

“Everyone likes it here”

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Sea-level rise threatens communities of the Lakshadweep islands. But what happens when belongingness, religious beliefs and the identity of being an islander make them stay?

The global narrative of the impacts of climate change on islands often presents island communities as refugees in waiting. This popular discourse is at odds with the local perceptions of climate change in Lakshadweep, a group of islands off the south-western coast of India.

In Lakshadweep, climate change has not yet fully entered the vocabulary of the islanders. In recent years they have noted increased storm surges or ‘big waves’, flooding, and changes in temperature and rainfall patterns. They often connect these changes to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (and not to climate change) as the tsunami was a big event that they have personally experienced. Even if they do observe local changes, they are unable to link them with global processes such as climate change. The islanders cannot envisage the melting of glaciers or thermal expansion, both of which contribute to sea-level rise. This different worldview serves to widen the gap between risks communicated by the scientific community and those perceived by the vulnerable populations.

On the other hand the problem of beach erosion which affects the local jetties is of serious concern to the islanders as it has a direct impact on the working

of the ferries that cater to their day-to-day needs of food and fuel and it hinders inter-island transport. Climate change does not yet manifest as a survival threat or as a risk to their livelihoods; it makes sense to outsiders but not to the islanders.

Migration or belongingness

In Lakshadweep a sense of belonging to place shapes the identity of people. “Everyone likes it here” is the common phrase when questioned about the possibility of moving. Though islanders move for employment and education, there is a strong preference for coming back to the tranquility and peace of living on the island and community bonding. Moving,



Kavaratti island beach in Lakshadweep.

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whether voluntarily or involuntarily, poses a threat to their values and belief systems.

Regular public discussions are a source of information exchange and cooperation amongst islanders. These dialogues are a forum for expressing any community concern and finding inclusive solutions – but climate change is not a topic that has found a prominent place in these discussions. While islanders of Lakshadweep are ostensibly vulnerable to climate change, their way of life on the island can have a positive bearing for adaptation to the effects of climate change. Their attachment to place and their traditional knowledge in managing environmental stressors can motivate them for climate change adaptation activities. Meanwhile, the high level of reciprocity amongst islanders, both on the island and between islands, could be used to disseminate information and awareness.

Climate induced-migration, if it occurs, is likely to erode exactly the identity, local culture and traditional knowledge that can be useful in making them resilient. This kind of loss cannot easily be assigned a value. There needs to be a constructive debate on how to compensate for loss of homeland, culture and values – and what the criteria will be for distributing resources when it is so challenging to establish what the loss is and how much the damage is.

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