be landlords, or related to or interested in the landlord who had registered the document, would appear on the spot. The Amin and the assessors would, according to a pre-arranged plan, offer a proposal for compromise and the tenant, out of fear of physical harm, handed over part of the coconut trees to the new landlord. There were many such cases. We had to issue orders that no document would be registered unless it was put upon the notice board for seven days. In fact the power of registration was taken away from the Amins and the tehsildars made responsible for it.

There were many other methods by which the tenant became poorer and the landlord richer. This was the condition in all the islands as late as in 1962.

Division of Lands

This was the opportune moment to effect land reforms. Education

and developmental activities were opening the eyes of the people and contacts with the mainland had made them realise their rights. A large number of cases were coming into the courts every day. High Court judgements were giving the tenants a ray of hope. The Administration had started survey operations, and land records were being built up from available evidence and data. If a settlement could be arrived at between the landlords and the tenants, then a peaceful revolution would have been initiated with the consent of all parties.

Four main islands—Amini, Androth, Kavaratti and Agatti—had to be tackled. In the rest of the islands the problem was not so acute and in some cases it did not exist at all. For various reasons it was decided to tackle Amini first. Once they agreed that the lands should be divided between the landlord and the tenant, the problem was off the proportion in which to divide the property. As expected, the landlord as well as the tenant desired to keep the majority share for himself. It was finally agreed that one-fourth of the land would go to the landlord and three-fourths to the tenant. The story looks simple now. But it took days and days before the final decision was accepted unanimously. It was a happy occasion when almost at midnight in the dim light of a lantern, one by one the landlords and the tenants came and signed a formal agreement about the division of land. After signing they seemed to be happy and all joined at a midnight meal.

After Amini, the smaller island of Agatti was tackled and then Kavaratti where the opposition to the proposals was less tough and everyone agreed to the compromise. Androth continued to be difficult and it took a long time to convince the people there. But after many days they also agreed.

The more or less self-imposed land reforms not only changed the economic pattern of the society in the islands but also brought about social changes. The tenant no longer had to work for the landlord in his house nor had he to repair his boats or sail them to the mainland. The co-operative movement and the land reforms together completely changed the pattern of life in the islands.

The Debt Chain

Eighty per cent of the income of the islands came from the sale of dry coconuts (copra) on the mainland. The coconuts of the islands.

were of a very high quality, having a high percentage of oil content. A special variety of small coconuts was used in some parts of India for religious purposes. These fetched a very good price in the Calicut market. But the benefits never reached the cultivators. The tenant had to pluck the coconuts of the landlord, cut them, dry them and get them loaded for shipment to the mainland. At the same time he had to get the copra ready from his own trees as well. There were no weighing machines in the island and he had no idea of the weight of the copra that he had produced from his own trees or from those of his landlords.

The tenant did all the work and in addition he had to sail the boat to the mainland, doing all the work of the sailor while the landlord sat on the deck and watched all the proceedings. Some of the landlords were, however, good navigators. When the sailing boat reached Calicut beach or Mangalore harbour they were met by the traditional middlemen who waited like hawks on the beach. The landlord changed his clothes, trimmed his beard and was rowed across to the shore in the small lifeboat brought by the middleman, whose forefathers had been in this trade for a hundred years or more. In Calicut it was the monopoly of a few families. The landlord was taken to the middleman's godown. He was feasted, was taken care of, and offered new clothes. If his wife and children had accompanied him they were also looked after and many a present was passed on to them. The tenant unloaded the copra and took it to the middleman's godown. What transpired between the landlord-cum-boat-owner and the middleman about the copra deal, the tenant did not know. In the next few days consumer goods required for the whole year were purchased by the landlord and the tenant, for themselves and for those who were left behind in the islands and who had requested them to bring them all that they had wanted. Most of the time the shopping for the tenants was done by the middleman and his agents; rice, kerosene, matchboxes, sugar, tea, etc., all were purchased at exorbitant prices. The tenants were advanced a few rupees now and then by the landlord. They went about buying pieces of cloth for their little girls in the far off islands, a shirt for the boy who was waiting to go to school. The old women wanted medicine. They all wanted rice.

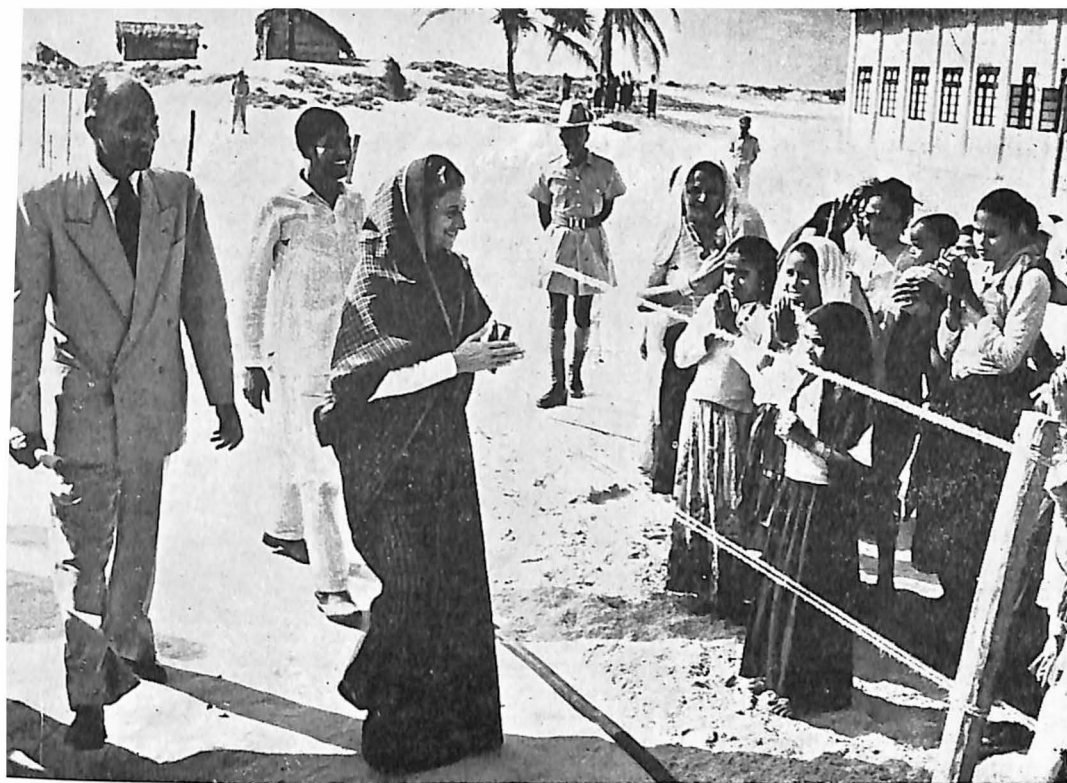
Many days later, the boat was loaded again, now with consumer goods bought from the mainland, to return to the islands. The land-

lord had collected a number of items to open a shop in a room of his house in the island. He knew what would happen during the monsoon. At the sails came up and they settled comfortably in the boat. they started thinking of the accounts. The landlord explained to the tenants the accounts and they listened in silence as they found that they had become indebted to the landlord. The income from the whole year's labour could not meet the expenses on purchases the tenants had made. The landlord himself could not make both ends meet. He started calculating the amount due to different families, his relations and friends who had asked him to take the copra to the mainland. He found that he was indebted to the middleman. Well ! he would come against next year. Thus the chain of indebtedness from the poorest cultivator to the landlord and to the middleman bound them to one another for generations.

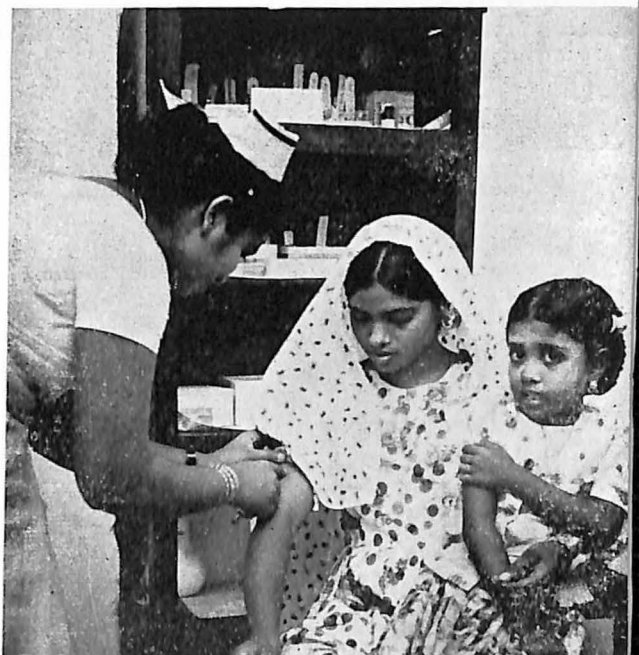
The landlord and the tenants normally reached the islands after several days but sometimes they did not reach at all. The storm blew them off and they were never heard of. The ocean swallowed all the labour, the money, the food and everything that was to last for a full year for a section of the people and with it the healthiest of their men, the pillars of many families. The loss was unbearable and irreparable for many summers to come.

To those who returned, it was a matter of joy, not the joy of those who had solved their economic problems, but the joy of reunion. During the monsoon the sailing boats would stop plying. The islands would be a closed world, without any post or telegraph office. As the monsoon blew harder, the housewife found that she had no more kerosene. There was no tea, no sugar and in a short time there would be no rice. One by one they would go to the landlord to borrow rice at exorbitant rates. Generally the tenant pawned his trees for 12 years at twenty-five for fifty paise per year per tree. The copra would from now onwards belong to the landlord. Within 12 years the tenant would have to borrow more during the monsoons and slowly and steadily he lost most of his coconut trees.

