
UNIT 5 TRIBES OF LAKSHADWEEP AND PUDUCHERRY

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to :

- Understand about the culture and tribal way of life of Lakshadweep;
- Explain about the tribes residing in Puducherry; and
- Describe the social organisation and religion of the tribals in Puducherry.

5.1 LAKSHADWEEP

Lakshadweep is a group of coral islands which lie scattered in the Arabian Sea. They are located at a distance of 225-450 km from the nearest Kerala coast. Among the 22 islands only 10 islands are inhabited. These are categorized into three groups: the five inhabited islands of Amini, Kadmat, Kiltan, Chelat and Bitra belong to the Amindivi group. The 4 inhabited islands of Androth, Karavatti, Agatti and Kalpeni, and the 12 uninhabited islands of Kalpitti, Bangaram, Tinnakara, Parali, Tilakkam, Pitti, Cheriya, Suheli Valiyakara, Suheli Cheriya, Pakshi Pitti (the island of birds), Viringili and Kodithala constitute the Laccadive group. The third group is represented by a solitary inhabited island called Minicoy.

5.2 CULTURE, RELIGION, FESTIVITIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEM : LAKSHADWEEP

In respect of cultural regions, Lakshadweep can be divided into two distinct regions. In one region, all the inhabited islands, except Minicoy, can be grouped. Minicoy differs from the rest of the Lakshadweep Islands in language, dress and lifestyle as well as culture. The Minicoys are ethnically and culturally closer to the people of Maldives, whereas the rest of the people living in the different islands are culturally closer to the people living in coastal Kerala.

The people of Lakshadweep profess Islam and the majority of them belong to the Shafi School of the Sunni sect. There are also a few Whabi and Ahamadiyya among them but they constitute only a microscopic minority of the Lakshadweep inhabitants.

In all the islands, the important religious festivals which have recognition in Islam are observed. Besides these, the people observe some festivities associated with the religious preceptors, e.g Sheikh Mohiddin and Sheikh Raffai. Id-ul-Fitr is locally known as Cheriya Perunnal. It marks the culmination of the Ramzan fast, and is celebrated on the first of Shawwal, the tenth month of the Islamic calendar. It is the day of feasting and rejoicing. In some islands, feasts are arranged at the mosques and *maulood* conducted in the name of the prophet. Id-ul-Zuha is known as Bakrid, and is celebrated on the tenth day of Dulhaj, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, to commemorate Prophet Ibrahim's surrender to the will of God. Prayers are offered and sacrifices of cows and goats are made in the name of God and meat distributed among friends, relatives and neighbours.

The life cycle rituals observed in Minicoy are, to some extent, different from those of the other islands of Lakshadweep. But inter-ethnic differences in regard to the observance of these rituals are not found either in Minicoy or other islands. Moharram is not of much importance in the islands. It is mostly celebrated by the well-to-do families. They observe it on the tenth day of Moharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar.

Before the linguistic reorganization of the states, these islands were part of the Chevayoor constituency of the Malabar district of the erstwhile Madras (now, Chennai) Presidency.

The members elected from this constituency to the Madras (now, Chennai) Legislative Assembly and parliament represented these islands in the Madras (now, Chennai) Legislative assembly and the Parliament. After the formation of these islands into a union territory, one member used to be nominated by the president of India to represent the islands in the Parliament till 1967, after which a constituency, covering the Laccadive, Minicoy and Amindivi Islands, was created and since then a member is elected from this constituency to represent it in the parliament. Moreover, to ensure that the people are closely associated with the local administration and developmental process, committee/councils have been constituted.

5.3 TRIBES OF LAKSHADWEEP

KOYA

The term Koya is a corrupt form of the word *Khoja* which means "the respected". The name Koya itself is of comparatively recent origin. Formerly, the Koya were known as the Tarwadi or the Karnavar and claimed their descent from the Namboodari and the Nair from mainland India. Presently, the Koya are distributed in all the inhabited islands except Minicoy. Their group-wise population is not available. The language spoken with the kin group is Laccadive, i.e., Dweep Bhasha (a local variation of Malayalam). Their constitutional status is that of a scheduled tribe. The Koya do not have any sub-groups or synonyms.

