

Statement and appeal on the retrograde moves in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep

Vikalp Sangam Core Group

11 June 2021

We, the Core Group members of Vikalp Sangam (Alternative Confluences), are shocked at the recent developments in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep. The actions of the Administrator of the UT, Mr. Praful Khoda Patel, are arbitrary and insensitive, and will have irreversible ecological, social and cultural impacts on the inhabitants of Lakshadweep and the rich and fragile ecosystem in and around the islands. ***We call for all the recent regressive legal and administrative measures to be withdrawn immediately, Mr. Patel to be recalled with immediate effect, and a widespread process of consultation in the islands be initiated to evolve a development plan that is in keeping with their ecological and cultural ethos.***

Background

Lakshadweep, the smallest union territory (UT) of India is an archipelago of 35 islands in the Arabian Sea; it was declared a UT in 1956. The islands form the tops of a vast undersea mountain range, the Chagos-Lakshadweep Ridge. Only 11 of these islets are inhabited and the population, as per 2011 census is 64,473. They are categorised as scheduled tribes. Kavaratti serves as the capital of the UT and the region comes under the jurisdiction of the Kerala High Court. The Lakshadweep has one District Panchayath and 10 Grama Panchayaths. Main occupations of the people are fisheries and coconut farming. The Islands are historically connected to Kerala, ruled by the Kannur Kingdom for centuries until the British took over in 1903. The people, predominantly Muslim (97%), speak Malayalam which is also the medium of education. Their main connecting points with the mainland are Kochi and Baypore (Kozhikode) with limited operations with Mangalore and Tuticorin.

Lakshadweep is a peace-loving territory with one of the lowest crime rates in India. It has very low poverty rate and very low economic disparity. The highly progressive land reforms regulation of 1964 ensured land rights to the peasants. The islands also have unique biodiversity with some of India's richest coral reefs.

Controversial actions of the Administrator

The present Administrator is trying to impose a series of reforms that would drastically alter the social, cultural and religious fabric and economic activities of the people of the islands. Development activities in the UT have to be in accordance with the Integrated Islands Management Plan (IIMP), approved by the Ministry of Environment and Forests & Climate Change (MoEF&CC) in 2015. The IIMP, prepared initially by the National Centre for Earth Sciences Studies (NCESS), Thiruvananthapuram, was finalised after incorporating recommendations by the Supreme Court appointed Justice Raveendran Committee. The reforms proposed by the new Administrator are not in tune with the IIMP. The actions of the Administrator seem to be part of a three-pronged strategy – pave way for big players in tourism sector, restrict cultural-religious freedom, and cut off links with Kerala.

The proposed regulations have been vehemently opposed by the local people as these regulations are a grave threat to their deep cultural and diverse linguistic traditions and history. The majority of the inhabitants are fisherpeople, who have evolved through centuries

as stakeholders of local ecosystems and developed identities fundamentally intertwined with nature. The forced imposition of ‘development’ will cause social and economic crisis among the community and also lead to cultural erasure. This assault by the current regime is also in line with its well-known hatred for Muslim populations.

These plans and regulations, designed to enable large-scale corporate entry into the tourism and hospitality sectors, are not only anti-people, but also anti-environment. The proposed ‘development plans will irreversibly damage marine ecosystems including coral reefs, and speed up the climate crisis. This goes against our national policy regarding Climate Change, and is a violation of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 as well as India's obligations under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992. The plans for on-shore and off-shore development of Lakshadweep UT for high-end tourism, and to make Kavaratti into a “smart city” are rightly opposed by local people for failing to take into account acute limiting factors like availability of land, scarcity of fresh water.

The measures taken and proposals adopted by the administration are in violation of the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution. The people of Lakshadweep, with women at the forefront, have been justifiably protesting against these regulations.

The draft ‘Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Regulation, 2021’, allows the Administrator to unilaterally detain people for up to one year without public notice, and has been brought in with no justification as to its necessity. On the contrary, the UT has one of the lowest crime rates in the entire nation. Moreover, the Indian Navy has a base there in the form of INS Dweeprakashak and the Coast Guard is also present there. They can very well handle any law-and-order issue, if it arises in future. As a matter of fact, contradictorily, alcohol restrictions have been relaxed to support the focus on tourism, in spite of resistance from the community. It seems the PASA regulation is intended at suppressing opposition to the ulterior motives of the administration.

The draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation, 2021, concentrates planning powers with the administration, and empowers it to take any piece of land on the islands, irrespective of its ownership, for “development” purposes, to further tourism expansion. It causes justified concern not only regarding the ecological impact, but also when it comes to the impossibility to provide adequate rehabilitation to the population to be displaced, and compensation for the loss of livelihood through fishing.

In 2012, the Central Government had handed over five departments, directly connected to the people – Education, Animal Husbandry, Agriculture, Fisheries and Health Care - to the Local Self Governments. A committee headed by S S Meenakshi Sundaram had recommended more powers to the LSGs. However, the Administrator has taken back all these departments from the District Panchayat, through an ordinance dated May 5th, 2021.

Another regulation prevents citizens with more than two children from contesting Gram Panchayat elections. The draft Lakshadweep Animal Preservation Regulation, 2021, bans beef, including removing it from mid-day meals of a population that is 97% Muslim and for whom the main source of protein is beef and fish. Violations carry draconian penalties. This is a clear communal attack.

Air ambulance was being provided to patients for treatment at the main land (Kochi and surroundings) on the basis of recommendations by medical officers of respective islands. Now this power of the medical officers has been taken back and permission for air ambulance has been centralised and is vested with a committee headed by the health secretary.

These plans and regulations have been introduced without public consultation of the small communities of Lakshadweep, and without regard to their social and religious sensibilities,

their ways of life and livelihood, their economic well-being, and their environmental and natural resource situation.

