



## Changing Patterns of Livelihood of the Melachari Tribe, Chetlat Island, Lakshadweep Union Territory

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the changing trend of livelihood strategy of the Melachari tribe in a tiny coral island called Chetlat off the western coast of the Indian Peninsula in the Arabian Sea. This island is within the Union Territory of Lakshadweep and Minicoy. Given the island's extremely limited resources and high density (2255 people per square kilometer), the objective of this research is to highlight the strategies used by the islanders for subsistence and to better understand the livelihood mechanism at two different points of time. The paper also draws attention to the common property resources of their traditional matrilineal family institution called *tharvads* of the Melachari people and the role of the developmental activities of the Government while analysing their changing livelihood strategy.

**Keywords:** *tharvads*, Melachari, patterns of livelihood, common property resources, migration.

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### Introduction

It is a truism to say that the concepts of livelihood and 'sustainable livelihoods' (SL) are very much related. A livelihood encompasses "the capabilities (including both material and social resources) and activities essential for earning a living" (Scoones 1998: 5). A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base to offer sustainable livelihood prospects to the next generation and also contribute short and long-term benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels (Chambers and Conway 1992).

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Such a view holds many attractions for anthropological analysis for adopting a holistic perspective incorporating social, economic, and environmental considerations, into its key concept of “livelihood”; and it allows for a process of change and adaptation as conditions change, even dramatically (Stone 2003). In reality, a person’s livelihood is never simply a matter of finding or making a home, exchanging money, obtaining food for the family table, or exchanging goods in the market. Stone emphasizes that identity-construction processes are inherent in the pursuit of livelihoods. Thus, earning a living entails engaging in social relationships with others, including relatives, friends, strangers, buyers, sellers, employers, and government agents, and these social relationships are built around identities based on kinship, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and social class (Wallman 2010; Tripathy 2018).

A detailed study on Chetlat, a comparatively less developed tiny island in Laccadive<sup>1</sup>, Minicoy, and Amindivi Islands, was published in the form of a Special Monograph under the Village Survey Series of 1961 (published in 1967) Census Publications under the able guidance of noted Anthropologist, B.K. Roy Burman. The report had successfully addressed the specific problems of social change on this island in detail. A restudy of some of these villages (surveyed in 1961 by the Census of India) was taken up by the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) under the twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) to understand the manner and direction in which Indian villages are changing under the influence of different planned developmental programs.

The present paper on the changing livelihood of the Melachari tribe living in Chetlat Island village is part of the whole project initiated by the AnSI. The paper highlights changes in the traditional livelihood patterns of the Melachari tribe with reference to their migration history, religion, sources of livelihood, land ownership and descent rules, food preferences, material culture, household and residence patterns, etc. The impact of the introduction of new Government rules and policies on the basic outlook and life patterns of Melacharis has also been discussed here.

## **Methodology**

The Socio-Economic Survey Report on Chetlat Island (1967) was conducted under the leadership of noted Anthropologist, B.K. Roy Burman is taken up as the baseline for the present paper. The fieldwork for the current study was carried out between April 2015 and February 2016. A specially designed schedule was canvassed to collect demographic data as well as assess the islanders’ socioeconomic profile. Data from 193 households were collected from

three wards namely Ward-3 (northern part of the island), Ward-5 (southern part of the island), and Ward-6 (eastern part of the island). In these wards, the majority of the families were fishermen and landless labourers. Traditional anthropological techniques such as observation, case study, and key informant interview were used in this study to gather information from the locals

## **The Locale**

Chetlat is the northernmost inhabited island in Lakshadweep's Union Territory, formerly known as the Laccadive, Minicoy, and Amindivi Islands. Besides Chetlat, there are 10 other inhabited and 16 uninhabited islands within this UT. Chetlat Island (11°41' North latitude and 72°41' East longitude) lying lengthwise north to south, is about 2.68 km in length and width is about 0.59 km with a total area of 1.40 sq km. The reef and lagoon are located to the west of the island while the sea on the eastern side is quite deep. It is well-connected with a few port cities on the mainland. Chetlat is located at a distance of 145 miles from Mangalore (Karnataka), while Cannanore and Kozhikode in Kerala, are situated at distances of 160 miles and 178 miles respectively.