Traditionally, the Koya men wear a white or coloured lungi and shirt, but nowadays the youngsters wear shirts and trousers. The Koya women's traditional dress is similar to that of the Kerala Muslim women. They wear a white or coloured cloth (*kachi*) and a tight-fitting blouse with long sleeves (*kuppayam*). The head-dress (*thattam*) covers the head and shoulders. The women have a great penchant for ornaments. Eardrops and ear-rings are common adornments. The Koya are non-vegetarian and eat beef but not pork. Their staple food is rice and fish.

Social divisions among the Koya exist at the *tarwad* (a matrilineal descent household) level but internal hierarchy does not exist. The community self perception about its social status is high. The other communities also have a high perception of the Koya. The Koya maintain endogamy at the community level and exogamy at the *tarwad* level.

Consanguineous marriages-both parallel and cross, except maternally parallel-are practised. However, mother's brother's daughter (MBD) is preferred to father's sister's daughter (FSD). Maternal uncle-niece marriage is not allowed. Sororate junior (a custom by which on the death of a woman her husband is required or has the right to marry her younger sister) is allowed. Adult marriage for either sex is practised and the mode of acquiring a mate is either exchange (of sister) or negotiation. The form of marriage is monogamous. Divorce by either party is permissible with the approval of the *Kazi* (muslim priest). In the case of divorce by the wife, the compensation is given to the ex-husband, and children are the liability of the mother but the payment is made every month by the ex-husband for their livelihood till they reach adulthood. Remarriage of a widow/widower/divorcee is permissible. The Koya prefer the joint family system, but nowadays nuclear family is also coming into existence because of the gradual erosion of authority of the matrilineal group as well as the emergence of the individualistic outlook. There are two types of property among the Koya. One is the self-acquired property and the other is the ancestral property. In the *tarwad* property, each member, irrespective of age, sex or generation, has an equal share. However, no individual member can alienate his/her share of her property, sons get double the share of daughters' and wife gets one-eight share following the *shariat* (Islamic code of conduct). The rule of succession is either by nephew or the younger brother of the head of a *tarwad*, whoever is older. The Koya women of this territory enjoy a higher social and economic status than the other Muslim societies in India. They participate in economic activities and contribute to the family income. The major natural resource is land. Among the Koya, the land is controlled individually as well as by the *tarwad*. The Koya were the principal landowners and they still remain so.

MALMI

The word Malmi or Mali is derived from Arabic word *Muallim*, meaning the leader of a crew. The people who were specialists in the art of sailing and in doing the calculation needed in sailing used to be (and are) engaged by the Koya to ply their *odam* (indigenous sailing-boat). These people have come to call themselves Malmi or Mali.

The Mali as a rule, learn and practise navigation and astrology and propose a suitable date for the departure and return of a sailing vessel, for laying the foundation stone of a house and for designating the auspicious time for conducting a social ceremony. The Malmi converse in Dweep Bhasha with their family and kin group. The script used with them is Arabic. The language and the script used with others are Malayalam. Among the Malmi, marriage with the MBD is more frequent than with the FSD.

There is a practice of parallel-cousin marriages: both maternal and paternal. Uncle-niece marriage is not allowed. The Malmi are non-vegetarian. Social divisions among the Malmi exist at the *tarwad* level but there is no hierarchy. A *tarwad* mainly functions as a corporate group and confines the marital alliances within the group. Their self perception is of middle order. The Koya and the Melacheri also perceive the Malmi as belonging to the middle order. Community endogamy is practiced by the Malmi but exogamy operates at the *tarwad* level. They prefer cross cousin marriages. Though Islam permits parallel-cousin marriages, the Malmi gives less preference to it. Maternal uncle-niece marriage is not permitted. Adult marriage is practiced and the mode of

acquiring a mate is either negotiation or exchange. Monogamy is practiced. Divorce is permitted for either sex but with the approval of the *kazi*. A male divorcee or widow can remarry only after the completion of three menstruations. Normally, the main reasons for divorce are adultery, maladjustment, chronic sickness, etc. If the divorce is sought by the wife and granted, the compensation is to be given to the ex-husband. After the divorce, children are the liability of the mother but the ex-husband has to pay some amount (mutually agreed) every month till the children reach adulthood.