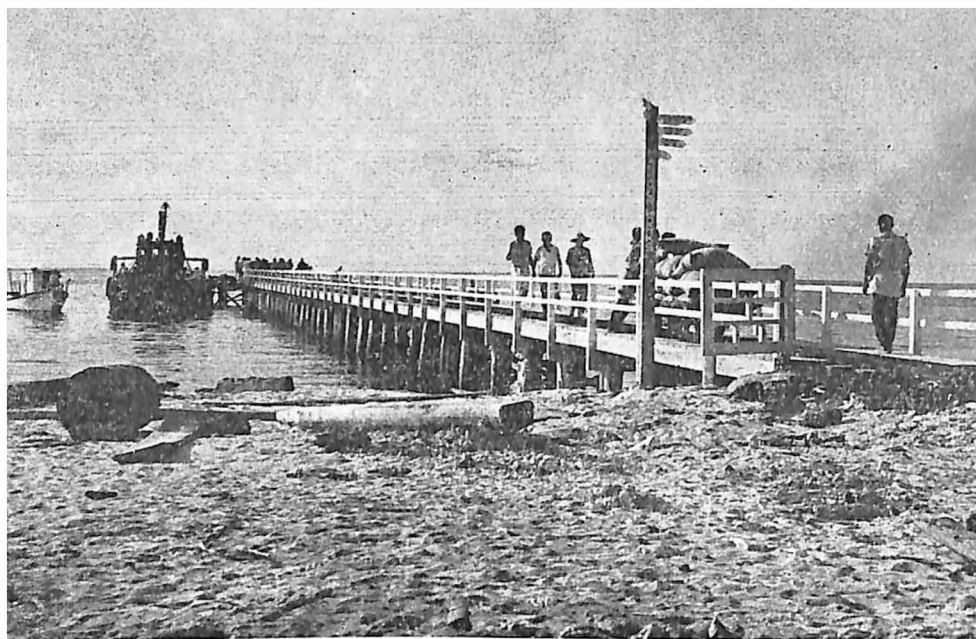
During the monsoon days a matchbox would cost about twenty-five paise. It was a luxury which few could afford, but rice they had to have. In certain islands like Chetlat some families had to live on grass and certain roots for a few months. They migrated to Mangalore



*The Prime Minister,
Shrimati Indira Gandhi,
being greeted by the
Amini islanders*

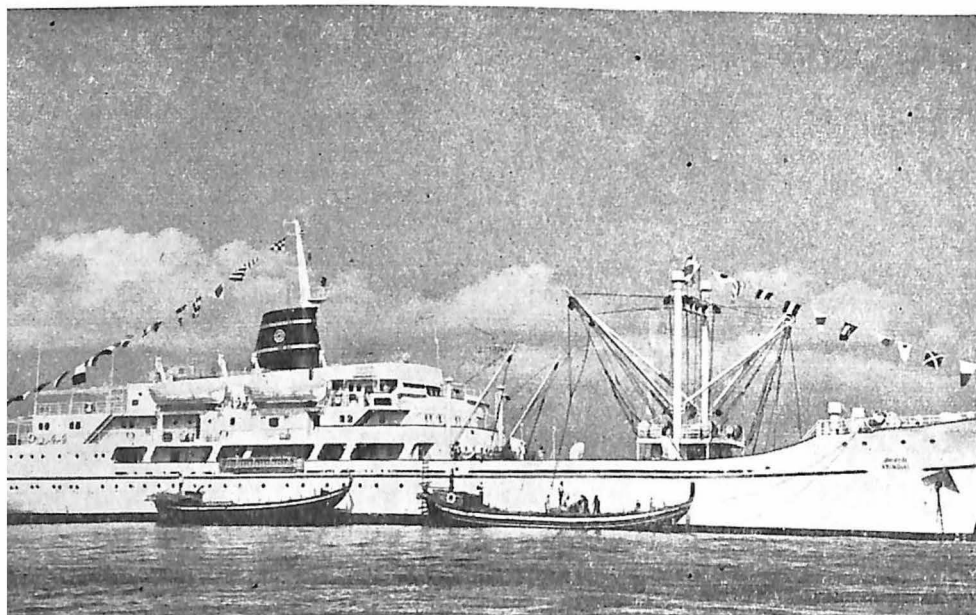


*Inside a primary health
centre, Minicoy island*



Jetty at Minicoy island

M. V. Amindivi provides an all-weather cargo-cum-passenger service between the mainland and the islands



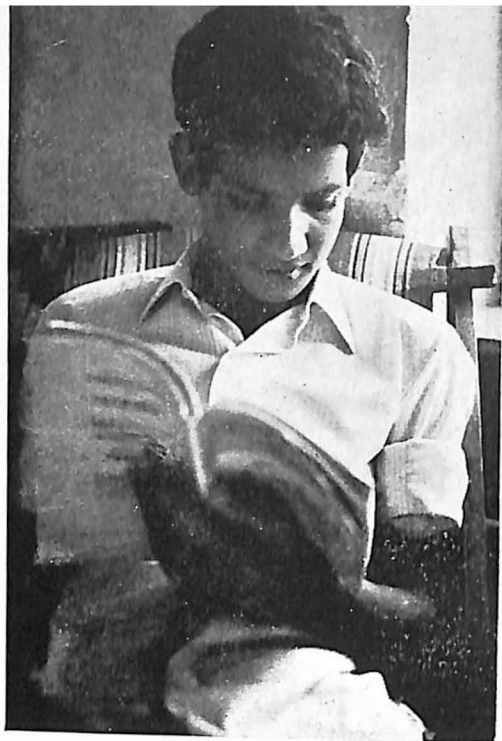


A village street scene from Minicoy island. Villages in the islands are known for their cleanliness



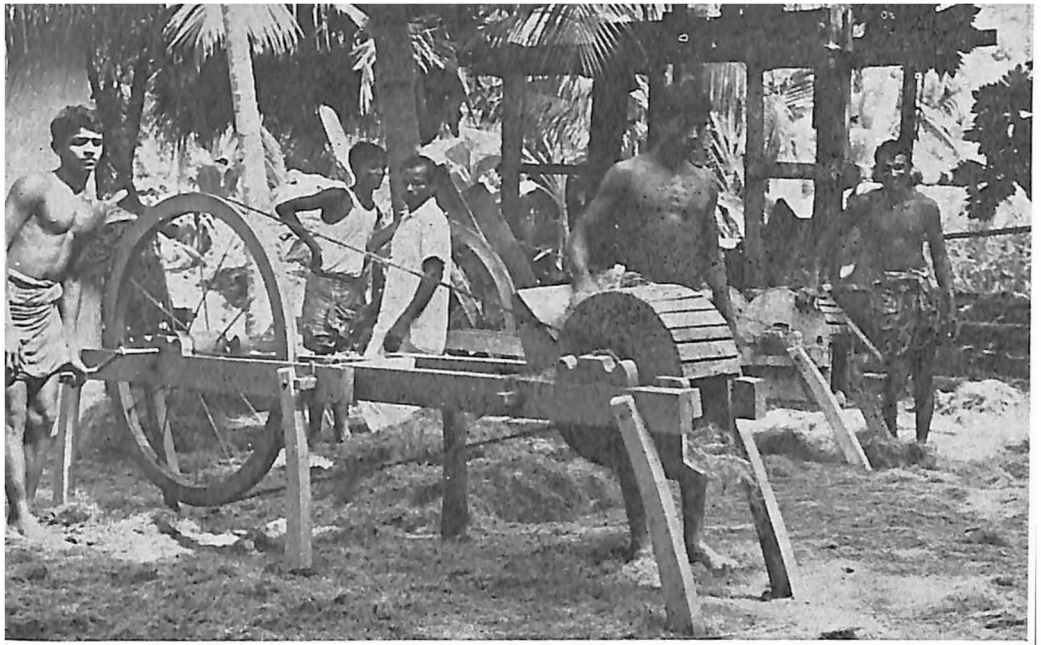
There are about sixty mosques in the Union Territory. The most important mosque is the Ujjara Mosque in Kavaratti island

Free school education is available to the students in the islands. The bright students like the one in the picture are given scholarships for higher education in the mainland colleges



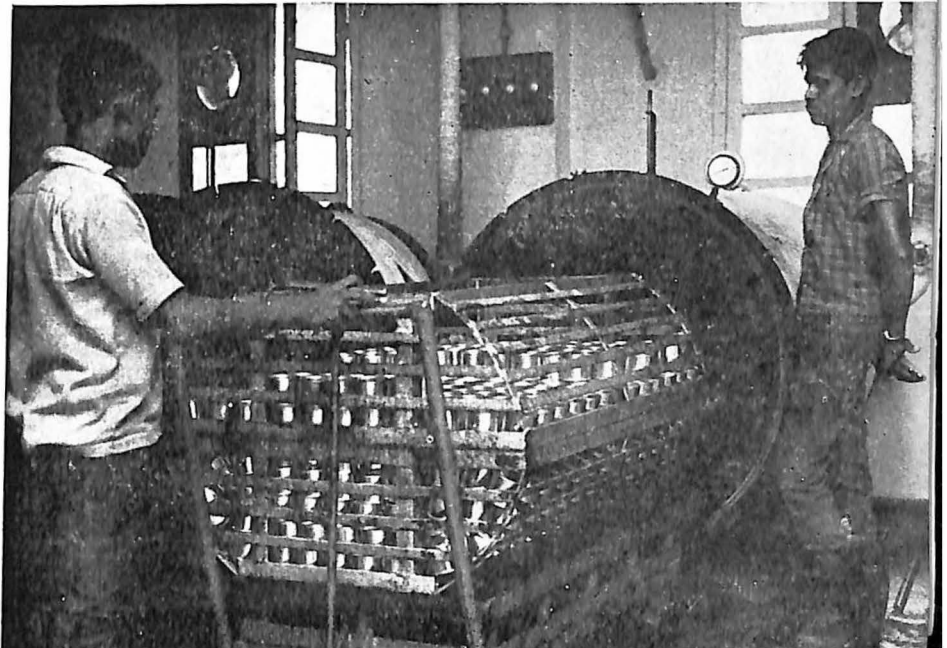
Girls of Minicoy forming up for a group dance





Fibre factory at Androth. Coir making is the principal industry in the Laccadive and Amindivi group of islands

Sterilisation of canned Tuna fish in a canning Factory—Canned Tuna has a big foreign market