The total population of Chetlat as per the 1981 Census was 1484, (734 males and 750 females) and the sex ratio was 1022 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate was 49.93 percent. The total number of households was 357, with 344 Muslim, 11 Hindu, and 2 Christian households. (Census of India 1981). In 2011 the total population was 2347 (1,172 were males and 1,175 were females) out of which 2,195 (93.52 percent) belonged to a single Scheduled Tribe, namely the Melachari (Census of India, 2011). Melachari happens to be the only Scheduled Tribe in Chetlat islands (Roy-Burman 1967:7). At the same time, the number of households in Chetlat rose to 526 in 2011 out of which 494 households belonged the Melachari community. The total population of the Melachari tribe in Chetlat was 2,195 persons out of which 1,068 were males and 1,127 were females. In Chetlat island 83.44 percent of males 76.34 percent of females were literate while the density of population was 2255 as per the 2011 Census (Census of India 2011).

Because of their economic and social backwardness, the entire indigenous population of Lakshadweep UT has been classified as a Scheduled Tribe, the Melachari. According to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes list (modification orders), 1956, residents of Lakshadweep who were born in these islands, as well as both of their parents, are considered as a Scheduled Tribe, namely the Melachari people. They speak a language that includes words from Tamil, Kannada, Arabic, Malayalam, English, and Hindi, among other

languages, with the exception of Minicoy, where they speak Mahl. Some of the older generations referred to it as “jesri”<sup>2</sup> or “Dweep Basha”.

### **The Story of Migration and the People**

The name “Chetlat” comes from the Arabic word “chetlatun,” which means “small plant.” According to a legend, after Kolathunad King, Uday Varman made the announcement, high caste Hindus decided to migrate to this Arabian Sea Island (Roy- Burman 1967:4). They took control of the islands of Amini, Kavaratti, Androth, and Kalapani. Because the people who resided on the islands belonged to the higher classes, they were given the name *tharvad* (*tharvad* refers to their matrilineal, matrilocal extended family which also managed their common property resources). Later, several persons from the lower castes were hired as servants by the early high-class immigrants. These people then moved to the five other islands known as Melachari Island or the Servant Islands. These islands were known as Chetlat, Kiltan, Kadmat, Bitra, and Amini.

The Chetlat islanders are Melacharis by origin. Many believed that they were drawn from two castes on the mainland (India), Thiyyas and Mukkuvas, prior to their conversion to Islam. Significantly, the Amindivi group of islands (Amini, Kadmat, Kiltan, Chetlat, and Bitra), of which Chetlat is a part, has three endogamous populations: the landowners are known as the Koya; the sailors, who occupy the middle rank in society, are known as the Malmi; and the third group, known as the Melacharis, are toddy<sup>3</sup> tappers, tree climbers, servants, and labourers. Melacharis have a lower social status. The traditional occupation of the landless Melachari forefathers was climbing coconut trees to pluck the nuts and tap *neerah*, the sweet toddy. In course of time, Melacharis of Chetlat became an expert in the art of building small old seafaring vessels called *Odam* (country boat) to huge ones carrying a cargo of about 60 tons of weight on the rough seas to ports of Mangalore (269 km), Cochin (432 km) and Calicut (330 km). Previously, Chetlat boat builders received orders from foreign countries to build boats even for going on expeditions around the world. Thus, the traditional means of communication between this island and the mainland was the local country boat known as ‘odam’. Since 1963, the Administration is providing motor launches for communication from one island to another and also to the mainland.

The island’s main constraint is its geographical isolation and lack of access to the mainland. People not only rely on hospitals and educational institutions on the mainland for specialised treatment and higher education, but also for

materials for building RCC<sup>4</sup> type of houses and roads. Except for coconut and fish, Melachari people were completely reliant on the mainland market for all items of daily use, and special items for marriage functions or other rituals as these requirements were not available on the island.