The administration is trying to block trade links of the islanders with Beypore port in Kozhikode and plan to take it to Mangalore.

The Administrator has also, shockingly, relaxed the hitherto mandatory Covid-quarantine for all visitors to the islands. Consequently, after more than a year with no Covid cases, the deliberate sabotaging of containment efforts has led to more than 26 deaths, as well as the arbitrary imprisonment of those resisting such overt suppression.

In solidarity with the people of Lakshadweep

Vikalp Sangam stands in solidarity with the people of Lakshadweep, in their struggle for social justice and ecological rights. We condemn the attempt of Lakshadweep administration to paint the legitimate concerns of the inhabitants of the islands and of those in solidarity, as ‘misleading propaganda’, and demand the following:

1. Withdraw immediately Lakshadweep’s Administrator Praful Khoda Patel and replace him by an I.A.S cadre officer as previously done.
2. Suspend the plans for on-shore and off-shore development of Lakshadweep for high-end tourism, and making Kavaratti into a “smart city”.
3. Conduct social and environmental impact assessments of all proposed ‘development initiatives’ with transparent public hearings and consultations and involving local people as well as those who have been working for conservation of biodiversity in the region; explore decentralized and regenerative alternatives in participation with the local people privileging the local livelihood needs and the ecosystems.
4. Restore the powers of Local Self Governments with immediate effect.
5. Withdraw, in public interest, the draft Regulations and other measures like relaxing alcohol restrictions, relaxing Covid quarantine, etc.
6. Withdraw the ban on beef and respect the food habits of the local people.
7. Scrap the Prevention of Anti-Social Activities Regulation, 2021.
8. Roll back the move to by-pass the islander’s trade links with Beypore and move it to Mangalore; do not tamper with the historical, economic and cultural connect of the islanders with Kerala.
9. Stop the repressive measures and legal action by the UT administration against people rightfully and peacefully protesting these authoritarian measures.

We remind the Home Minister of India to keep his promise to consult the people of Lakshadweep, and immediately engage in widespread public consultation processes across the islands on the policy and legal directions they would like to see in the islands.

We call upon all concerned citizens, environmental groups, democratic movements to stand by the people of Lakshadweep Islands against this brazen attack on their culture, identity, economy and ecology.

Vikalp Sangam Core Group

Endorsed by members of Vikalp Sangam Core Group, listed below alphabetically. The Vikalp Sangam process is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and searches for alternatives in practice and vision. Over 70 movements & organisations around the country are involved. For more information: <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/>

ACCORD (Tamil Nadu)
 Adivasi Lives Matter (national)
 Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture
 (national)
 Alternative Law Forum (Bengaluru)
 Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the
 Environment (Bengaluru)
 BHASHA (Gujarat)
 Bhoomi College (Bengaluru)
 Blue Ribbon Movement (Mumbai)
 Centre for Education and Documentation (Mumbai)
 Centre for Environment Education (Gujarat)
 Centre for Equity Studies (Delhi)
 CGNetSwara (Chhattisgarh)
 ChalakudypuzhaSamrakshana Samithi / River
 Research Centre (Kerala)
 ComMutiny: The Youth Collective (Delhi)
 Deccan Development Society (Telangana)
 Deer Park (Himachal Pradesh)
 Desert Resource Centre (Rajasthan)
 Development Alternatives (Delhi)
 Dharamitra (Maharashtra)
 Ekta Parishad (several states)
 Ektha (Chennai)
 EQUATIONS (Bengaluru)
 Extinction Rebellion India (national)
 Gene Campaign (Delhi)
 Goonj (Delhi)
 Greenpeace India (Bengaluru)
 Health SwaraajSamvaad (national)
 Ideosync (Delhi)
 Jagori Rural (Himachal Pradesh)
 KagadKach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (Pune)
 Kalpavriksh (Maharashtra)
 Knowledge in Civil Society (national)
 Kriti Team (Delhi)
 Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (Ladakh)
 Local Futures (Ladakh)
 Maadhyam (Delhi)
 Maati (Uttarakhand)
 Mahila Kisan AdhikarManch (national)
 Mahalir Association for Literacy, Awareness and
 Rights (MALAR)

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Rajasthan)
 Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network
 (national)
 National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (national)
 National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights
 (national)
 National Coalition for Natural Farming (national)
 Nirangal (Tamil Nadu)
 Non-timber Forest Produce Exchange India (national)
 North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society
 (Meghalaya)
 People's Resource Centre (Delhi)
 Peoples' Science Institute (Uttarakhand)
 reStore (Chennai)
 Sahjeevan (Kachchh)
 Sambhaavnaa (Himachal Pradesh)
 Samvedana (Maharashtra)
 Sangama (Bengaluru)
 Sangat (Delhi)
 School for Democracy (Rajasthan)
 School for Rural Development and Environment
 (Kashmir)
 Shikshantar (Rajasthan)
 Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (Ladakh)
 Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Women's Association
 Social Entrepreneurship Association (Tamil Nadu)
 SOPPECOM (Maharashtra)
 South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy
 (Delhi)
 Students' Environmental and Cultural Movement of
 Ladakh (Ladakh)
 Thanal (Kerala)
 Timbaktu Collective (Andhra Pradesh)
 Titli Trust (Uttarakhand)
 Tribal Health Initiative (Tamil Nadu)
 URMUL (Rajasthan)
 Vrikshamitra (Maharashtra)
 Watershed Support Services and Activities Network
 (Andhra Pradesh/Telangana)
 Youth Alliance (Delhi)
 Yugma Network (national)
 Let India Breathe
 Travellers' University
 Dinesh Abrol
 Sushma Iyengar

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