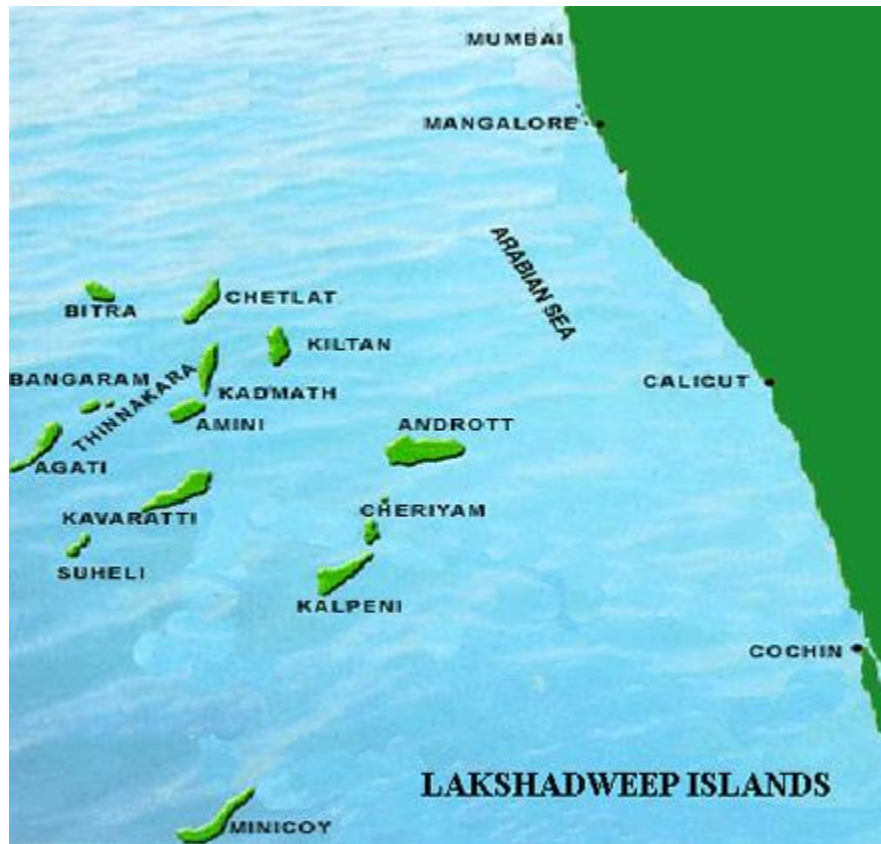


## Socio-Political Rhythms of Amini Island: A Cultural Study

Mohammed Khasim PK

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### Abstract

Lakshadweep is a group of islands situated in the blue verge of the Arabian Sea. There are about 36 islands out of which ten are inhabited. These Islands are situated about 123 to 240 kilometers away from the Kerala coast. It is said that once all islands were populated, but in the course of time due to natural calamities and high waves made life impossible and people migrated to more comfortable islands. Amini is one among such populated islands. Here I am trying to explain about the attention, with particular reference to 'Amini Island' and the people of Lakshadweep in general.

**Key words:** Arabian Sea, Kerala coast, Migrated, Lakshadweep, Amini Island

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:2 February 2016

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## Introduction



The island of Amini lies 281.63 km, away from the Malabar Coast. For centuries Amini Island was under the rule of Arakkal Raja, Chirakkal Raja, Ali Raja and finally the British. Amini is said to be the first inhabited island and these people are well known for their ideologies and wisdom of life. Amini is the first island where seeds of the Islamic religion were first sown. From time immemorial, the people were famous for their cultural and religious prowess. Amini island added much colour and pride to the history of Lakshadweep islands. The last king of the Perumal Dynasty, Baskara Ravi Varma embraced Islam and migrated to Saudi Arabia. A team of followers of the king set out in search of the king; on the way they found this island and rested there. The prosperity and benefit of the island attracted the new comers and they settled there. This happened nearly around AD 618. The rich nature of the islands caught the attention of Udaya Varma, the king of Northern Kerala. The generous Udaya Varma gave much help to the people. He rendered all possible help and assistance to the people who were ready to settle on the island. Due to this reason people migrated in large groups to the island except Minicoy. These settlers were mainly of the Nair societies of Kerala. Their customs, rituals and land system was also copied as they were. The same is still practiced in the islands.