The Malmi prefer an extended family, but nowadays nuclear family is also coming up.

Malmi follow the *marumakkathayam* (the matrilineal system of inheritance) and Islamic laws of inheritance. Property is of two types: *tarwad* and self acquired. In the *tarwad* property, each member, irrespective of age, sex or generation, has an equal share. No individual member can alienate his/her share of her property from the *tarwad*. In the case of self acquired property, sons get double the share of daughters' and wife gets one-eight. Succession is either by nephew or the younger brother of the head of the *karnavar* (the head of a matrilineal unit, usually the oldest male) whoever is older.

The Malmi women are mostly engaged in the collection of fuel, fetching of potable water and other domestic chores. They also play an active role in the political activities. They have a higher social status in the area of literacy and economic freedom. They also contribute to the family income. They do not have any decision-making powers and do not control the family expenditure.

The marriage proposals, in the Malmi, usually come from the girl's family. Preference is given to maternal uncle's son. Marriage consists of *kanoth* (the term used for Islamic marriage contract) and *mangalam* (the social ceremony in connection with marriage). The *kanoth* ceremony is usually performed at a mosque or, sometimes, at the bride's house, in which the *kazi* takes the consent of both the parties. The nuptial ceremony is performed at the bride's residence, either on the day of the *kanoth* ceremony itself, or subsequently, on the third or seventh day. Since the Malmi are sailors, their main natural resources is water. Originally a tenant class, the Malmi were considered experts in navigation and held the rank of a captain in *odam*. The Malmi follow Islam and belong to the Shafi school of the sunni sect.

MELACHERI

The term Melacheri means high climbers, an apparent reference to the primary occupation of the Melacheri, i.e., coconut plucking. The main function of a Melacheri *tarwad* is to regulate marriage. The community's self perception is low and the Koya and the Malmi also have low perception about the status of the Melacheri. Endogamy is maintained at the community level. Divorce is permitted for either sex, with the approval of the *kazi*. If the wife seeks and is granted the divorce, the compensation has to be paid to the ex-husband. Remarriage is permitted for a widow/widower and divorcee-male and female. The Melacheri follow two types of inheritance rule-one for the *tarwad* property and one for *tingalaicha* (self acquired or personal property).

For the latter, they follow the Islamic law of inheritance as mentioned in the *Shariat*, i.e., "to the male a portion equal to that of two females". The share prescribed for wife is one-eighth of the whole property, after deducting debts, and one quarter in case the male has no child. In the case of the *tarwad* property, the rule of inheritance is passed on matrilineally in which each member of the *tarwad* gets an equal share. Succession passes to either nephew or younger of the *karnavar*, whoever is older. The Melacheri women enjoy a higher social status than women belonging to any other Muslim society in India in literacy and economic freedom. They have the right to inheritance. They play

a role in the plantation operation, collection of fuel, fetching of potable water as well as other economic activities, besides their household chores. They also actively participate in social and religious functions. In the political field, they do not play any significant role. Women contribute to the family income but do not control the family expenditure. In the Melacheri, the marriage proposal is initiated generally by the girl's family. The Melacheri follow Islam and belong to the Shafi School of the Sunni sect.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Briefly discuss the religion and festivities observed by the people of Lakshadweep?

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5.4 PUDUCHERRY

The Pondicherry (now, Puducherry) Union territory is home to multi-ethnic communities, with different languages and culture.

The population of Puducherry (Census, 2011) is 12.48 lakhs. As a proportion of the country's total population, it is 0.10%. Puducherry had quite a favourable sex ratio at the beginning of the 20th Century. But, it steadily decreased decade after decade until 1991 when it reached 979. However, there has been a remarkable improvement in sex ratio in the UT in 2001 (1001) and in 2011 it is 1037. The main languages spoken in the Union Territory of Puducherry are Tamil (in Puducherry and Karaikal), Telugu (in Yanam) and Malayalam (in Mahe), apart from French which continues to be spoken by many. Hinduism, Christianity and Islam co-exist in Puducherry. The Hindus have scores of ancient temples in Puducherry.