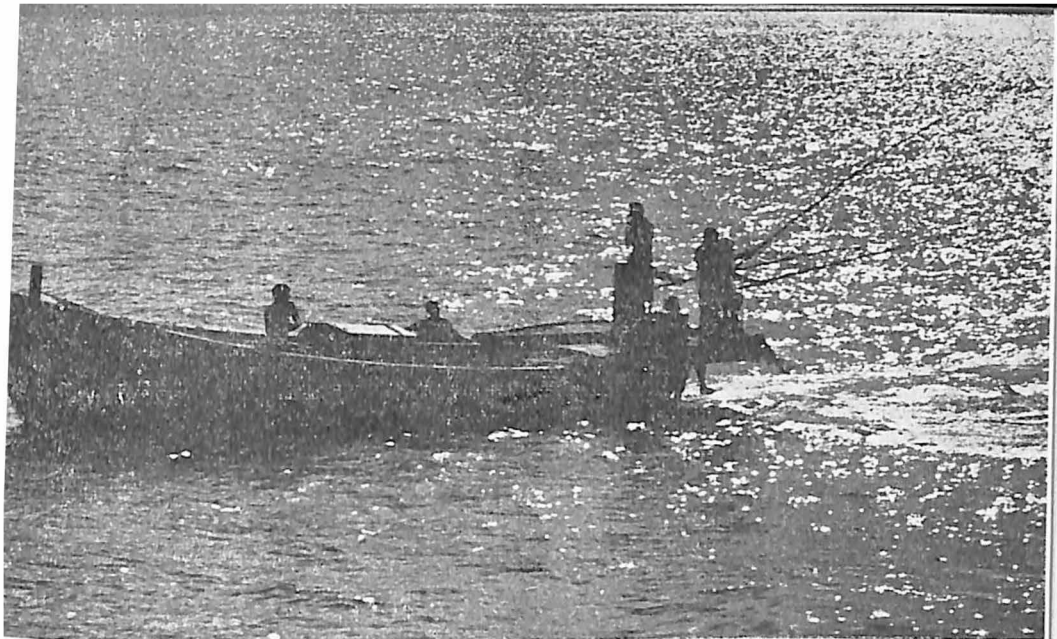




Removing bones from the fish before canning

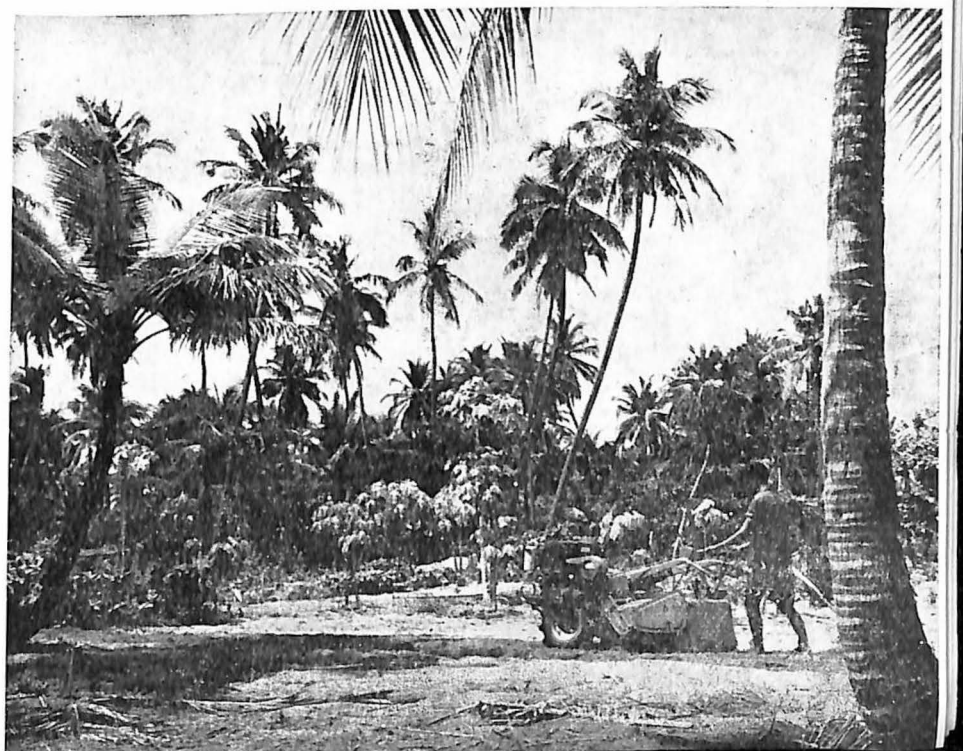


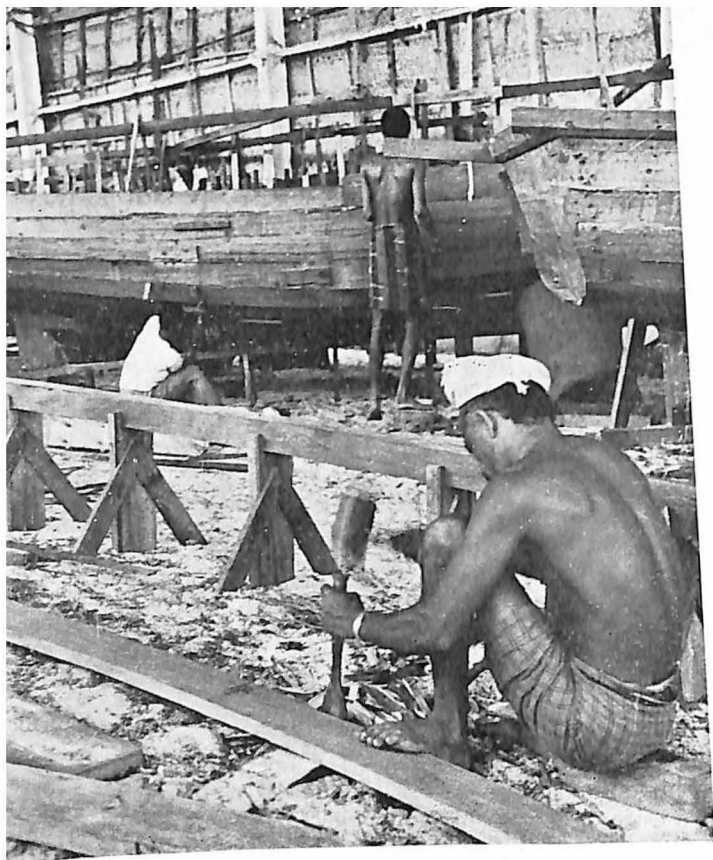
Co-operative supply and marketing society in Minicoy island. Co-operative movement has taken firm roots in the islands and practically the entire consumer sales are through the co-operatives



Tuna fishing—the world famous Tuna is the most important fish of the Laccadive group of islands

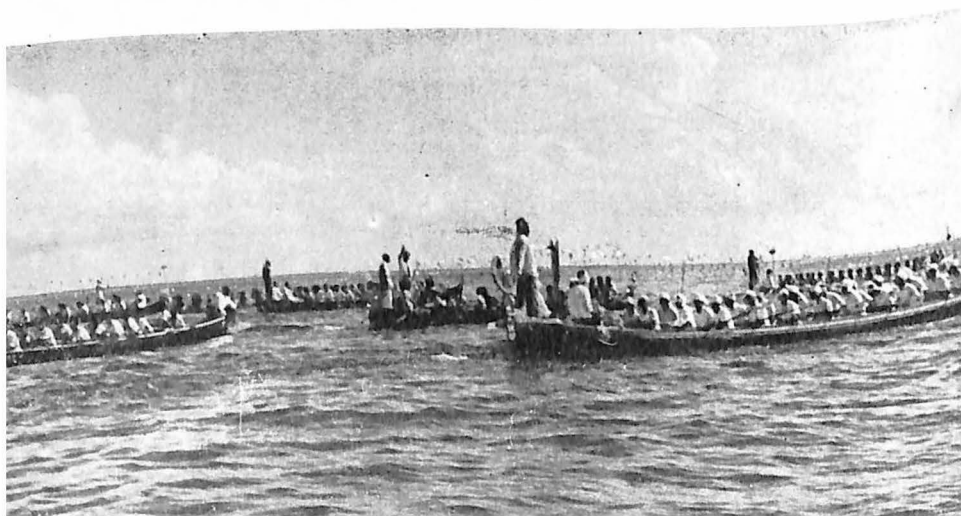
An agricultural demonstration unit, Minicoy island





*The boat building
yard at Kavaratti*

Minicoy islanders getting ready for a boat race



and worked as daily labourers. The only salvation was the coir monopoly.

A Typical Case

This story was unravelled, slowly and pathetically, through Kader Koya, the one-time landlord who had lost everything and had become almost a destitute. He had lost 2,000 coconut trees in the years that had passed. It was his story that started all of us to initiate plans for liquidating debts in the islands. It seemed a hard job but not unsurmountable. The people were very anxious for reforms.

At a public meeting in Kalpeni in the latter part of 1963, we asked the people for their views as to how to save Kader Koya. Here we must give full credit to the people of these islands, particularly of Kalpeni, who came out and said that they would all like to give him back his coconut trees if they got the money that he owed them. As true Muslims they took no interest on the loans. The money he owed was not much but the question was how to find that money. The co-operatives were not strong enough to lend him that amount. We had no co-operative bank and to get Government sanction for loans to the people would take a very long time. We had to solve the problem on the spot and the people were anxious to remove this great evil from amongst them. A simple formula was adopted. Two thousand coconut trees were mortgaged for Rs. 3,000 to various people. For example, there were 30 trees mortgaged to Kasmi Koya for Rs. 100. We auctioned these 30 trees for one year. The auction went up and we got Rs. 120 from one man. He paid the amount of Rs. 100 to Kasmi Koya and Rs. 20 to Kader Koya. Thus we disposed of all the 2,000 trees for one year to various people by auction and got as much as Rs. 3,500. Out of this, Rs. 3,000 were paid to the landlords and Rs. 500 to the co-operative society and Kader Koya was to get his ration for full one year. The three signatories to the simple document were Kader Koya, the person who had loaned the money and the person who now took the trees for one year. The Administrator signed as the witness. After the completion of the year he got his 2,000 trees back as his own. It took two days to solve the indebtedness of all the people of Kalpeni. During one of my visits to Kalpeni a year later, Kader Koya was the first to receive me with a bunch of tender

coconuts. Tears of joy and gratitude rolled down his sunken cheeks and his throat was so choked that no words could come out. The water of that tender coconut was the sweetest I ever had drunk in all my life.

Co-operation a Boon

The islands did not cultivate rice. Since 1956 when the Central Government took over the administration of the islands, rice was being supplied from the Government stocks. The islanders could purchase rice at the Government godown at Calicut for their consumption. On the basis of this, the office of the Administrator issued an order to the godown and invariably the middleman collected the rice. There were stories of this rice being sold in the Kerala market where the price of rice was higher than the godown price. There were allegations that the superior rice from the godown was replaced with inferior rice. And in certain stages of this transaction the middleman entirely took the benefit and in certain others he and the landlord shared it, but in all transactions the cultivator suffered.

The key to all these transactions was the sale of rice from Government stock. We started work with Androth island and the people most enthusiastically collected ten thousand rupees as share capital to form the first co-operative society. The children danced and sang as the people collected the money at a public meeting. Thus started an economic revolution in the islands. There were already some co-operative societies in the islands but they were only small consumer societies.

In doing this the boat-owner or the landlord was not uprooted. The tenants were asked to carry their produce in the landlord's boats as before. Initially we only arranged the copra to be weighed by the co-operative society and on behalf of the co-operative society to hand the copra over to the boat-owner. On the mainland the consignment was auctioned under Government supervision. By this time we had started every Sunday a short broadcast to the island through the Calicut Station of All India Radio. As each boat arrived we announced the amount of copra that was brought and the price at which it was sold. This had tremendous effect on the islanders who knew about the sale of their copra and the price that each family would get. Rice was taken to the islands in the same boat on behalf of the Government and freight was paid to the boat-owner.