## Suffering

Peoples of Amini are now the followers of Islam. At the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century Chirakkal Raja handed over the rule of Amini to the Kannur Sulthan. This period was described as the period of innumerable hardships and endless troubles to the poor people of this isolated island. The officials and their assistants made life horrible in the island. As they started to attack the people, the women of Amini united and caught and tied an official representative of the

Kannur Sulthan and brought him to the shore of Kannur and approached Tipu Sulthan. After long negotiation Amini came under Tipu Sulthan's rule. During this time officials of Tipu Sulthan, namely, managers took care of the islands including civil administration, starting from 1787. After the fall of Tipu Sulthan, the islands were under the British East India Company. Before this, Amini had become the Administrative capital of the islands.

### **Spread of Islam**

It was in Hijra year 41 Hazarath Ubaidulla the grandson of Khaleefa Aboobakker Siddeeqe reached Amini from Saudi Arabia and spread Islam. The first woman who embraced Islam was "Fiziya" who later became Hameedathbi. Hazarath Ubaidulla married Hameedathbi. The people of Amini were not ready to embrace the new faith and they started to rebel against Hameedathbi and Hazarath Ubaidulla. In a country craft they both escaped to Androth; and they preached Islam in Kavarathi, Agathi and Kalpeni. All the people in those places embraced Islam. And then they returned to Amini and this time the people there also believed in Islam

### **British Rule**

In 1908 all islands came under the direct control of British. Amini group was under a manager. They were the trained officials in the revenue department who worked in the Amini group as Ameen, whereas, the other group of islands were governed by Ameens, who were not well educated. For the second group of islands a special regulation, namely, Island Regulation Act 1912 came into effect which provides power to the Ameen to finalize civil and criminal cases. The land owners of the island were Ameen or Ameens; sometimes the dealings of the Ameens put the islanders in trouble.

In 1947 when India became independent, the rule of the island was turned over to the Malabar Collector. In 1948 an official representative Manager came to Amini with the Collector and appointed an official Thahasildar.

### **The Inhabitants**

The inhabitants of these islands are Sunni Muslims and they are descendants of the Hindu settlers from the Kerala Coast.

The system of descent is matrilineal and residence pattern is predominantly duolocal. Matrilineal groups are known as Taravads and for the sharing and transmission of Taravad property, female links alone are recognized. One such island's Taravad property is divided on *stirpital* basis; on others the division is per capita. Individually owned property is governed by the Islamic law. Since 1956, the inhabitants of the islands are treated as scheduled tribes by the Government of India.

### **Developmental Activities**

Several developmental activities have been introduced in the islands. Regular Steamer as well as postal and telegraph services are the important measures for increasing communication. Land survey has been followed by radical land reforms and special regulations made in 1965 have introduced many changes in the system of law and administration of justice.

### **Amini Island and the People**



One of the earliest inhabited islands of the archipelago, Amini has been the seat of administration for Amindivi group during the various regimes through the centuries. It is known as the original island from where the people migrated to the islands of Kadmath, Chetlath and Kilthan. It is therefore, regarded as the parent (Taravad) island and has enjoyed a strong patronage over the other islands of the Amindivi group.

Amini is the northernmost island in the Amindivi group and is only 9.6 km from Kadmath, which is the biggest island of the group, having an area of 302.70 hectares. Other inhabited islands belonging to this group are Kilthan, Chetlath and Bitra which are situated respectively at distances of 51.46 km, 56.32 km and 69.20 km away from Amini.

The nearest island of the Laccadive group is Agathi, which is only 53.11 km from Amini. The island of Kavarathi is situated 56.32 km away from Amini. It is the present headquarters of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep. The sea port, Calicut (Kozhikode) with which Amini has frequent contact now, is 281.63 km away on the Kerala coast.