### **Social and Cultural Traditions: A Brief Historical Overview**

The story of the Melachari tribe is unique in many aspects. All the original inhabitants of the Island are Muslim by religion. According to historical and linguistic evidence, the early major migrations to the islands possibly occurred in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. After about four centuries there was an enmasse<sup>5</sup> conversion of the people of these islands to Islam brought there by Arab traders. Significantly, even after their conversion enmasse from Hinduism to Islam, the converted populations retained many of the cultural traditions such as matriliney which the early migrants had brought with them and has survived to this day (Dube 1969; Kutty 1972; Ittaman 1976; Saigal 1990). According to different scholars, the conversion of the people of Chetlat Island to Islam was supposed to have taken place either during the 7th century or in the 13th century, which synchronises with the rise of the Ali Raja family of Cannanore, the only Muslim dynasty of Malabar. "They took a keen interest in the propagation of Islam and were responsible for the construction of many mosques and patronising religious preachers belonging to the Islands. In spite of being converted to Islam, the island continued to have caste distinctions. The Koyas were the landlords, Malmis, the sailors, and Melacharis, the cultivators and workers" (Ramunny 1989: 96). Since their conversion, all the original inhabitants including the Melachari are Sunni Muslims who practice Islamic law according to the Shafi School. The islanders speak Malayalam as their mother tongue which is very much mixed with Arabic, Urdu, Tamil, and Kannada. The present study reveals that there were 27 mosques including three main mosques, the biggest among them is called *Jumma* mosque (where Friday prayers and Id congregation are held). Out of 27, two are exclusively for women. The *Kazi* (religious priest) leads the Friday prayers in Chetlat. Women regularly go to the mosque to offer their prayers. On the surface, it appears that there is real equality between genders. But according to the customary law relating to a property, it is the women, who have the right of inheritance and hence are not equal, rather enjoy higher status in comparison to men.

Tradition means handing down cultural elements from generation to generation within the particular culture. The relationship between a community's ecological setting with their material and non-material (or social

and cultural) traditions is intricate and multidimensional. Here, the study restricts it focuses on the type of house, food patterns, and household organisation i.e., the property managing *tharvad* institution of the Melachari people to shed light on their changing livelihood pattern in the context of the limited resource base and limited connectivity of their island. The role of developmental activities on the part of the Government will also come into the picture.

### **Institution of *Tharvad* (*tharavad*)<sup>4</sup>**

Even after being converted to Islam for several centuries their matrilineal social systems of practicing *tharvad* system (the matrilineal system of property inheritance) and *Marumakkathayam law*<sup>6</sup> has been continuing among the Melacharis by helping in as survival mechanism. The property owned by a *tharvad* is jointly possessed by all members and every individual irrespective of age and sex, has a right to it. Though the male members also have a right to the property, they can only enjoy the fruits of the '*tharvad*' as long as they are alive. After their demise, the share of the property will not be handed down to their offspring, but would revert to the '*tharvad*'. In this way, it was ensured that the property will not be shredded into pieces but will remain intact with the *tharvad*. In the 1960s, it was reported that there were only nine *tharvads* in this island. Those were *Pallithithiyoda*, *Briyanthithiyoda*, *Kalpura*, *Cheriapura*, *Vadakeroda*, *Melapura*, *Manamathiyoda*, *Askaithiyoda*, and *Kuriyathiyoda* ( Roy Burman, et al. 1967:6). These nine *tharvads* resided in the central sector of the island and reclaimed three different areas for cultivation. The '*tharvads*' which reclaimed the same area for cultivation were grouped together to constitute a single '*koottam*' (cluster). Thus, there were three '*koottams*' on the island (Roy Burman 1967). The traditional mode of residence is duo local, each household having its separate household name. The girls after marriage stay in their mother's house and their husband, who stays at the day time at their mother's house, visit their wives at night. Normally they take day meals at their mother's home and night meals at their wives' house. His responsibilities are to take care of his sisters and their children and other persons residing in his mother's house whereas his own children will be looked after by his wives' brother. Children born of a couple remain with the mother and have the right to the property of their mothers. Similar ethnographic findings have been conveyed by Dube and Kutty (1969) and A. R. Kutty (1972) on another similar coral island of the Laccadives called Kalpeni, 230.136 km southwest of the port of Kozhikod. Significantly, Kathleen Gough (1973) compared the ethnographic data from Kutty (1972); her own fieldwork material supported by "reading

on the Kerala mainland, and on a Census of India Monograph on Chetlat, the northernmost of the Laccadive Island” (prepared by Roy Burman and his team 1967 which happens to be the base line for the present paper). Gough notes that “this book provides a less sophisticated analysis than the other two but contains much useful information.” According to Gough, the islander’s lineages and their segments bear close resemblance with those of the Nayars across Kerala and Mappillas and Tiyyars of the North Malabar regions whose ancestors most likely arrived at the Laccadives islands with both matrilineal descent and duolocal residence either before or during the fourteenth century.