Co-operative societies spread to all the islands. Within a year almost all the islanders were members of societies. Poor labourers contributed twenty-five to fifty paise of their daily earnings to accumulate and purchase a share of Rs. 10. The chairman of each society was an islander. Six out of the nine directors were islanders and the remaining three were nominated by the Government. One was an officer in Calicut who kept the Bank accounts. The secretary was a paid Government servant. He was paid well and was selected for his integrity, enthusiasm and initiative. Slowly the societies started to supply all kinds of consumer goods to the islanders. By the next monsoon there were very few private traders in any of these islands.

This was about ten years ago. Co-operative movement now has taken firm roots in the islands and the entire consumer sales are through co-operatives. There are labour co-operatives and weaving, hosiery, oil mills, bakery, boat building yards and many other activities are now conducted through co-operatives today.

5. FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

IT WAS towards the end of September 1961 that the first sailing vessel had arrived loaded with coconuts at Calicut. The north-east monsoon would soon set in rendering it extremely difficult for the vessel to ply in the rough ocean. In that sailing vessel came one of the Government officials. He was a plucky man, who had braved the seas for five years serving the islanders and improving their agricultural standard. Today, he arrived to be in time for the festival of Onam. He had been away for two seasons. He had dreamt of the flower carpets, the new clothes and the dancing and singing in the homes which would commence in a couple of days.

The sailing vessel, which was a small boat of 12 metres in length, had no amenities. Everyone had slept on the deck, in the sun and the pouring rain. It had taken them ten long days in the deep Arabian Sea. They had sighted land two days earlier, but a calm had set in and it was very slow progress in the last 48 hours. These were anxious days for the officer because he himself had an experience a couple of years ago when his vessel, having hit a calm, had drifted for a month in the ocean without sighting land. There have been cases of the sailing vessels sinking within sight of the land. The greatest fear of a sailor in the Arabian Sea is the calm that might hit it. Wind in any direction might take him somewhere, but in the calm he is drifted along with the current and knows not where he would reach or when.

From the sailing boat he made straight for his village with a few presents for his father, mother and other relations. When he arrived in his village, he was struck by an ominous silence. There was no one outside. The children were not playing or singing. No one greeted or ran to meet him. He went inside the house and found his mother lying in her bed, surrounded by womenfolk and children in complete silence. At the sight of him there was sobbing from the women and somebody quietly said that his father had died four months earlier.

A Closed World

This was the state of the islands up to 1961. There was no contact with the mainland for at least five to six months. There was no system

of regular postal service and the only way one could pass messages was through the sailing boats that came during the fair season to sell copra. There was only one wireless station at the island of Minicoy established many decades ago for passing out meteorological information.

To the people in the other islands, whether they were local inhabitants or Government servants from the mainland, the islands were a closed world. They knew nothing of what happened outside. There were no newspapers, no radios and no transistors. Every day was the same as every other day, except when somebody died or a child was born or the wind blew hard uprooting coconut trees. The children played on the breaches and even the smallest ones learnt to swim. The women spun coir out of the coconut yarn. When they had spun enough, they took it to the Amin and got some rice in exchange. The men climbed trees early morning to tap sweet toddy, which they brought down and boiled in large metal vessels with coral stones inside. Hours of boiling turned it into brown sugar. In fair weather, this was also taken all the way to the Kerala coast for sale. During the day, the men took their little boats into the lagoons and some even outside, and after hours of fishing with the most primitive tackles, they brought in a fish or two. It was just enough for the family and sometimes not even so. In the evening the children sat in the glowing light of the fire from the hearth waiting for their small meal. The little quantity of kerosene which the landlords had brought would serve for a few months, but the large percentage of people could not afford the luxury of kerosene for lighting lamps in their homes. The moon and the stars were their only source of light at night. By dusk they went to sleep on the beaches. They heaped the sand to serve as a pillow and spread a piece of cloth and made their bed.

Living in isolation for centuries, the people had got used to it. The smile and the laughter of the children, the songs that accompanied the dances at night, weddings and festivals—all these were signs of a happy and contented people. Their desires were few and hopes not high.

There were some schools, but only up to two, three or four classes, with one teacher. Few could read and write, but the religious schools went on and everyone of them could repeat the Koran. As the sun set, the call for prayers from the fifty or sixty mosques all over the island rent the air and even to those who came from outside the islands and professed other faiths, it was a solemn moment for a silent prayer.

British Days

During the days of the British, a ship was chartered once or twice a year to take inspecting officers around the islands. That was the only time when the islanders saw outsiders. The inspecting officers were senior sub-divisional officers of the Indian Civil Service. They were young Englishmen with an adventurous spirit who thought it an achievement to visit some of the islands at least once during their service career. Some of the more sympathetic officers visited the islands several times and had tried to do something for the people. But no one visited more than once a year. Sometimes, Indian officers too were deputed.

When the collector himself arrived, he was received ceremonially by the people and the officials, while the band that accompanied him played to mark the great occasion. He came in his imperial uniform, with his white headgear and plumes, and the people lined up in respect. He sat in the only Government building, a small room on the sea-shore, which was called the 'Kutcherry'. His main job was to receive petitions, hear appeals and settle cases. He heard a few and gave verdicts, all according to the translator's recommendations. He left the other cases to the Indian subordinates who accompanied him. The so-called Laccadives offices were inspected by the Indian subordinates. The entire inspection lasted a couple of hours and as soon as it was time for drinks and meals, the party returned to the ship. They dared not take any water on the islands not because of any religious prejudices but of fear of contamination. Coconut water they drank in plenty. Some of the more conscientious ones, however, returned after their meals to continue hearing appeal cases. Thus passed many many years of administration in isolation.

Colossal Ignorance

Fifteenth of August, 1947, was the day when India hoisted her flag of freedom. A new life had come into independent India but darkness and ignorance continued in these islands because no one there knew that India was free. It was only in October when the first sailing vessel arrived at Calicut and returned after a month that the islanders knew that India was free. Many of them could not get national flags to hoist on the Government buildings. Some tried to

make paper flags, but they did not get coloured paper. In 1948, it took them another three months after the event to learn that Mahatma Gandhi had been assassinated.

In the pre-1947 period, Madras Government used to depute medical officers to the islands. There were three or four dispensaries and it was compulsory that a subordinate medical officer should serve at least a year in the islands. Many tried to avoid this and the stories of those who went there read stranger than fiction. There were medical officers who had gone in the sailing boats and had been adrift in the ocean for 20 to 30 days. They had very little medicine, but their presence itself was a solace to the people who, otherwise, went to the religious leader and the village quack or magician to cure their ailments. In some islands, no doctors had visited for many many years. Even after Independence, there were very few doctors—I found four in 1961. I also found islands where the people had not seen medicines or a doctor throughout their life. In 1961, a small ship called *Sea Fox* was chartered. This made half a dozen trips in the fair season between December and March.

Thus, we found a people cut off from the world, denied modern facilities of medicine and education, with no communications with the mainland of India. A few Government officers stayed on in the islands and served them to the best of their ability. These Government servants comprised a teacher in each of the major islands, four doctors, two tehsildars and a couple of overseers of the P.W.D. The rest of the staff stayed with the Administrator in the mainland at Calicut. It was administration in absentia.

The Magic of Freedom

Within three years, the Vice-President of India inaugurated the new buildings of the Secretariat at the headquarters islands of Kavaratti. A hundred houses had been built for the staff. There were medical officers in every island. Schools came up everywhere and in the bigger islands there were high schools and boarding houses. Three ships plying regularly brought islands closer to the mainland. During the monsoon of 1964, the ships stopped plying only for 15 days. Wireless stations and post offices came up on every island and they saw

electric lights for the first time. (Out of the inhabited islands, eight have been electrified so far.)

Attempt at improving the communications between Calicut, where the Administrator had his headquarters, and the islands was started after 1956 when the islands became a Union Territory under the Government of India. A vessel named *Nelum* was chartered. On one of the very few trips that she ever took to the distant islands, her engine failed at mid-sea and she had to be brought back to the mainland with improvised sails. Finally, she had to be pulled to her destination by two island rowing boats. She never made another trip to the islands. She was replaced by another vessel called *Ashoka*. It also made very few trips to the islands due to the reported unreliability of her engines. It was in 1960 that *Sea Fox*, a very stable cargo ship, was chartered. But since the ship was received very late in the season, very few trips could be made to the islands. The average unloading at an island was only about five tonnes per days. In view of the fact that every item of building materials, like cement, timber, steel, C.I. sheets, hardware, etc., had to be brought from the mainland, the building programme was very slow. The annual development funds could not be fully spent because the P.W.D. could not get the material in the right place and at the right time. Owing to lack of materials, during six or seven months in the year, the people could do no work. By the end of the 1960-61 season, the trips of the *Sea Fox* were increased and the unloading facilities were improved.

Here, I would like to add a word on how unloading is done in an island. The ship has to remain one to six km. off the island. In the island of Androth, where there is no lagoon worth the name, the ship anchors about one km. from the shore. Similarly at Amini, half to one km. from the shore the ship could be anchored. In most of the other islands, the anchorages are far away and in many cases non-existent so that the ship is brought close to the reef of the lagoon and allowed to drift out to the sea while unloading is carried out. Sometimes, the ship would be as far away as eight to nine km. and the rowing boats would find it very hard to make the trips between the ship and the shores. Except in Minicoy, there were no lighthouses on the islands. There is a small one at Kiltan, established after a series of shipwrecks there. But these did not help the boats carrying

cargo from the ship to the islands through the entrances in the reefs of the lagoon after dusk.

Unloading was done in small island boats six to nine metres long which were constructed from coconut timber planks tied together by coconut fibre twine. The boats were not strong. It was very difficult to allow the boats to approach the ship in even slightly bad weather. Unloading of heavy materials in bad weather was well-nigh impossible. The island boatmen were not trained to get their boats near the ship to receive the loads from the cranes. *Sea Fox* had a fairly modern crane and it was easy to bring down the load on to the boats. But the operations were painfully slow. Gradually the tempo of unloading increased. The ship's crew with experience became adept at coming closer to the islands, the waters of which were not chartered. Better boats were built on the mainland and later in the islands for unloading cargo. Temporary lighthouses were constructed on the islands. Timber trestles, 24 to 30 metres tall, with a petromax lamp burning on the top helped the islanders to return to the lagoons even during dark nights. Thus, within two years the capacity of unloading went up from five to 255 tonnes per day. This helped the movement of goods to the islands and construction programmes went ahead rapidly.