This island can be approached from all directions as there are no dangerous rocks lying in its vicinity. It has a small lagoon on the western side, and the land proper fills the interior of the ring reef. It is small on the west, and larger towards the north. For entering into the lagoon, there are four boat entrances on the western reef but the main entrance is marked by two stone pillars which are well-defined at low water. The beach on all sides is free from any bank of coral debris. There is a very conspicuous formation of beach sandstone in both the eastern and western beaches.

The surface of the island is very even, and at no place is more than 3.5 metres above sea level. In earlier times the centre was occupied by a deep vacant piece of land for growing paddy and other food grains but this has never been dug out to the depth found on the Malabar islands. This place is now occupied by thick groves of coconut trees. On the sea shore on the western side, opposite to the cutcherry, there is a raised stone platform with a flight of steps leading down to the beach. Mounted on this platform there are two old cannons said to have been taken from a ship wrecked at Amini about a century ago.

The island is divided into five Cheri or wards, of which Keelapallicheri, and Melappallicheri lie in the extreme south purakkara in the East, Edaniyam in the north, and Kodicheri in the west. There is a watchman or kavalgar for each Cheri; otherwise these old divisions appear to have lost all their significance. Since Keelapallicheri and Kodicheri are situated on the two narrowed ends of the island, there are only a few houses in these two Cheri.

The most populated areas of the island are Melappallicheri and Edaniyam, and most of the public institution such as Cutcherry, Hospital, and Assistance Engineer's office, Cooperative society, Wireless station, Post office, Coir-cum-rice godown, High school and Boarding house are all located in these two Cheri. The newly built Dak Bangalow Government guest house is also situated here.

In 1963 there were no regular streets or markets on the island. The houses of local population were distributed in dispersed fashion all over the island. The houses invariably faced north so as to be safe from the monsoon storms which swoop over the island from the south-west direction.

## **Houses**

The majority of the houses were rectangular structures with thatched roofs which were low and sloping on all four sides' plaited coconut leaves were used for thatching the houses. There were also a few houses with tiled roofs. The walls were constructed with rectangular slabs of limestone which were cut from the quarries. Coral stones collected from the beach and the lagoons were also used for the construction of walls and plinths. Lime mortar was used for plastering. Generally the roof was raised first on the temporary pillars and after it was thatched, the work on the wall started. For this a frame was made of coconut stalks and the stones for making the walls were packed into this framework. Lime mortar was then introduced into the joints from the sides. After the walls were thus erected completely and the mortar well was set, the temporary supports were removed and the roof was made to rest on the wall.

The interior of the walls was plastered with lime mortar and the outside was left "stone faced" probably for the lime mortar in the masonry to get set in course of time. In many houses the floor was also found to have been plastered with lime mortar. Lime required for the

preparation of mortar was obtained by burning the coral stones. The frames of doors and windows were made of wood of coconut trunk, but the shutters were made of wooden planks of bread-fruit tree or of timber imported from the mainland.

As the roofs of the houses were low and windows very small the houses were badly ventilated and the interior dark. A typical island house had a spacious front room which led into a corridor. The living rooms or bedrooms were arranged on either side of this corridor. One or more living rooms might be converted as store rooms. The corridor also led to the kitchen which was constructed separately, but attached to the main house on its eastern side. Each bedroom in the house was occupied by a married woman to receive her visiting husband for the night and the number of bedrooms found in each house depended upon the number of married women present in the house.

The front room was used as common meeting place where the members of the family took food, and women offered prayers, spun coir and gossiped with the neighbours. This room was also used by unmarried women, children, widows and divorcees for sleeping. The bedrooms and the living rooms had raised platform, two in the front room and one in each bedroom, which were used for sitting and sleeping. Similarly, outside the front of the house on either side of the front door, were platforms where guests were received and offered seats. The majority of the houses were without a ceiling but a few houses had ceilings made by spreading wooden planks over beams of coconut trunk. There were only two houses on the entire island which had a second storey. All the other houses were single storey structures. In the case of rich people, the house was enclosed with a tall fencing of about 2.44 metres high made of coconut stalks and plaited coconut leaves, in order to maintain privacy.