A series of new Acts and regulations were introduced ([https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/legislative\\_references/REGULATIONS%201960-1968\\_0.pdf](https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/legislative_references/REGULATIONS%201960-1968_0.pdf)) during the period between 1960- 68 that ushered in a new era and the people of the Islands of Lakshadweep faced new courts, new rights, and new obligations. In the past, their social life was essentially community-oriented, their notions of life and property is based on common property and impartible estates in the form of *tharvad* properties and coconut trees on one non-demarcated plot of land. Formerly, during the British period, since 1877, for each of the Amindivi group of islands including the Chetlat, that was attached to the district of Malabar, an Amin appointed by the government from among the *karnavars* or elders who represented important *tharvads*. These *karnavars* helped Amin in the administration of justice (Dube 1994). The modernization of the legal system had a profound impact on social life. Its impact upon the joint family *tharvad* is very significant. Before the enactment of the new laws, the joint family property was governed by a definite system of customary laws with considerable emphasis on precedent (Dube 1994). The property could not be transferred or alienated unless written consent was given by all the members of the *tharvad*. This consent was known as *Razi* or *sammathapathram* meaning compromise. Vijay Kumar (2006) cited that cohesiveness in the *tharvad* system is disintegrating. New branches of *tharvads* were emerging owing to the lack of space in the main *tharvad*. It was not able to accommodate the growing number of people in the traditional household. It was also observed that members of the household did not have full confidence in the leader of the *tharvad* on account of which the authority of the head had weakened. The *tharvad* branches also functioned as the main *tharvad* and all the members of the branch had an equal share in the property of the *tharvad*.

The present study recorded over thirty *tharvads*. Most of the households found in the present study were reported to have been branching out from the above original *tharvads*.

## Changing Material Culture

**House types:** With the gradual disintegration of the earlier *tharvad* households, changes in house building and house types are also notable. Until the mid-nineteenth century, nearly one-fifth of Chetlat's houses had one *pathayam* (secret room) in the underground to store valuables such as ornaments and to hide their ladies in order to protect their honour at the hands of pirates. It was reported that in the 1960s, all houses were thatched with coconut leaves. During this study it was observed that almost all of the residential and official buildings were of bricks and cement, with RCC roofs, found all over the island. There were very few traditional *tharvad*-style houses with tiled roofs left. Significantly all of the building materials had to be brought from the mainland, either Mangalore or Cochin as the island lacked all these resources.

**Food pattern:** The islanders' staple diet consisted of rice and fish. They usually ate three meals a day. In addition to fish, beef, mutton, and chicken were consumed, which were brought from the mainland based on ship availability. Due to a lack of fodder, cows could not be reared as they died owing to lack of food. Kattan tea, a tea decoction with sugar, was their favourite drink. Every day, they drank 5-6 cups of Kattan Chaya (black liquor tea). The village well was the only source of drinking water. Almost every home had a rainwater collection system. The drinking water was boiled before consumption.

**Resources and Livelihood pattern:** The livelihood of the Melachari islanders centered around two resources of the island: these were marine fishing and to some extent coconut production. With the initiative from Government Departments, they were also engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, and horticulture, all of which had limited opportunities due to the island's limited productive land. As a result, the islanders relied primarily on marine fishing and some coconut production. The recent trend was more focused on fishing because it brought in more money when marketed on the mainland. Fishing had seen a significant increase as a result of the introduction of modern fishing techniques and mechanised boats. The earlier occupation of building traditional boats had been discontinued since long past.

Coconuts are the island's primary crop. In addition to coralline sand, the island has alkaline soil which is ideal for growing coconuts since it is rich in calcium and magnesium. Except in its early stages, caring for a coconut tree does not require much effort. The coconuts are de-husked with the help of a thick and sharp knife. The de-husked nuts are cut into halves and left for drying in the sun for some days for enabling easy separation of the kernel from the shells. Then the separated copra is further dehydrated by leaving it in



the sun so as to dry out completely. The dried coconuts are sold to the outlets provided by the co-operative supply and marketing society in Chetlat. The rate per quintal is nine thousand four hundred rupees. Among the different islands in the Union territory of Lakshadweep, the soil in Chetlat is considered to be poor for coconut growing. The amount of production of copra, as well as the market value of copra, is not the same each year. They also made vinegar from the juice of the coconut tree for their own consumption. There are no other crops that can be grown. No fodder is grown on the island. There is no pasture or grazing land to keep domesticated cattle like cows, sheep, etc. Leaves from breadfruit and coconut trees are given to goats to eat.

