

Escape to heaven on earth - Indian islands.

“ Life is an island. People come out of the sea , cross the Island, and return to the sea. But this short life is long and beautiful. In getting to know nature. A man exalts the wonder and beauty of life.”

~Martiros Saryan

It is not always the same when you look from the window of Aircraft specially while flying over the beautiful Islands of the Country. We are a proud nation to have three oceans surrounding our earth. Kanyakumari is named as a place where one can see the three oceans merging together and this is a unique experience to find three different colours of the sea.

I am talking about the Islands of the Country. We normally think about Andaman & Nicobar Islands with abundance of small and big islands. Always it has been the question in my mind as to why the oceans are having the names as *Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean* and *Bay of Bengal* which took considerable time to understand that bay is different from the ocean because it is enclosed with rocks from one side and with the earth on the other. Islands in our country have unique features, because of their virginity, may be due to non-connectivity.

As a tourist, the experience of living in Port Blair never touched so much, as it was the case for Lakshadweep. There is always a talk about the Islands of Andaman & Nicobar due to Cellular Jail and the history of different tribal communities there. Over 500 Islands in Andaman are having memorable events of historical importance. It is not the case with Lakshadweep.

The memories of my visit to Islands of Andaman & Nicobar are fading in the shadows of decades left behind. But, the visit to the Islands of Lakshadweep is like having passed a few months. Those four days are in active memory as if I visited the place yesterday. Agatti is the only airport which connects Lakshadweep by air. It is a small Airport with limited frequency of flights giving the impression that tourist in-flow is slow.

Let me recall the view from the windows of the aircraft fifteen minutes before landing. The picturesque view on the sea gives different colours of the water surrounding the Islands which are around 30. The place looks very small and while

descending it becomes so wonderful that one can only think as to how the plane will land on such a small space. Fortunately, the sky was not cloudy and I could have the pleasure of experiencing the unique landing on a small airport, Agatti.

The weather is hot which reminds the climate of Chennai. But the humidity level is less. When the plane reaches the threshold point of landing, one can see a large number of boats, small ships making rounds. Coming out of the aircraft, it is not like any other airport, where you find the bus coming as well as the trolleys and the aerobridges. Rather, it is like getting down from the car, have your baggage and come out for the city. No transport is available, unless you have prior booking with some resort.

Agatti is a small place. The population is around 7000 people. Lakshadweep is having 100% Muslim population. You cannot find a single person except tourists belonging to any other religion. All are tribals. I stayed in a resort facing the sea. You can only think about looking at the waves or talk to the tourists who are really not interested to make new friends. It is heaven for honeymooners. The sun rise and sun set, as usual, are wonderful. The water is so clean in the sea that you can view inside a few meters. You cannot believe a tortoise of the size of a buffalo.

It is wonderful to see a strong wave when it comes to the shore and goes back with another with the passing wind. The language is no barrier in Lakshadweep. Hindi is well established as National language. There are schools, but not degree colleges. Even English medium schools are there. Malayalam is the local language for most of the people. I was surprised to see that the mosque which is adjacent to the airport is not maintained properly, but still I could see people going for prayers.

In the night, it is totally dark. You cannot make out that the airport is there. Only the resort near the airport is having magnificent illumination. The electricity is there round the clock due to high power generators totally dependent on diesel supply which comes in ships. Calicut and Cochin are two important places which are connected by the ship route but it takes 24 hours for the people to go there. Talking about poverty, yes, it is there, since the entire economy is dependent only on coconut and fishing.

I have never seen such a large number of coconut trees and different variety of sea foods in my life. Coconut is also having unique feature of having yellow colour eatable part inside. Because normally when we break the coconut, water comes out. But in Lakshadweep, I could see the tasty fruit inside the coconut. Suddenly my Secretary reminded me that this fruit is available in Chennai also. For me as a North Indian, it was quite an exciting moment to eat this unique fruit.

The industrialization is not there. The coconut and fishes are taken from here to other places. The poor fisherman or coconut tree owner gets small profit which is not sufficient even to sustain the living. The marriages are also quite different. The thing is somewhat like after marriage, the bridegroom goes to in-laws place and waits there to acquire property until the marriage of his brother-in-laws. It is a custom. One can go for a second marriage also. But eventually it becomes difficult to have sharing in two houses. I talked to the people and they are quite happy with this kind of custom. Women in the houses are mainly doing processing work related to coconut and fish.

Drinking water is really a problem. It is scarce. But you will be surprised to know that even the illiterate people have got the concept of water harvesting. They store drinking water because the rains are quite heavy. The rainy season lasts at least for more than 6 months in a year. The high tides make the people confined to their houses. Connectivity through roads is there because Agatti is an island which can be covered in 3-4 kms. Small and big ships are there which cater to the daily needs of the people.