Houses of poor people also had fencing but they covered only the background. Bathroom, shed for storing coconuts and firewood and cattle-shed in case of people who owned cattle, were all situated within the enclosure. There were 16 big Odam sheds - a number of sheds for keeping small boats which were scattered all along the beach of the island. Each Odam shed was a long building of about 25 to 30 metres in length and 10 to 15 metres in breadth. The roof was thatched, and was raised on stilts. Excepting that they were small structures, the small boat sheds were also similar to the Odam sheds.

## **Mosques on the Island**

In 1963 there were 41 mosques on the island. They were distributed unevenly all over the island. The Jumah mosque which is the biggest is a double storey building constructed on the same pattern as that of the mosques found on the Malabar Coast. Most of the materials used for the construction of this mosque such as timber, tiles, bricks and cement were imported from the mainland. There was no other double storey mosque on this island. Most of the mosques had thatched roofs.

The oldest mosque found on the island was the old Jumah mosque which stood on the western side of the island near the present primary health centre. It was a dilapidated structure supposed to have been constructed for the use of the local inhabitants when they embraced Islam sometime during the 13<sup>th</sup> or the 14<sup>th</sup> century. When this mosque became old and was beyond repair, another Jumah mosque was constructed at the centre of the island. As this mosque was a small structure, it was dismantled and the present new Jumah mosque was constructed in its place.

## **Central Public Works Department CPWD**

Since 1959, the CPWD had taken up the construction of a series of buildings on this island. By 1964, buildings for a high school, hostel, girls' school, dak bangalow, primary health centre, wireless station, community hall, and a number of residential houses for the government employees posted on the island, were completed. These buildings were constructed according to modern architectural specifications, but materials available on the island were also used extensively.

## **Civil Administration**

The present Administration took steps to improve the housing condition of the islanders. For achieving this object, loans and subsidies were made available to the natives for repairing old houses and constructing new ones. Subsidies were given only to the people belonging to the low income-group under the welfare of backward classes housing scheme. But under village housing scheme, loans were available for any needy person who intended to construct or repair a house at a cost not exceeding Rs. 5,000.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:2 February 2016

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The earliest public institution found on the island is the *cutchery*, the seat of the local administrative authority namely, the Tahsildar. Under the coir monopoly scheme for purchasing the coir from the spinners and for giving rice in exchange, there was one coir depot of which the Karani was in charge. The overall control of the coir depot was however placed in the hands of the Tahsildar. For carrying out the construction work undertaken by the CPWD, one office of the Assistant Engineer was opened on Amini in the year 1961. The Assistant Engineer posted at Amini had his jurisdiction over all the islands of the Amindivi group.

### **Post Office, Other Offices and Schools**

In 1960 a post office and in the succeeding year, a wireless station were opened on this island. For agricultural development an Agricultural Field man was appointed in 1961, who supervised the government agricultural demonstration farm and rendered extension services. Up until 1960, facilities only for primary education were available on Amini. But the educational facilities were enhanced by the opening of a high school. To encourage female education, a separate middle school for girls was also opened on this island. There was a hostel attached to the high school with provision for accommodating a hundred students. Students from other islands studying in the Government High School at Amini were admitted to this hostel. Education was free for all students at all levels. The students also received free books and writing materials. The girl students studying in all standards were provided with free dress, and the boys studying in the secondary classes were provided with two pairs of uniforms; free mid-day meal was given to every student.

### **Dispensary and Public Health Service**

The dispensary at Amini was equipped with modern medicines and surgical instruments, and was kept under the control of a qualified doctor. During 1962, a separate hospital building was constructed, and the dispensary was raised to the level of a primary health centre with a Medical Officer as its head and with more staff to assist him. A touring Lady Medical Officer had also been appointed in 1958 to look after maternity and child welfare centres of all the islands of the Union Territory. Moreover, the patients who suffered from chronic and serious diseases were required to be sent to the mainland, to receive specialized treatment. In such cases

the entire expenditure involved in providing specialized treatment including the maintenance charges of the escorts accompanying the patients were borne by the Administration.