The proceeds of the sale of *copra* or dry coconut belong to the '*tharvads*' where the women have the right on the property. But '*Karnavan*' (brother of the eldest female of '*tharvad*') manages the property. He is accountable for his acts of omission and commissions to the members in '*tharvad*' who keep a close watch on the activities going on in the *tharvad*. The money earned through the sale of *copra* is meant to be for '*tharvad*'. The mother's brother having the authority of overseeing property has been noted by many anthropologists like Meyer Fortes from the Ashanti of Ghana; Malinowski from the Trobriand Islanders among many others (Hamer, 2005). In the Indian context, studies of Gough (1965, 1973, on Nayers of Kerala), Dube and Kutty (1969, on Kalpeni island, Laccadives) from South India, and Nongbri (1988) on Khasis of Meghalaya could be cited in this context. The yield of coconut per household per year was calculated to be 2553. Out of this yield, 760 nuts were used for household consumption and the remaining number of nuts (1793) was for marketing. From had One coir<sup>7</sup> production center was established on 18 September 1982 with one Instructor, one labourer on substantive employment, and seven labourers on a temporary basis. At the time of the present study, the coir making industry was not functioning though a new building for the small-scale industry was built for the same purpose.

**Fishing:** Fishing is one of the major sources of livelihood for the Melacharis of Chetlat. The fishing enterprise got a big boost in 1962 when Fisheries Department provided mechanised boats and outboard motors fitted on country crafts. Traditionally, the settlers practiced different methods of fishing like harpooning, hand linings, cast netting, etc. but after the formation of Union Territory in 1956, a major thrust was given to develop deep-sea fishing of tuna and shark. Fishing (inside the lagoon) is carried out on average for 3-4 hours a day. Deep-sea fishing requires much more time and a devoted team of 10-12 fishermen. There are two different categories of fish- lagoon fish and deep-sea

fish. Lagoon fish is considered to be good for health. In lagoon fishing, they generally avoid catching small and egg-bearing fish. The local names of various types of lagoon fish are –*kaduva*, *chammam*, *varifad*, *nilalam*, *naula*, *karakkam*, *fala*, *kaloram*, and *manjam*. The deep-sea fish are *ayakura*, *tuna (churan)*, *sharo* (shark), *olemin*, *kudremin*, *apnos*, *sawmin*, etc.

The preparation of ‘*masmin*’<sup>8</sup> from tuna catch is a profitable business among the Melacharis of Chetlat island. Owing to inadequate facilities available for cold storage and lack of instant transport to places on to mainland where the potential markets exist, the people of Lakshadweep, in general, took to the conversion of tuna catch into delicious ‘*masmin*’. Now a day’s almost the entire tuna fish landing is processed by a special method into ‘*masmin*’ which is esteemed as a delicacy in places like Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia. The product fetches a good market price and in fact, contributes a major share to the island’s economy.

**Animal husbandry:** Animal husbandry, in the past was very limited. The islanders being non-vegetarian they domesticate goats, poultry (which includes duck and cock), and to a limited extent cows for their own consumption. Department of animal husbandry supplies them the cattle goats, poultry as well as fodder for the animals.

**Horticulture:** They now grow vegetables like papaya, ladies’ finger, brinjal, tomato, drum stick, banana with the initiative of the Government. But the soil is sandy and salty, growing horticultural products on a large scale are not possible. In spite of that, a few households are growing vegetables.

### **The Pattern of Livelihood and its Changing Aspects**

With this background of the sources of livelihood vis a vis the natural resources of the Chetlat island, an attempt has been made in Table 1 to depict a clear picture of the primary source of income of the households in three different wards (3, 5, and 6) on the basis of educational and occupational pattern which is again based on ancestral resources and proximity to sea for fishing. The rest three Wards, (1,2, and 4) were inhabited by families, members of which are working as casual labourers in some other islands. For this reason, it was not possible to conduct in-depth fieldwork by using household schedules in these three wards. Therefore, data were collected from Wards 3, 5, and 6. While it was observed that ward no 3 is mainly inhabited by old established families who own quite a large number of coconut trees and also have requisite educational qualifications to get Government jobs, Ward 5 is represented by those who have very little ancestral properties in the form of coconut trees and are unable to get

into white collar Government services. They are mainly engaged as labourers. As Ward no 6 is situated close to the deep sea that facilitates easy fishing. Overall, the primary occupations are of five types namely coconut selling (14 per cent), fishing (17.62 percent, Government Service (36.79 per cent), Wage Labour (26.94 per cent), and running Provision Stores (4.66 percent) of which government service is the most prominent.