When the monsoon was over in the year 1963, two ships were chartered—*Rajalaxmi* and *Dhanalaxmi*, 1,020 tonnes and 402 tonnes respectively. Special permission had to be obtained to carry more passengers in these ships. Movement of people and cargo became faster. At least twice a month a ship would touch an island. The novelty of a ship arriving at an island wore off.

The increase in the number of visiting ships to the islands improved the postal system. It was only in 1958 that post offices were opened in these islands. Till then, official and private post was sent through sailing vessels to the mainland agents. The postal facilities were restricted to a few transactions; there was no arrangement for such an essential service as that of money order. The post offices were kept open only during fair weather as there were no transport facilities during the monsoons. One of the educated islanders, very often the school teacher, functioned as the postmaster. A letter that had taken three or four months to arrive was received and read over by not only

the recipient but by all his neighbours and friends. The arrival of a letter was a great occasion.

Freed from Agents

By 1962, the postal facilities were improved. This decision was made after it was known how the so-called Minicoy agents at Cannanore exploited the people. In the island of Minicoy, which is the southernmost island, there were at least 1,500 young men who served in the various merchant navies of the world. To be a sailor far away from home was the ambition of every young boy there. In fact, it was difficult to find young men staying in those islands. These sailors earned a lot of money by serving in foreign ships and sent their earnings home through the Cannanore agents. It was reported that at times 30 to 40 per cent of the amount was taken by the agents as charges for sending the money to the island in the sailing boats. We had cases where a sum of Rs. 1,000 was reduced to Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 when it reached Minicoy.

The difficulty of the postal department in starting money order facilities could be appreciated. There were no treasuries and no banks. The Administration, however, came to their help. We had co-operative societies which had large amounts of cash available. This cash was sent to the headquarters at Calicut through the ships that visited the islands. We decided to hand over the cash from the co-operative society to the post offices and also to accept their cash through the co-operative societies. Before we could come to an understanding with the postal department, we managed to do it unofficially ourselves. All islanders who were outside the islands and wanted to send money orders were asked to send it to the Administrator's office. The money was received by an officer entrusted to do this work and he did this job as a labour of love. He sent a telegram through the wireless station to the island concerned to pay the money to the family. The co-operative societies paid it. Thus, a private system of money order facilities was started by the Administration with the approval of the postal department. This served the islands considerably. It was after promising this system that the people of Minicoy decided to start a co-operative society. Now they got the entire amount sent by their youngsters. This system was later regularised by the post office

who took over the postal system after the treasuries were opened in the islands.

Wireless Service

The movement between the islands and the mainland became quicker, safer and more frequent. A ship now reached the islands after every 21 days. This was made possible by using the Cochin harbour, instead of Calicut that was closed after May 15 till about September 15. In order to ensure safe passage we started a private system of meteorological reports. With the opening of wireless stations in all the islands, a wireless message was received every morning and evening about the direction of the wind, rainfall in the islands, etc. This helped the ship to start from Cochin when the weather was good in the islands. This was one factor that helped the islanders keep in contact with the mainland as long as possible throughout the year.

In 1956, when the islands became a Union Territory of the Central Government, there was only one wireless station at Minicoy to give weather reports to the Director General of Meteorology. But by 1962, eight more wireless stations were established and finally there was a wireless station in every island. But these wireless stations worked with Mangalore from where telegrams had to be sent to Calicut, 241 km. away, which was the headquarters of the Union Territory. By 1963, a wireless station was established at Calicut itself within the premises of the office. Thus the headquarters could directly get in touch with the islands.

Meanwhile, the Administration ordered a modern ship to be built at Calcutta, a passenger-cum-cargo ship. By 1966, it was plying between the islands and the mainland. Another modern ship capable of carrying more than a hundred passengers and 510 tonnes of cargo has been obtained from Yugoslavia.

Thus, the islander who did not know for three months that India had become independent on the 15th August, 1947, and who did not have for several months information about the assassination of the Father of the Nation, the officer who came home from the islands to pay respects to his father but found that he had died four months ago; all these people are today in hourly touch with the mainland through

the wireless. Their letters arrive regularly. The ships touch the islands once a week. The islands have been brought closer to the mainland.

Thirst for Knowledge

It was in the month of September 1954 that a 12 metre long sailing boat was getting ready to sail from the island of Agatti to Mangalore, a distance of 290 km. A consignment of copra, the first of the season, and a large amount of coir were being loaded to be taken to Mangalore for the Government monopoly godown to be exchanged for rice. A young girl of 13 walked up to the captain, who was engaged in shifting the load from the small boats into the big sailing vessel, and asked him whether he would take her to the mainland. The captain who did not take her seriously pushed her aside and asked her to go home. But she came back with her mother who this time pleaded with the captain to take her child to the mainland. The mother's eyes were wet with tears as she said : "This girl is very keen on going to school on the mainland. Our school gives education up to the fifth class only. She has just finished her fifth class but she wants to continue her studies and become a nurse." The little girl had evidently seen some nurses and had dreamt of becoming one herself. The old captain laughed it off. But as the time approached for sailing the mother became more and more insistent and finally the little girl and her younger brother were taken on board, both to join school on the mainland far far away in a strange place with people they had never seen before.

The girl, happy in her ignorance of the dangers ahead, fell asleep on the deck as the sails came up and the boat slowly moved out of the lagoon into the wide expanse of the ocean. By the time the sun had set she had woken up. For many days she and her younger brother were looked after by the kind crew of the vessel. As the sun came up the day became warmer and the little boy and girl watched the flying fish that came up and shrieked as the tortoises rolled over the surface of the water. The trolling lines that trailed behind the boat now and then brought in some fish to the great excitement of the crew. They were welcome addition to the meagre meal they had. On the sixth day land was sighted. It was a great day when a young member of

the crew climbed the mast and said, "Land." He came down and they got ready to enter the port and land on the beach of Mangalore, But to their dismay towards sunset the wind failed and in another hour, clouds came rushing from the eastern side. Before they knew what had happened a storm had burst out. They pulled down the sails, but the frail boat could not stand the storm and it split into two and everyone prayed to Allah and jumped into the deep sea. The little girl Rahmath was a strong swimmer.

The night was dark and it was pouring rain, as Rahmath tried to swim. Whither, she did not know. But the current obviously was taking her to the shore. It was about six km. from the harbour of Mangalore. Soon she managed to get a small plank that had broken out from the sailing boat. Claspig the wooden piece she found it easier to remain afloat as her tired limbs failed her. After that she did not remember what happened. In the morning she was picked up in an unconscious state on the beach and brought to a hospital. In a few days she was strong enough to be sent to Calicut to the headquarters of the Administrator. All the men had swum ashore including her little brother. Within a week Rahmath and her brother were put to school.

It was in 1962 that Rahmath and her brother came to me. She had got a high position in the pre-university examination. She had won many prizes. Now she wanted to join the Medical College. Belonging to the Scheduled Tribes, education was free for the islanders and admission to colleges was reserved for them every year and it was not difficult to get her admitted to the Warrangal Medical College and her brother to the Agricultural College at Trivandrum. A year later she brought her annual marks that showed that she had done very well at the college. Today she is the first lady doctor from the islands working in one of the islands.

This is the type of young men and women for whom the Government of India is spending a lot of money on education. During the days of the British there were very few schools in the islands. Till 1875, there were no schools at all. They had classes to learn the Koran. In 1877, a few experimental schools were started by the Government in some islands. But one by one they were closed. In

1878, two primary schools were started in Kavaratti and Agatti. By 1893, a few single-teacher schools existed on many of the islands but the number of students never rose to more than 20.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the inspecting officers insisted on schools being established. Consequently single-teacher schools, where the teachers were paid according to the passes obtained, were started. In 1945, standard VI was opened in the schools of the three islands of Kalpeni, Androth and Agatti. But they were all discontinued in 1951 and three-class elementary schools functioned instead. In 1951, 353 pupils went to schools in all the islands. In 1957, five small islands got their first primary schools; four bigger islands got middle schools; four of them girls' primary schools and the first high school at Amini.

Cent Per Cent Attendance

Education was completely free. The students were supplied with books, writing materials, and mid-day meals. There were very good laboratories and reading rooms. After 1961, upper primary schools with the latest equipment were started in every island. By 1965, it was most gratifying to see that in most of the islands, particularly Kalpeni and Agatti, 100 per cent of the boys and girls were attending schools. If Minicoy is not included, 95 per cent of the children of school-going age were attending schools. For an area inhabited by backward people this can be a record. There were a dozen boys in medical colleges in the mainland and an equal number of them in agricultural and engineering colleges.

Many modern methods were initiated in the education system of the islands. The schools tried to keep up the traditions of the islands. In an island, community life is the basis of the society. When a boat arrived from the mainland, the entire community gathered and helped it to be anchored or pulled up to the shore. Unloading was a community affair. When the monsoons hit the islands all the boats were hauled up by the community as a whole. But we found that as the children got educated, they along with their teachers stood watching these activities and moved further and further away from the social life of the islands. The difference was felt within one year. Instructions were issued that on all such occasions where the whole com-

munity was required to work, schools would be closed and students and teachers would join in the islands activities. The intention was to give the best of modern education without losing sight of the traditional moral and social values; to grasp all that was good in the new and yet to preserve the best of the old.

When the high schools were opened we found that playgrounds were not available. Hundreds of valuable coconut trees had to be cut down to get a decent football ground. We decided to concentrate on such games as volleyball and basketball which did not need a large playground and water polo which could be played in the lagoon. The entire physical and cultural activities of the islanders were changed. A swimming coach from A.I.C.S., Patiala, trained the boys in water polo.

The National Cadet Corps organisation was started in the islands as soon as the high schools opened. In 1963, the first batch went for their camp to Kerala and it was a great day for us when Abdulla of Kavaratti was declared the best cadet and the island high school troop was adjudged the best in the whole of Kerala centre.

We had a volleyball coach too from the A.I.C.S. who, after two seasons of coaching, took the boys on a tour of Kerala.

The kindergarten schools are a pride of the islands. The latest furniture, toys, books and models are available to the children of the islanders.

There are no animals in the islands except a few cows and goats. A little boy once asked me how big an elephant was. It was difficult to take all the children to a zoo on the mainland or to bring an elephant to the island. Even though some tours of students were arranged, very few could get a chance to visit the mainland. So it was decided to have a model zoo in each school. Forests and animals in their living conditions made out of papier mache was set up in all schools. This was an education not only to the children but to their parents also. Many of them had never seen even a dog!