Puducherry is part of the geographic and linguistic-cultural region of the South Indian peninsula. Like the other South Indians, the people of Puducherry are primarily Dravidians.

The Union Territory of Puducherry includes four enclaves located in three states of South India. It includes the coastal towns of Puducherry and Karaikal in Tamil Nadu, Yanam in Andhra Pradesh and Mahe in Kerala. While Puducherry and Karaikal and Yanam are on the East coast bound by the Bay of Bengal, Mahe is on the West coast bound by the Arabian Sea. Puducherry is surrounded by South Arcot District, Karaikal by Thanjavur District Yanam by East Godavari District and Mahe by Kannur District.

5.5 SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Clans and lineages are important kin groups, dividing the communities into a number of social divisions. These kin groups are exogamous units. All the members of a clan/*gotram* and *pravara*/lineage maintain brotherly relationships (*pangali*). The *pangali* have specific roles to perform collectively during rituals, ceremonies and festivals. The Brahman and the other Brahmanical communities, like the Vysya, Kammalar, Kshatriya, Raju and Patnulkaran, have *gotrams* which are affiliated to a putative ancestor. Further, the *Gotrams* of the Brahmans are divided into *pravara* like *yekarishi* (single rishi),

trayarishi (three rishi), *pancharishi* (five rishis), *saptarishi* (seven rishi), to maintain marital alliances, and to indicate descent. In some communities, the clans are named after a plant, fruit, flower, animal, as well as other natural objects and man-made things. The clans of the Vellalar, Naicker and Vanniyar communities are affiliated to particular deities and are named after those deities. The clans may be further divided into a number of lineages based on *veetuperu* (house name), *intiperu* (house name), *tharavad* (household name) etc, that have roots in a person's *parambai* (ancestry). The Muslim communities are divided into many kin groups based on lineage alone.

The local name for the family is *kudumbam*. The family is the smallest basic unit in all four regions of the Puducherry union territory. It acquires membership through birth, marriage and adoption. The family and household are synonymous and it comprises of husband, wife, and children, either married or unmarried and other related members, such as aged parents. The predominant family type is nuclear, consisting of husband, wife and unmarried children. The joint families are of two kinds: vertically extended and horizontally extended. The widowed mother or father living along with her or his married sons is the other family type. In all the communities, a girl after marriage, joins her husband's family and continues to live with his parents for sometime. A majority of the communities are patrilineal and patrilocal. Matrilocal residence is commonly found among the Maraikayar community.

5.6 RELIGION

The main religion practised in the Union Territory of Puducherry is Hinduism. Other religions practised are Christianity and Islam. Hindus constitute the majority. Among the Hindus, there are Saivites, who worship Siva, and Vaishnavites who worship Tirumal or Vishnu. Among the Vaishnavites, there are two further sects, Thengalai and Vadagalai. The following are the important festivals celebrated in the Union territory of Puducherry. *Amavasai*, or the day of the conjunction of the Sun and the Moon, occurs every month and is considered auspicious by observing rituals to the *pitri* (souls of ancestors). Ugadi is the Telugu New year Day. It falls on the first day of the Tamil month *Chitthirai* (March-April). It is generally believed to be the anniversary of the creation or the first day of the Sathyayuga. The most important festival celebrated in Puducherry is Pongal (harvest festival), also known as Makara Sanskranti in other regions. The celebration lasts for four days. Vishu is an important festival celebrated in the Mahe region. It is the Malayali New Year and is celebrated on the first day of the Malayalam month of *Medom* (April-May). On this day astrologers bring to every household a note on the fortunes of men, animals, seasonal conditions and crops in the New Year. They are given a measure of rice in return. Deepavali is celebrated in all the four regions. Onam is a post harvest festival special to the Mahe region. Mahasivaratri is observed in honour of Lord Siva in the Tamil month *Masi* (March).