The public health problems of the island were being looked after by a Health Inspector and his assistants. Before his appointment in 1956, the sanitary conditions on the island were far from satisfactory. Almost all the houses and their surroundings were kept unclean. As the plinth of the houses were low, the floor remained damp, particularly during the rainy season, and the crawling children moved about on this floor in sand and dirt. Due to this, most of the children suffered from different types of diseases. There was no practice of sanitation, and the refuse was left to accumulate at every place. Sea shore and fields were used for defecation; scores of burial grounds were distributed unevenly in the midst of living areas. Step wells were in use for drinking water and bathing tanks contained stinking water. The mosquito menace was intolerable; innumerable ditches for retting coconut husks provided ample facilities for their breeding.

Efforts to remove the unhealthy conditions were made by the Health Inspector and team. Many step wells and other unused ditches were filled. Local people were encouraged to convert their step wells into drawing wells. Larvicidal oil was sprayed in all the pits containing stagnant water. Ditches used by the islanders for retting coconut husks posed a difficult problem because the Larvicidal oil discoloured the coconut fibre. Therefore, spraying of petrol and other type of Larvicidal agents had to be tried. Dredging and cleaning of bathing tanks was taken up periodically. For popularizing the use of regular latrines for answering the call of nature, water closet concrete slabs were provided free of cost by the administration. Further, to give an incentive to keep every house neat and clean, a prize was instituted to be given to the cleanest house every year.

### **Health Awareness**

Some idea of the health conditions of the people on this island can be obtained from the data collected in a rapid health survey of 1960 to 1961 conducted on all the islands by a team of doctors and other technical persons to find out the incidence of major diseases like leprosy, nutritional diseases, and anaemia and skin diseases among others. Another important public institution found on the island was the cooperative society. On Amini this institution was present

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 16:2 February 2016

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since 1956. The initiative for organizing a cooperative society on the island had been taken by U.R. Panickar, who was then the Deputy Tahsildar of this island. The society was lodged in a neat building which had been constructed by raising funds from the local people. This building had been inaugurated by the president of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, when he visited the island on second February, 1956.

### **Cultural Institutions**



There were no cultural institutions on the island. Some local people who were trained in the popular folk dances of the island called Kolkali and Parichakkali used to give performances at the time of the visits of dignitaries or in association with marriage functions. Oppana pattu, popularly known as Mappila Pattu on the Malabar Coast, had found its way to the island. Singing Oppana Pattu to the accompaniment and clapping was a special feature of marriage celebrations.

The people of Amini Island have varying shades of reddish brown skin colour. The dress of the people of Amini resembled that of the Malabar Muslims. Men generally went about in a coloured or white loin cloth tied tight to the waist from right to left, and kept in position with a waist band. To this waist band, amulets of copper or silver containing texts from the “Quran” were conveniently attached. The amulets were supposed to have powers to ward off evil spirits and to prevent misfortune. There was no distinction between the dress of boys and adult males except that the latter generally hung a key bunch, with a small knife on the waist band. Men

belonging to the aristocratic households wore head gear or simply wore on their shoulders a folded thin silk or cotton shawl. Shirts were worn on festive occasions or while going out. Most adult males wore sandals, leather shoes, or slippers and it was almost rule to use footwear while going to the mosque to offer prayers. Until the first of the present century, the people of low social status were forbidden to use shirts, footwear or umbrella. But this restriction has long been removed.

The dress of women consisted of a coloured or white loin cloth, with coloured borders. The loin cloth was kept in position by means of a waist band as in the case of males. They also wore amulets on their waist. Women from rich households wore a belt over the loin cloth to keep it in position. A white, thin tight blouse with long sleeves, which reached up to the waist, formed the only upper garment of women. These blouses were stitched on the island by the women themselves, and were embroidered with expert hands. A long cloth either white or coloured was used for covering the hair. Women did observe purdah, while small girls went about wearing only a loin cloth.