In establishing the schools, the finest science equipment was made available. The laboratories of the schools in Kalpeni and Amini can serve as models for any high school. Teaching of English was a little difficult. But the children were very keen on learning English. We brought BBC records and taught English through them. Teachers

had to go through the course first before they could even use them. Hindi was compulsory. Hostels were constructed in the high schools where children had to come from other islands. Boarding and lodging were free, but we made them do all the work that they would otherwise do in their own homes. They had to wash their clothes, serve food and help in cooking, marketing and running the hostel. They had their own vegetable gardens on which they worked during their leisure hours.

The high schools were equipped with cinema projectors. Open-air theatres and stages were constructed and the development of histrionic talents of the children was encouraged. Apart from bringing in land reforms and removing indebtedness, attempts were made to remove caste distinction, by introducing folk dances in the schools which were so far confined to the so-called lower classes. With these folk dances forming a part of the school curriculum, every child irrespective of the caste of the family very happily joined in. His father or uncle could not have dreamt of doing it.

At present there are four high schools, one higher secondary school and 35 junior schools in the islands. Scholarships and free boarding and lodging are provided for those who go to the colleges in the mainland.

6. STRANGE EXPERIENCES

MAJOR ALCOCK in his book *A Naturalist in Indian Seas* gives the following description about Pitti island : "From the ship it looked like a barren sand bank and nothing more, but as our landing party drew near, the boat suddenly became enveloped in a dense cloud of shrieking sea birds. On landing we found every foot of the ground above high water mark literally carpeted with young terns of two species, many living and nearly full-fledged, many dead and rotting and many reduced to clean picked skeletons with only the quills and feathers still sticking to the wings and bones. There were, no traces of nests or of any materials out of which nests could have been made, so that the parent birds must have laid and hatched their eggs on the bare sand. We soon discovered that the one great cause of the wholesale destruction of young birds was the voracity of the swarms of large hermit crabs (*coenobita*), for again and again we found recently killed birds, in all the beauty of their first speckled plumage, being torn to pieces by a writhing pack of these ghastly crustaceans."

Pitti lies 24 km. north-west of Kavaratti. It consists of reef with a sand bank at its southern end. The island does not contain even a blade of grass or any other vegetation. To attract the attention of mariners a pile of stones about 3 metres high was raised on this island in 1880. Landing is very difficult as there are heavy breakers and the approach is rocky so that boats cannot go very near. In fact, there is only one approach for boats on the northern side.

It was May 1962. In another few days monsoon would be on us. We were determined to get on the Pitti island. I was accompanied by two young officers and some islanders. On nearing the island we found that it was impossible to take the motor boat closer. We left the motor boat and got into the small boat we were towing and tried to row nearer. But that also was not possible. Finally, one by one all of us jumped into the sea and swam ashore. A couple of the islanders with a big copper vessel between them were swimming

with one hand and holding the vessel with the other. I too jumped into the sea. Going towards the shore was easy as huge waves carried us faster than we had thought. Only when I reached the shore did the islanders realise that I was also with them.

Eggs, Eggs Everywhere

Meanwhile the islanders ran hither and thither and started collecting the eggs. Without worrying about our return, we all got so much interested in the birds, the eggs and the lonely island of white sand in the middle of the blue ocean. There were two types of birds which were identified later as sooty terns and noddies. The little ones sat there and they would not even fly away; not used to human beings, they would just jump from one place to another, allowing us to walk across. It was very difficult to avoid stamping on small birds. Eggs were lying everywhere in the sand. They were beautiful with brown and grey spots on them. We saw hermit crabs coming up from the rocks and carrying away the eggs. I did not see them eating any of the eggs, but this is what they do, we were told. We saw empty shells lying about and the carcasses of little birds killed by crabs which crowded all over the island. As we ran from one corner of the island to the other, the bigger birds flew over our heads in large flocks. There seemed to be lakhs and lakhs of birds. On the beach there were beautiful rocks and the fish came swimming very close to the shore. They were not afraid as they were rarely caught.

Now we had to get back. I had two islanders on either side and we dived as a wave rose high. But in a moment, we were swept back to the shore and were rolling up the beach. I got bruised. We could not get past the initial big waves. Some of the islanders were swimming against the current and the waves. At this stage, one of the islanders suggested that he would swim up to the boat and bring a life belt tied to a rope. We sat and waited and it was a wonderful sight to see this brave young man battling against the waves, moving slowly and slowly towards our motor boat. He tied a rope to the motor boat and swam back with the life belt tied to the other end. This made things easier. We had just to hold on to the life belt and the people in the motor boat pulled us slowly into the boat. This was

all very exciting experience to feel that we were the first officers of the Government to visit this wonderful little island in the middle of the ocean.

We went to the island many times during the next seasons. Sometimes, it was possible to beach a boat, sometimes not. One of our trips was with two of the naturalists from Bombay who had come to identify the birds and to ring them. Both were non-swimmers who got a good ducking before they reached the shore.

Byramgore was the name of another island or rather a large sand bank, far to the north of the northernmost island of Chetlat.

Cherbaniani or Baliya Paniyam is the northernmost reef of the Laccadives. It is situated north-eastward from Byramgore reef and is separated by a very deep channel. In 1894, it was reported that at the southern end of the reef there were islets and some sand banks on its eastern and northern sides, but the greater part of the barrier reef is only visible in low water.

Mr. A. O. Hume who visited this atoll in February 1885, found the noddy and the sooty tern breeding, but Alcock in October 1891 could not even find so much as an egg shell. Alcock described the atoll as "an emerald disk girdled by a ring of snow-white foam." The emerald disk was the lagoon and the white that encircled it was the surf breaking upon the submerged atoll. This surf, which only the turtles seem to enjoy makes landing a matter of much inconvenience at all times. Alcock found the place desolate. "Almost all the coral that I saw was dead. Not a sign of a plant or even of a cast up seed or nut was visible, and the only animals to be seen, besides a flock of sand pipers and an occasional bosun bird, were hermit crabs of the genus *coenobita* and *grapsois* and crabs of the genera *grapsus* and *ocypoda*. Even the lagoon supported but little life, but there were plenty of seaweeds in it."

Many Shipwrecks

Byramgore reef and Cheriyanani reef are sunken reefs except for the south-eastern point which is seen during low tide. In the year 1828, it is reported, the ship *Byramgore* bound from China to Bombay laden with silver, silk, etc., was lost on this reef to which she has given her name.

In 1844, *Ceylon* bound from England to Bombay laden with food-stuff, piece-goods, cutlery, etc., was wrecked on the Cherbaniani reef. Sir Robinson who salvaged this ship instituted a charity fund. In 1854, *Homidy*, an Arab ship from Bombay to Mauritius, was wrecked on the Byramgore reef. In 1858, *Alchemist*, bound from England to Bombay, and *Sultan* bound for Bombay were both wrecked on the same reef. In 1865, *Lord Brougham* was wrecked on Cherbaniani and *Abel Tasman*, a Dutch ship, on Byramgore. Most of the wrecks occurred at the end of the fair season, in the beginning of the south-west monsoon.

No wrecks have been recorded on these reefs since 1865 which synchronises with the opening of the Suez Canal and the consequent change in the international trade route.

In 1962, we visited Byramgore. It was 25 km. north of Chetlat and was not properly marked on the map. In our ship *Dhanalaxmi* we set course. According to our calculation, we were supposed to reach by about four in the afternoon. We had taken a small island boat on the deck with four good island swimmers who said they had been to this sand bank for fishing many years ago. After an exciting trip, having missed the island completely we reached there next evening by about four. We lowered our boat with the four islanders, the captain of the ship and the other officers and rowed on to the sand bank. It was a beautiful island, with no trees on it but with a very large blue lagoon in the middle. We walked along the sand bank and found a number of small birds which had just been hatched, the same kind of birds we had seen on Pitti. The bigger birds now tried to save them from us. It was a wonderful sight to see the parent birds flying low over our heads towards the little ones, and leading them away from us. Some peculiar sounds were made by them as they flew over the little ones which ran faster and faster in small groups towards the cliff. We did not chase them, but quietly watched to see what instinct could do. The parent birds took them away from us and finally reached the edge of the sands. Finding that we were approaching them closer, they turned back, circled and flew over the bank and at some unknown signal from the parent birds, the little ones jumped into the water, perhaps for the first time. They were paddling, when we left them.

We tried to cover as much of the island as possible in the couple of hours at our disposal. This island had never been visited by anyone except Alcock, and so, it had never been properly surveyed. From what we could see, millions of tonnes of calcium carbonate are available there.

Suheli Par consists of a barrier reef, enclosing a lagoon in which lie two uninhabited islands known as Cheriyakara and Valiyakara. Both islands are very low, perhaps little more than a metre above high water mark. Both appear to be very fertile but the sandstone substratum is absent and good water is, therefore, not available. Like Bangaram, etc., these islets are sand banks formed in the middle of the lagoon.

Perhaps the first attempt at colonising Suheli was made by Sir W. Robinson in 1848. He founded a colony of 200 persons belonging to Kalpeni and Androth left destitute by the great storm of 1847. But as these islands gradually recovered from the effects of the storm these people returned to their homes. Further attempts were made by Winterbotham in 1876.

In 1880, Brodie reported that the soil of Suheli appeared to be very fertile. It does not contain any screwpine at all like other islands. In the centre of Valiyakara there are large trees of various kinds, the most common being a species of banyan (*Ficus Indicus*). At the eastern and western extremities the jungle becomes smaller and is composed of a species of rhododendron locally known as Kanni. On the north the shore is composed of coral rock, and the vegetation overhangs the water.

Giant Crabs

Here also, many a shipwreck had taken place. When we visited the island the ship had to be left far out at sea and the motor boat took us into the lagoon. The island fishermen we had taken from Kavaratti knew their way about as they had come there for fishing many times. We swam ashore to this uninhabited island and in our swimming costumes started reconnoitring the islands. There were beautiful shells lying about as no one interested in them had visited these islands. In one corner, we saw some tyres of lorries and cars lying on the shore. Then the oldest man among the islanders told us the

story of a big ship that had foundered on the rocks during the war. The ship was still there with many trucks and lorries aboard and next day when the tide was low, the tops of the lorries were clearly visible.