**Table 1: Family distribution by Source of Primary occupation**

Primary Occupation	Ward 6		Ward 5		Ward 3		Total
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Coconut Selling	4	6.06	1	1.41	22	39.29	27(13.99)
Fishing	21	31.82	7	9.86	6	10.71	34 (17.62)
Govt. Service	28	42.42	21	29.58	22	39.28	71(36.79)
Labour	10	15.15	39	54.93	3	5.36	52 (26.94)
Provision Store	3	4.55	3	4.22	3	5.36	9(4.66)
Total	66	100.00	71	100.00	56	100.00	193

Source: Fieldwork

It appears that Government service is the most important primary occupation in all the three Wards taken up for the present study. However, it is highest among the families of Ward 3 where selling of coconut (copra) as a primary occupation is also the highest. The occupational pattern of the families living in Ward 3 shows that the proportion of families engaged in selling copra and Government service is equal. It points to the fact that that these people not only own a considerable number of coconut trees but are also educated/qualified to get into Government jobs like school teachers, officers, and clerks in Banks and different Government Departments (like Fishing and Aviation, Agriculture, Mining, etc.).

Ward no 6 is situated towards the eastern side near the lagoon where the water is not shallow and is very near to the deep sea. Maybe for this situational advantage, compared to the other two Wards, quite a higher proportion (31.82) of families from this Ward are engaged in fishing in the seas. The deep-sea fishing is carried out in small groups of 3 to 4 persons. The groups of fishermen are now using a GPS system (provided by the Government) to locate their fishing and also to communicate with fellow fishermen of the group. Fishing has seen a significant increase as a result of the introduction of modern fishing techniques and mechanised boats. Such innovations have positively contributed not only towards the rise in the fish catch but also enabled them to sell fish in

the market as arranged by the Government Departments. But here also, the proportion of families relying on Government service is higher than fishing.

Ward 5 is mostly inhabited by working-class families having very little or no coconut tree who could not get into Government service. They are mostly engaged as day labourers (54.93%) in road building, repairing an embankment on the coral reefs, construction of residential buildings, and such activities. Compared to the other two wards, the proportion of Government service is also quite less (29.58%) followed by 9.86 % in fishing while as low as 1.41 % of families have coconut trees to pursue their livelihood.

Data from Table 1 may be compared with the findings from Roy Burman's study of 1967 to reveal the changes in the livelihood pattern among the Melachari people of Chetlat. In 1967, out of 59 households, fifty-three (90%) households stated coconut cultivation, three (5%) households reported collecting or plucking of coconuts, one household mentioned coil twisting (1.69%) and 2 (3.38%) households had reported P.W.D. labour as their primary occupation while only 5 (13.51%) household out of 37 household had been practicing fishing as a secondary occupation only. Besides fishing, sailing *Odum*, (21.61%) and shopkeeping (5.40%) were pursued as secondary occupations (Roy-Burman, 1967, 45-46).

Thus, it is apparent that there has been a tremendous change in the livelihood patterns of the Melachari tribe living in Chetlat island. In the traditional society, the *tharvads* used to safeguard the livelihood prospects of their members by acting as the fountainhead of all collective property. It safeguarded their common property resources from being divided and subdivided across generations. Vijay Kumar (2006) cited that in matters of property and kinship a *tharvad* remained a cohesive group while their social life was essentially community-oriented, their concepts of life and property were based on common property and impartible estates in the form of *tharvad* properties with more than a dozen people's coconut trees on one non-demarcated plot of land. However, with the introduction of new laws, regulations, and enactments from 1 November 1967, the people of the Islands of Lakshadweep faced new courts, new rights, and new obligations. Now cohesiveness in the *tharvad* system is disintegrating. New branches of *tharvad* are emerging and the complete trust in the authority of the head of the *tharvad* is also weakening day by day.

The gradual disintegration of the *tharvads* would have put a significant strain on the livelihood prospects of the community's new generation, but with the expansion of developmental programmes and activities undertaken

by the Government through its various Departments over the last six decades, new avenues for income generation and earning a living have opened up. The government is now providing the bulk of the Chetlat islander's means of living as Government servants followed by working as labourers mostly in Governmental schemes either directly or indirectly.