Men wore moustaches and shaved off their head completely. A few kept both beard and moustache, but shaved off the head. Boys below the age of five were always seen with clean shaven heads. Boys and young men had, however started cropping their hair. Girls below the age of twelve kept their hair plaited at the back, whereas adult women tied it into a knot or a kind of bun.

## **Census**

According to the census taken in 1963 in connection with the present study, this island had a population of 3,411 persons, excluding all persons who had migrated from the mainland and other islands in recent years to work in the different departments of the Union Territory Administration. This population included 1,806 men and 1,605 women. There were constructed 471 households of which 13 belonged to the Muslims, who had migrated from Malabar Coast many years ago and settled down here permanently. Some of the male members belonging to these households had married the native women, but they had not amalgamated completely with the indigenous population. The indigenous population was distinguishable into three caste-like endogamous groups, namely the Koya, Malmi and the Melacheri.

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Of the three endogamous groups found among the indigenous population, the Koya were the principal landowners and subsisted on coconut cultivation. Traditionally they were the proprietors of the Odams and at one time had monopolized the entire trade and commerce of the island. They were a privileged class and thereby enjoyed the right to occupy all prestigious positions in the society. The Malmi were expert sailors, and plied the Odams of the Koya. They were the tenants of the Koya, and did not carry on coconut cultivation for supplementing their income, which they were able to derive from navigation. The Melacheri were the agricultural serfs of the Koya, and were engaged in coconut plucking and toddy tapping. They belonged to the lowest rung of the society, and constituted the entire labour force of the island. They lived on the plantations of their Koya landlords and were tied to their masters in perpetual bondage. Their women spun coir which accounted for the major part of the coir production of the island. The Melacheri also suffered from many social disabilities which are being gradually removed. The rules of caste distinction however, had not enforced any social norms for segregated living, exchange of cooked food, social distance or ritual purity among the different groups.

It's quite obvious that more than half of the indigenous population was composed of the Melacheri and the rest belonged to the Koya and the Malmi groups. The Malmi were a small group and constituted only 12.50 percent of the total indigenous population. Among the Malmi the percentage of the illiterates to the total Malmi population was 43.58 and the percentage of male and female illiterates to their respective population was 25.11 and 67.32 respectively. In respect of the Melacheri, the corresponding figures were 40.96 percent illiterate in respect of the total and 36.92 in respect of males and 58.81 in respect of females. It will be seen that the proportion of the illiterates was maximum among the Malmi and minimum among the Koya. If the proportion of the illiterates is considered sex-wise then it will be seen that the Koya had the minimum percentage of male illiterates and Melacheri had the maximum, but in respect of the females, the maximum percentage of the illiterates was found among the Malmi and the minimum among the Melacheri.

## **Conclusion**

The island of Amini is the Administrative headquarters of the Amindivi group of islands. It has a total area of 251.71 hectares, and measures 3.5 km in length and 1.6 km in breadth at the

widest portion. This island lies on the 11<sup>05'</sup> North latitude and 72<sup>045'</sup> East longitude, and is situated about 249 km away from Mangalore which is the nearest port on the mainland for it. This island can be approached from all directions as there are no dangerous rocks lying in its vicinity. It has a small lagoon on the western side, and the island proper fills the interior of the ring reef. It is small on the west, and larger towards the north. The surface of the island is very even, and at no place is more than 3.5 meters above sea level.

Lakshadweep archipelago, India's smallest Union Territory has many strange secrets to unfold which have not been told by anyone so far. Scarcity of authentic text books regarding these tiny atolls of India is a major problem as it is very difficult to get genuine and reliable information. Notwithstanding all these facts this paper throws light on the socio-economic and cultural background of Amini Island of Lakshadweep. Among all the islands in these groups Amini bears some sort of prominence with regard to historical and cultural factors.

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