Then, when we put out our camp cots to rest for the night, we saw the most amazing sight. The entire beach was swarming with huge crabs that raised themselves up on their legs, and two big paws came out of their heads with eyes which served them almost like light houses. They could move forward, backward and sideways. They started chasing us. It was difficult to find a place to sleep as they climbed on anything. We were almost desperate not knowing how we could spend the night with thousands of crabs all around us. Meanwhile, the beautiful sea was illuminated by phosphorescent light. The waves as they reached the highest point on the shore left one line of green irradiance. As we washed our feet, these luminous things would stick on to the feet. In the darkness the islanders would get into the water and the luminous insects would cover their body and they would look like illuminated ghosts. The islanders had kept their secret how to tackle the crabs. Later they showed us how they slept on the shores. They took the small strips of the leaves of coconut trees and stuck them on the ground in a line near the place where they were sleeping. In fact with these they made a boundary wall for their bed. As the crabs came near and touched these leaves, they ran back and thus the person sleeping inside was saved unless one of the coconut leaves fell down leaving a gap for a clever crab to come in. We all did the same and had a pleasant night.

Early morning we left this most beautiful uninhabited island which had plenty of vegetation and a huge ship showing off its wares buried close to the shore.

7. UNIQUE MINICOY

MARCO POLO in his 13th century travel diary speaks of a female island in the Indian Ocean. It was perhaps this island. It is apparently entirely inhabited by women. The men come to this island only during the months of March, April and May. The people are all baptised Christians but follow the ordinances of the Old Testament. They find on this island very fine ambergris. They live on fish, milk and rice. They are capital fishermen, and catch a great quantity of fine large sea fish. They dry the fish so that all the year they have plenty of food and also enough to sell to the traders who go there.

When Winterbotham visited this island in 1876 he found that there were 1,179 women and only 351 men. The men were mostly the old and the infirm who could not pursue any work. There were also some fishermen. The other men were absent on their voyages. The people preserved certain strange customs which were being practised before Christ. They isolated people suffering from communicable diseases. Community punishment in the form of public whipping was given to people committing adultery.

Though Sir Robinson did not visit the island he has left us a description of the Minicoy trade. "These active merchants and sailors carry on a considerable carrier trade from which their profits are good. Their boats which are superior to the Laccadive craft leave the island about August each year, with their cargoes of coir, nuts, jaggery and dried fish, etc., and proceed to the Maldives and Ceylon where the dried fish is exchanged for other articles fitted for the Calcutta market. Further they proceed with coir, etc., and disposing of them, supply themselves with rice in the cheap markets of the Araccan coast. They retain sufficient rice for home consumption and dispose of the rest in Ceylon and Maldives."

In 1908, Mr. Ellis lamented that the quaintly rigged Minicoy vessels would soon be things of the past. In that year there were only two vessels on the Bengal trade and one of these had just returned damaged having been able to proceed only as far as Galle. The islanders had

almost ceased to look across the seas for wealth and had started concentrating on 'Mas' fisheries ('Mas' is processed hard, dry fish).

'Mas' Fishing

Ellis describes the lure and excitement of 'Mas' fishing, and the deft hands that work miracles with the rods. The live-bait is caught in the lagoon and kept in two wells one just forward and the other just aft of the mast. "The rods used are six feet bamboos with a line of the same length and a barbless iron hook kept freshly silvered with lead, and the shank made broad flat and curved to resemble as far as possible a small fish. When the boat gets into the shoal every available hand seizes a rod. They crowd the platform overhanging the stern. The bailer hurls the live-bait right and left among the fish. Two men on each side of the stern keep up a continuous splashing with a long wooden ladle, while the others dash their hooks among the shoal and as soon as they get a bite hand out the fish by the main force, swing it on board and with a deft dip of the rod, all in one motion, unhook it and send it slithering between their legs down the platform into the well of the boat." We found the same methods being used. Our contribution has only been the introduction of mechanised boats.

The 'Mas' annually fetches the islanders about Rs. 5 lakhs on an average. But due to lack of organisation on their part in olden days the benefit did not accrue to the islanders. They were exploited by the mainland merchants in marketing their produce. With the use of mechanised boats and modern methods since 1962 the catches have increased, and with the formation of a co-operative society in the island, the people are getting a fair price for their produce and also consumer goods at a reasonable price. This has considerably benefited them economically.

Minicoy has now a twenty-bed hospital started in 1960 with two medical officers. It has a senior basic school and two junior basic schools, of which one is exclusively for girls. About 700 students attend these schools. Electricity was introduced into this island in 1962.

In view of its strategic location in the Arabian Sea, Minicoy has a lighthouse since 1885. The wireless station was opened in 1944.

Minicoy has also a number of scientific research stations like the Pilot Balloon Observatory, the Radio Zone Ravine Observatory and the Tidal Observatory.

Normally a ship is scheduled to reach an island early morning. It is considered safe to have a whole day ahead for the captain in case the ship had drifted off its course. With a number of islands without a lighthouse and having unchartered water around and with a ring of black reef on the western side, it was not safe to approach Minicoy at night.

Thus it was that we approached the Minicoy island in the morning of a clear day. The dark green semi-circle with its white border embracing the turquoise lagoon was a most wonderful sight. The 49 metre lighthouse near the southern tip stood up most unnaturally in the otherwise natural surroundings. Through the binoculars one could see the snake boats being towed by smaller sailing boats. It took about an hour for the narrow sleek, race boats to reach the ship.

Well-disciplined

Normally in all the other islands when boats arrive alongside the ship, there is utter confusion. There is noise like hell let loose. Every boat tries to get near the gangway first, and in the process, they collide, the men curse, some fall into the sea, all shouting at the same time. The captain of the ship, whose vocabulary is much more than in any well-known dictionary, shouts back. Ropes that have reached the deck are thrown back hitting the people as they gesticulate. Meanwhile the passengers in the ship have started lowering the boxes and even children along the side into the waiting boats. A ship was a rare sight—receipt of a letter, a friend or a brother returning to the islands, a sick relation to be taken to the mainland, were rare happenings which broke the dull monotony of the islands and which, therefore, provoked all the enthusiasm and accompanying confusion.

But Minicoy was different. The boats were clean, beautifully painted. The healthy bare-bodied youngsters stood at their posts silently. Each boat fell into line, queuing up to take their turn. There was order, calm, discipline, patience and cleanliness in appearance. Except for the trained armed forces of India, there could not be any set of young men in India who could match those of Minicoy for their

discipline, obedience to their leader and efficiency in their profession.

We got down. There was no fuss. But discipline had its coldness. We got into the most decorated boat and as we glided alongside the other boats the men stared at us. There was no smile, no waving; everyone was keen on his part of the job and we appeared to be strangers. Otherwise there was beauty, colour, efficiency and orderliness.

As we approached the jetty we could see a splash of red colour all over the snow-white beach against the backdrop of the green coconut trees. In this island the women dress alike, in the same colour. They wear a long gown going right down to the ankles. The cloth is similar except for the richer classes who wear silken ones of the same colour. They wear a black short veil to cover their heads but not the faces. The entire island seemed to have turned up with young boys with their bare body and snow-white dhotis. The grown-up boys and men wear long black trousers tight at the ankles and a short dhoti on top of it folded at the knees.

A visit to the island of Minicoy is most interesting as it is very different in many ways from all the other islands of this Union Territory. The people are divided into four social classes or castes in spite of the fact that they are all Muslims. The Manikfans are the rich and the higher class in the island. The Thakrus and Thakrufans come next in order and the workers are known as Raveries. Inter-marriage between the first two and the last two are allowed but not among all of them. Only the women of the Manikfan caste can wear gold ornaments. Thakrufans also can use gold ornaments in a restricted way; they cannot wear gold earrings. Women of the third caste wear only silver ornaments while the Raveries wear threads and copper ornaments.

Unusual Customs

The people are divided into nine villages called Attiries, and unlike other islands, they live close together, houses being built almost wall to wall. The streets and compounds are kept scrupulously clean. It is the responsibility of the entire village to keep the place clean. Youngsters are specially deputed for the work. All smallpox cases are segregated to the small island called Viringelli on the southern tip of

the main island. Any leprosy patient is immediately moved to the northernmost area, about three kilometers from the villages. Public opinion is so strong that no one escapes from there. Today the leprosy patients settlement is a beautiful village just like any other Minicoy village. The Government has taken over the maintenance of the patients and the village. Each patient has a hut just like the one he had in his village. The beds, the furniture, everything is like those in his own house. The Government has built a small mosque; pipe water supply has been given with special kind of taps to enable the patients to use it easily. There is a clinic which is visited by the island medical officer every day. There are chicken runs, goats, vegetable garden, small boats and fishing tackle available to those who can use them. The patients are fed and clothed by the Government. When Dr. Zakir Husain (the then Vice-President) visited the patients, he remarked : "This looks like an ideal camp or the aged." I found these unfortunate people happy and contented. When the medical officer declared that a patient was free from infection, he was readily accepted back by the island society.

There is no child marriage in Minicoy, while in the rest of the islands it is a curse. Boys below 20 or girls below 16 do not usually marry. They are strict monogamists and divorces are quite uncommon. This is in complete contrast to the customs of the other islands.

The most interesting and unusual custom is the system of inheritance. No male has any claim to a house. The ownership vests in the women of the family. Men stay in their own houses till they marry. After marriage the man moves into his wife's house and takes his wife's family name.

The village organisation and discipline is very elaborate and strict. Each village or Attiri has its elected leader, 'Moopan', and the women have their leader, 'Moopathi'. Even the children have their own leader. There is a second 'Moopan' in the Attiri who keeps the village accounts. The men have their own club house where they have their meetings, feasts, elections, etc. All the moveable property jointly owned by the village is neatly arranged in the club house. They have their own snake boats, used for boat races and also for pulling cargo boats or sailing boats out to sea beyond the lagoon. These boats are beauti-

fully painted and maintained with care. The village has its own boat house and when not in use the boats are wrapped in cloth to avoid dust and sand. At one time the village maintained its own dancing troupe with special costumes. But a few years ago there was a movement to stop all dances. They are now being revived when each year a troupe is invited to Delhi to attend the Republic Day parade. The dress of the dancer consists of a pair of coloured silk trousers cut very wide at the feet, a white cloth with a red border tied round the waist almost hanging down to the ankles, and scarlet waist strings with long beaded tassels and a mother-of-pearl pocket knife. The upper body is bare.

Expert Sailors

Most of the men work in ships all over the world and are away for two or three years at a time. They come on long leave. They bring foreign goods and one sees plenty of such goods in each house. When fishing season is bad they start selling them. Due to isolation and infrequent visit of officials, they never dreamt of requesting the Government for any help. In 1962-63, we found that Tuna fishing was very poor. During one of our frequent visits to the islands, we saw that the people had started selling their household goods. This was a sign that they were really badly off. We got a sanction for gratuitous relief and announced that free rice would be issued to the needy. The Moopans or the headmen of all villages formed themselves into a committee and produced a list of people to whom rice should be given free, another list of those to whom it should be sold at half the price and a third list of those who would pay quarter of the price. As soon as the situation eased, the leaders came to us and asked us to stop the issue of gratuitous relief. We could not spend all the money sanctioned by the Government.