5.7 TRIBES OF PUDUCHERRY

IRULA

The Irula are an endogamous group sparsely distributed in and around the Puducherry and Karaikal regions. Traditionally rat trappers, they are also referred to as Vettaikaran or Villi. The term Irula, in Tamil, means 'dark' or 'night'. The Irula mainly live in thatched roof huts. Several families live in the fields. Their staple foodgrains are finger millet, great millet and pearl millet. They are non-vegetarian. They trap field rats, porcupine and rabbits and catch snakes.

The Irula community is an endogamous group with several exogamous *gotrams* or *jatis* (Clans). Each *gotram* is divided into exogamous *kulams* (surname or lineage) whose function is again, to regulate marriage alliances. Each *gotram* is divided into exogamous *kulams* (Surname or lineage) whose function is again, to regulate marriage alliances. The head of the *kulam* (lineage/caste/clan) is the *kula guruvan* (head of the *kulam*). Every man is a member of his father's lineage. Women retain their father's lineage even after marriage.

The Irula worship plants and animals such as veppa (neem), lu (papal), naai (dog), kudhirai (horse), puli (tiger) and aane (elephant). However, such worship is no longer done. It is not clear whether these were totemic symbols or clans. The father is the head of the family. The majority of Irula families are nuclear in nature, but a few are vertically extended through the youngest son. Immovable property, particularly the house, is shared by sons by partitioning the rooms. Household items, such as utensils and furniture, are shared by all the sons equally. However, daughters are also given some of these at the time of their marriage. Old parents are looked after by the youngest son. Succession is by the eldest son. Women have a secondary status in the Irula community. They participate in economic activities along with men, apart from doing domestic work and looking after the children. During the first four days of menstruation Irula women are banned from entering their kitchens or cooking food. Compared to others in their neighborhood, Irula women enjoy more freedom within the family as well as outside. They take part in all social and religious functions. An Irula woman goes to her parents' home during the seventh month of her first pregnancy. Consanguineous marriages are the norm among Irula. Marriages with close kin, namely niece, father's sister's daughter and mother's brother's daughter or second degree cross cousins are generally preferred. Monogamy is the rule, but polygyny is permitted. Pre-puberty marriages are not allowed. Land is the main resource of the Irula. The forests are their secondary source of income. Traditionally they are hunters and food-gatherers. They also collect honey and are paid for it in paddy. They catch rats in the fields and are also paid for this in paddy annually. In addition, they take the grain stored in the holes by the rats. But primarily they engage themselves in agricultural labour nowadays. Most of them do not own any land and live below the poverty line.

KURAVAR

The Kuravar are also called Malai Kuravar, Thombaikkuravan, Koravan and Mala Kuravar. They have of late, started identifying themselves as KattuNaicker, which is a Scheduled Tribe. The term *kuravar* simply means a 'hunter' or 'forest dweller'. Some of them live in the hills, hence they are called Malai Kuravar. they practiced their age-old professions, hunting and pig rearing. The Kuravar speak their own dialect, viz. Kuravar *basha*, among themselves. It is a mixture of Telegu and Tamil. The Kuravar are non-vegetarian. They rarely eat vegetables, their staple food are rice and ragi. The Kuravar are divided into four phratries, viz. Melpadi, Satpadi, Mendra Kuttan and Kavadi. Each one is further divided into different clans, viz. Otel mogam, Bandi mogam, sisulu mogam, nadi mogam, Katta mogam. These kin groups indicate ancestry and regulate marriage alliances. The Kuravar are not aware of the Hindu *varna* system and are, therefore, unable to recognize their position in the *varna* order. The community's self-perception, as well as others' perception of the Kuravar, is very low. The Kuravar follow phratry exogamy and community endogamy. Among the Kuravar, a boy can marry his maternal uncle's daughter or paternal aunt's daughter or his own sister's daughter. They practice only adult marriages. Most marriages are negotiated. Generally, girls get married immediately after puberty. Either spouse can divorce, for such reasons as maladjustment,

adultery, cruelty, the practice of witchcraft etc. If the wife initiates the divorce, she has to return the bride-price to her husband. But no divorce compensation is paid to the wife. Children remain with either the father or mother, as suggested by the elders. Remarriage is allowed for both the widowed and the divorced of either sex.