During and after the different Five Year Plan periods, it is revealed that a lion's share of the outlays were earmarked to meet the expenditure on infrastructure developments, which include the creation of transport and communication facilities, followed by health and education, gender equality, cooperative movement to eliminate the intermediaries who used to exploit the native, supply of electricity, agriculture and fisheries development to ensure sustained economic development and generate employment opportunities to the locals in the various sectors of development. Lakshadweep being a zero industry, area, the MSME Development nucleus cell at Lakshadweep shifted its focus on the development of entrepreneurship in the island by organising various Training Programmes for the promotion of MSME.

The main constraint of the Island is the geographical isolation and access to the mainland. Due to the inadequacy of specialised treatment and educational institutions for higher studies, the people depend on hospitals and educational institutions on the mainland. Therefore, to achieve the development goal of this Island, there are some basic requirements that need to be realised.

The entrance channel in the lagoon area needs to be widened and deepened, while the construction of a jetty on the eastern side of the island is very much needed. Link roads need to be constructed on the Islands as it is very difficult to take outpatient/ needy person with the help of four-wheeler or two-wheeler at the time of emergency.

At present, the Government-sponsored speed vessels or ships only transport or carry the Government departmental materials. The private boat (*Manchu*) is hired by the Islanders for bringing the construction material, ceremonial items for festivals and ceremonies like weddings besides other day-to-day necessary food grains bought from the mainland. Keeping these aspects in mind, the connectivity to the island has to be improved by rescheduling the vessel/ship movement. At the same time, there is an urgent need to strengthen the grassroot level Panchayati Raj institutions by holding Gram Sabha meetings regularly every 3 to 4 months to evaluate and assess the people's participation in the overall developmental activities initiated by the Government in general, and employment generation programmes in particular.

## Conclusion

The empirical realities of the changing livelihood strategies of the Melachari tribe living in the tiny coral island of Chetlat affirm anthropological connotation mentioned at the beginning, that gaining a livelihood entail entering into multiple social relationships with relatives, friends, buyers, sellers, employers, government agencies, which in turn are constructed around equally diverse identities based on criteria like kinship, religion, ethnicity, nationality, caste, and class. These islanders, despite being devout followers of Islam for centuries, have retained their pre-Islamic matrilineal family organisation called *tharvads* that have helped to keep their community's common property intact till recent times. Considering the island's limited natural resource base, the livelihood options of the individual families were very much limited and were linked with social or kinship relations with their respective *tharvads* that gave only the right to use the coconut trees and their fruits during one's lifetime. With the changing times and situations, in order to earn their living, the Melachari people have now donned a new identity and have entered into diverse and multiple relationships with relatives, friends, strangers, buyers, sellers, employers, and government agents. From a more kin-based identity offered by the *tharvads*, they are now moving towards a new identity of being a citizen in a democratic nation.

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## Notes

1. The Laccadive is one of the three island subgroups in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, India. Formerly the Union Territory of Lakshadweep was known as Laccadive, Minicoy, and Amindivi Islands, which was changed to Lakshadweep by an act of Parliament in 1973.
2. Jeseri (also known as Jesri or Dweep Bhasha) is a dialect of Malayalam, spoken in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep in India. It is spoken on the islands of Chetlat, Bitra, Kiltan, Kadmat, Amini, Kavaratti, Androth, Agatti, and Kalpeni, in the archipelago of Lakshadweep.

3. Toddy is a hot drink consisting of liquor (such as rum), water, sugar, and spices.
4. The full form of RCC is Reinforced Cement Concrete.
5. Enmasse/ *En masse*: If a group of people do something all together.
6. Marumakkathayam was a system of matrilineal inheritance prevalent in what is now Kerala, India. Descent and the inheritance of property were traced through females. The customary law of inheritance was codified by the Madras Marumakkathayam Act 1932.
7. *Coir* or coconut fibre, is a natural fibre extracted from the outer husk of coconut and used in products such as floor mats, doormats, brushes and mattresses.
8. Masmin is a traditional dry product of the Lakshadweep islands. The surplus tuna caught after local consumption is used for the preparation of masmin. The tuna is filleted and the four loins are separated and boiled in seawater mixed with fresh water. Then, they are further smoked and dried to a product called masmin.

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