On the other hand, they were very orthodox and conservative. Only the Moopans approached the officers. No individual complaint or petition was allowed. The self-imposed discipline made administration very easy. But at the back one could feel the centuries-old exploitation going on.

They first opposed the opening of co-operative societies. The opposition came mostly from the village shopkeepers. But they stayed

in the background and only the Moopans talked to us. They gave no reason but just refused to have a co-operative society. Most of these shopkeepers were from the mainland. Some of them had settled and married in the island long ago. They had their principals in Cannanore. They bought dried Tuna wholesale and took it to Cannanore. This was sent to Sri Lanka. The women got rice and other consumer goods from the shops. Their system was very different from that in other islands.

It was the women who first realised the usefulness of co-operative societies. Once they decided to have it, theirs became one of the best co-operative societies.

Each village took the responsibility of looking after the old, the injured and the weak. Every boat that returned from fishing kept a share for the weak. When the men of one house went out to sea for months or years, the village looked after the womenfolk. The women's leader of the village has to be informed about the opening day of the school. Until she issued orders no child would go to school. No child was absent without proper reason and without the knowledge of the 'Mother' of the village.

Administration and modern education are fast changing the character of the simple and disciplined society. The exploitation by outsiders and their own leaders is vanishing with the rise of co-operative societies and the development of postal communications. The leadership is also slowly losing its hold on the youngsters. New methods of fishing and processing have brought economic changes and the individual is asserting his own rights.

8. THE ISLANDS TODAY

ALL THE islands were brought under a single line administration with the formation of the Union Territory in 1956. The seat of the Administrator remained in Calicut till 1964. A part of the office of the Administrator is still functioning in Calicut for the procurement of various stores, movement of ships to the islands and for Central Treasury work.

The Administrator is the Head of Department. The Collector-cum-Development Commissioner is in overall charge of development activities. He also functions as District Magistrate, Collector of Treasuries, Collector under Land Revenue & Tenancy Regulation, etc. Other technical officers advise the Administrator in technical matters. The islands have been divided into four tehsils under four Tehsildars.

The Laccadive and Minicoy group and the Amindivi group of islands had different types of judicial administration before 1st November, 1956, because of separate laws enforced in these two groups. They were placed under the jurisdiction of the Kerala High Court with effect from that date. The Central Government promulgated two regulations: "The Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands (Laws) Regulation, 1965" and "The Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands (Civil Courts) Regulation, 1965." By the former Regulation some of the pre-constitutional laws were extended including the Cr. P.C., C.P.C., Court Fees Act, Registration Act, Police Act, etc. This Regulation had uniform application to both the groups and was enforced with effect from the 1st November, 1967. The judicial and executive functions of the magistracy were separated with effect from the 1st March, 1970. Present set-up is as below :

- (1) Chief Judicial Magistrate and Sub-Judge, Kavaratti.
- (2) Judicial Magistrates & Munsiffs, Androth and Amini.
- (3) The Collector-cum-Development Commissioner as District Magistrate (Executive).
- (4) The Tehsildars as Sub-Magistrates (Executive).

Jurisdiction of the District and Sessions Judge, Calicut, is extended to the Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi islands.

The islands had no police force prior to 1958. In that year one police station was opened in Minicoy followed by eight more stations, one in each island except Bitra.

Proper representation has been given to the people of Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi islands in the Parliament by an elected representative from 1967. Apart from this there is an Advisory Council attached to the Administrator and a Committee at higher level presided over by the Home Minister. In the sphere of development activities there are development committees in all islands and elected members in the board of management of the co-operative societies. In matters of administrative nature, all the recognised Karanavans who represent the traditional system of Island Administration are consulted. In fact, one such Karanavan is selected and appointed as Amin which post as per local custom carries wide powers. The Amin remains the king-pin of the Administration at the island level.

Public Works and Electricity

One Public Works Division was positioned during 1959-60 with a work-load of Rs. 12 to 14 lakhs per year. An Electrical Sub-division was added in the same year. Eight islands have been electrified so far. In the Fourth Plan, it is proposed to electrify the remaining islands. Power supply in Kavaratti, Minicoy, Androth and Amini islands would be augmented shortly. The Chief Engineer, Bombay, exercises technical control over this Division in respect of public works and the Director of Central Water & Power Commission in respect of power.

Fisheries

A miniature fishery set-up was started in 1959-60 with a Fisheries Office and two Fisheries Inspectors for the introduction of mechanised fishing, training of island fishermen in improved methods of fishing, survey of fishing grounds, etc. Mechanised fishing gradually became popular and there are 80 fishing boats of different types in operation. These mechanised boats were given to groups of fishermen and co-

operative societies at a subsidised cost. By the end of the Fourth Plan a fleet of 170 boats would be in operation.

One of the most important achievements is extension of pole and line Tuna fishing to other islands. The per head fish catch has increased by four times. The mechanised boats have now replaced the traditional crafts and demands for more boats are forthcoming. The fish landing in 1960 was 575 tonnes, whereas in 1969 it reached a figure of 1,193 tonnes, an increase of over 100 per cent.

In order to meet the growing demand for the mechanised boats and to accelerate the pace of mechanising, a Boat Building Yard was started in Kavaratti in 1964. Twenty-three boats of different sizes are now under construction. The Yard also undertakes repairs and maintenance of fishing boats. Five workshops have been established at Kavaratti, Minicoy, Kadmat, Androth and Agatti islands.

A pilot Canning Unit was started in Agatti island for canning Tuna in the year 1963. Encouraged by the results of this unit a Tuna Canning Factory was commissioned in Minicoy in October 1969 with an Ice Plant and Cold Storage complex. Initial difficulties, such as expertising the workmen, capturing market for Tuna, etc., are being crossed over. Trade enquiries for Laccadives canned Tuna have been received from U.S.A. and European countries. Tuna cans were exhibited in 1970 in Brussels and Fiji islands and were given excellent grading.

A Frozen Fish Storage and Freezing Plant is proposed in Agatti island for export of frozen Tuna. The new vessel *M. V. Amindivi* has been provided with a cold storage for the purpose. Frozen Tuna can be exported from Cochin to U.S.A. and other international markets.

Fishery requisites are being issued to the islanders at a subsidised rate. H. S. D. oil, lubricating oil and spare parts for boat engines are provided at a no-profit-no-loss basis. Servicing and repairs of private fishing boats are carried out in the department workshops on payment.

One hundred and fourteen islanders have been trained in improved methods of fishing. Besides, 48 persons were trained in different trades of fisheries technology in the mainland. A Fishermen's Training Centre is proposed to be set up in Minicoy.

In 1960, only 12 persons were employed in fisheries development. The figure had reached 700 in 1969 and about 2,000 islanders are expected to be employed in 1974. The fish landing is likely to rise to the tune of 3,500 tonnes.

Rupees 72.1 lakhs have been provided for fisheries development in the Fourth Plan.

Education

There has been tremendous progress in the field of education. Today, there are educational institutions in every island which include one higher secondary school and four high schools. Education is free at all stages and even books and clothes are supplied to the students free of cost. Scholarships and ship fare to go for higher studies in the mainland are paid by the Administration. One-fourth of the total population is now studying in various educational institutions. In some of the islands, 100% of the children of school-going age are attending schools. It is a matter of pride that this Union Territory, which was very low in literacy in 1961, occupying 16th rank among other States and Union Territories takes the 6th rank according to the results of the provisional census figures of 1971. The creditable result of the examinations of higher secondary and high schools in March, 1971 (89% and 58.6% respectively) serves as an index to the intellectual advancement of the students, despite their unenviable environment. About 270 students are in the mainland undergoing higher education and attending professional colleges. The first batch of medical graduates and agricultural graduates have returned and they are now serving in the islands. A long cherished dream of the islanders will be transformed into reality when the proposed Junior College is started in Kavaratti. Teachers and students maintain good relationship and the students' unrest, which is a day to day affair in the mainland, is unknown in the islands.

Co-operation

Co-operative movement was introduced in the islands in 1962. At present, there are 25 co-operative societies engaged in various activities like distribution of consumer goods, marketing of agricultural produces, fishing operations, etc. The nine supply and marketing

societies, which form the backbone of island economy, distributed consumer goods worth Rs. 63 lakhs and marketed copra worth Rs. 65 lakhs during the year 1970-71. The activities of these societies are being co-ordinated by the Laccadive Co-operative Marketing Federation. This apex society has its own 90 tonnes capacity diesel vessel called *Sahakari* to facilitate quick transport of goods to the societies. Within a short period the co-operative movement has stabilised its activities and the societies are distributing 65% of the total requirement of consumer goods and marketing 100% of the copra produced in the islands.

Health

In 1956, there were only six dispensaries in the islands. Today, there are seven 10-bed primary health centres, one 20-bed hospital, one 30-bed hospital and 3 H. D. Sanatoriums. Public Health Inspectors are posted in all the islands. The number of leprosy patients has now been reduced to 1/6th. There is one Filaria Unit and the incidence of filaria has also been brought under control.

Cottage Industry

Coir, vinegar and jaggery were the principal industries in the islands. Today, coir making has been improved and there are training-cum-production centres in all the islands. A Co-operative Handloom Unit centre was opened at Agatti and a Hosiery Factory at Kalpeni. A decorticating Fibre Unit in Androth is doing very well. The survey conducted by the Geological Survey of India has indicated that the lagoons contain high grade calcareous sands. The possibilities of exploiting the resources are being studied.

Banking

Banking was unknown in the islands till recently. The Syndicate Bank, one of the 14 nationalised banks in India, opened its first branch at Kavaratti, the Headquarters of the Administration, in 1971. Another branch was opened at Minicoy subsequently and two branches are proposed to be opened at Amini and Androth. In spite of the religious apathy towards payment and collection of interest, there is

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good response for banking from the local residents. The banks are sure to contribute towards the economic progress of this backward area.

In the last decade the islands have progressed beyond recognition, mainly through co-operative societies. Their economic standard has gone up three-fold. Improvement of fisheries and the organisation of Boat Building Yard and other cottage industries has helped in increasing their income. The starting of educational institutions and special scholarships in the mainland has given them the opportunity to get the best of modern education. Medical work has spread all over the islands and they get the best medical attention and Government grants to go to the mainland for specialised treatment whenever necessary.

A small island population, scattered over thousands of square kilometres in the Arabian Sea, has come up due to good leadership, co-operation and the desire to get the best out of the modern world, helped by a sympathetic administration. Today, the islands can be a model for development anywhere in the country.