The Kuravar have both nuclear and joint families, though the former seem to be increasing. Kuravar women are hard working and participate in all kinds of jobs along with their men. They help in rearing pigs, collecting pig waste and pig fodder, drying fish when there is a catch, gathering fuel and carrying potable water. Besides participating in economic activities, child rearing and domestic work are the duties of women. They also control family expenditure. They participate in socio-religious functions and have special roles to play in them. Despite all this, the women have a lower status than the men. The Kuravar are a landless community. They are traditional pig-rearers and hunters.

YERUKULA

The Yerukula are chiefly found in the yanam district of Puducherry. They are a small migrant population from Andhra Pradesh. The term Yerukula is an etymological derivative of *yeruka* meaning 'fortune-telling' or 'foresight'. The women of this community are experts in telling fortunes. They wander in the streets crying "*Yeruko- amma-Yeruka*" (prophecies, mother, and prophecies) hence their name. The yerukula speak their dialect, Yerukula Bhasha, or Oadra, a corrupt polyglot of Telegu, Tamil and Kanarese, among themselves. With outsiders they talk in Telegu. At the community level, the dialect not only identifies them but enables them to maintain secrecy in their communications. The literacy level is low among the Yerukula and most of the elders are illiterate. The Yerukula are non-vegetarian. The Yerukula are divided into several endogamous sub-tribes based on their traditional occupation and the form of nomadism they practice: Suvi (date palm basketry), Badda or Dabba (bamboo basketry), Uppu ort Bidari (trading in salt) and Kunchi or Kaunchapuri (makers of brushes).

Each sub-tribe is split into four common exogamous phratries (*gotras*), viz. the Kavadi, Sathpadi, Menapadi and Mendrakutti. These are all corrupted Tamil words and signify various activities connected with deity worship. Of these, the first two are considered superior to the other two.

They regulate marriage alliances. People belonging to the Kavadi group are *pothu* (male) and those belonging to Sathpadi are *penti* (female). Marriages are favoured between these two groups. Membership in a Yerukula family can be acquired through marriage and adoption, apart from being born into it. The Yerukula unit is patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal. The most elderly male member of the family is the highest authority. In case of his death, his wife, if she is elder to his brothers, becomes the head of the household. The Yerukula family is a social unit, the members of which act for their common good. Marriage by negotiation is the Yerukula norm. Monogamy is the marital norm. Polygyny is practiced, usually when the first wife suffers from chronic illness or is barren. Nevertheless, the number of wives a man has signifies his wealth, status and authority in Yerukula society. They prefer consanguineous marriage alliances. Both types of cross-cousin marriages, i.e., maternal uncle's daughter and paternal aunt's daughter are common. The maternal uncle plays an important role in all phases of a person's life. He has the first choice in seeking the hands of his sisters' daughters for his sons, if he has no sons or has arranged their marriages with outsiders; he receives a certain share of the bride price given to the girls. He offers clothes, bangles and toilet items to his niece on her marriage. Among the Yerukula, widows and widowers can remarry. The Yerukula have their own *kula panchayat* (tribal council). The *kula*

panchayat is now called Yerukula Sangam and is headed by a president, secretary and some elderly persons (*peddalu*). They decide disputes pertaining to marriage, divorce, remarriage, property etc., and impose fines. The Yerukula have animistic beliefs. They are highly superstitious and take serious note of bad and good omens. The Yerukulas specialize in making baskets, mats and ropes. The women are skillful tattooists.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Write a brief note about the Irula tribe of Puducherry.

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5.8 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you would have understood the social organization, religion, political structure, cultures, marriage customs of the tribes of Lakshadweep and Puducherry. You can analyze that each of the tribes that has been written about have different occupations, in which they specialize, e.g., the Yerukulas specialize in making baskets, mats and ropes. The Kuravar practiced their age-old professions, hunting and pig rearing, which goes to show that each tribe has their own identity.

5.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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