Of course, the things are very costly. A Coco Cola bottle may cost Rs.40/. Biscuit box may be 3-4 times costlier than the maximum retail price. Mineral water is also a luxury there. Auto rickshaws are there for commuting. Mostly people prefer to ride on cycles. It is a small town which is having a unique culture of honesty. You need not lock your house. There is no theft, no crime. Women are safe. At any time, they can move from one place to another. They are like any other South Indian. Though Muslim by religion, I could hardly see a woman in *burkha*.

Agatti is a small island with a thin population. The people have almost the same standard of living, you can say, they all live on the seasonal income. They wait for the ships to come from Calicut or Cochin for the vegetables, oils, pulses, rice, grocery items and fruits, and what not. As I said earlier, you can get everything in Agatti, but at higher price. Most of the people have opened small shops in their houses. I could not find a smoker there. It looks like people don't smoke. Even *beedi* is not available. I felt like finding a cigarette packet, but all my efforts went in vain. Because no shopkeeper keeps the cigarette. Liquor is available but at very high price.

The people are very nice and loving. They welcome the tourist. You may have coconut, after coconut to drink and eat the inside fruit with no cost. They welcome you as a guest. Try to give money, they won't accept. It reminded me of my visit to Jaisalmer. When I was staying in the army guest house, there I told a

soldier to bring some milk and when I asked about the money, he said “Sir, it is Rajasthan. Nobody sells milk here”. I was happy when he came back with one litre of milk for my children. It was cow’s milk not camel’s. It is our country, one extreme end of desert and another end of island with the same culture of welcoming guest.

Now, coming about the Government functioning in Agatti, I am quite critical about it. Because, schemes are there on paper without implementation. Similarly, funding is there without proper utilization. The Government machinery and the local administration never impressed me because I could not find any evidence of Government spending. I was surprised to see a huge solar energy plant of the Government which was non-operational. We have been informed that some years back, the Government spent crores of rupees with the hope that this solar energy will be sufficient to meet the requirement of the Island. But all their dreams failed since it never worked. Same was the case of fisheries plant, which was constructed for some crores of rupees, but it was also not functioning. The machines were installed may be a decade ago. But, only the security guards were there, making it as a museum. Even the condition of boats was deplorable. I could only find stones and boards glorifying the name of the inaugurator.

There is a public library with good collection of books, but there was scarcity of new books. The informal discussion with the librarian revealed that he has the grant in lakhs. Then where are new books? There was nobody to answer this question. I was surprised to see the books kept in open racks. Well, I wrote the comments in visitors’ book making a request to authorities for giving the grant with the directions for proper utilization. As a writer, I felt happy to donate my books to library which I normally do whenever I go to a new place.

When it comes to the newspapers, yes, you get the newspapers in Hindi, English and Malayalam, but after one or two days. It all depends on flight movement. I could lay my hands on the Lakshadweep Times, it was a Govt. bulletin in bilingual. When I say bilingual, don’t take it for English and Hindi, it is English and Malayalam. I was so happy about the news items on port and shipping, drinking water, tourism development, fisheries, agriculture, medical, science and technology, art and culture. It was all Government schemes on paper which can impress anybody, unless he sees the reality.

The hospitality and the feeling of brotherhood in Agatti was enormous. You will not feel that you are in a Muslim populated place. There is no religion except humanity. People are receptive giving respect and are anxious to show their strong culture and also to reveal the history behind old monuments. I took lot of

photographs during my four days stay, say 400. Thanks to the capacity of my Panasonic camera which I bought from Singapore with 8 GB and 7.2 megapixels. Now the photography is easy. You just come home, see photos on your laptop or TV, keep in the pendrive or CD. Here are some photographs selected by the editor for our dear readers.

Now, let me talk something about *Bangara* Island. A beautiful island just an hour of boat journey from Agatti. Well, it looked like I was in some other country. Because, more than Indians and tribals, foreigners were there having sun bath near resort and sea side. See, how the smokers become the friends. One couple was smoking. Since I was tired of moving from one place to another, with their permission, I sat down on their chair. The man was from Germany. He offered me a cigarette. Though I never relished that tobacco, but still I thanked them. The lady with him was from London and was not his wife. They both were in their late 50s and good friends. I was quite anxious to know what made them to come to this place, because there are many more places in our country where they can have the same flora and fauna. The man said that this is the only part of the country which was not touched by them. They make tour for six months every year across the world and it is the last leg of the journey in India. This again reminds me about the young girl, who was my co-passenger in flight to Singapore, because she also told me the same story about the six months tour, all alone going to unknown places with no reference. How adventurous it is!

Bangara Island is a very costly island famous for its ayurvedic massages. As an Indian, we may not be spending Rs.5000-10000. But there was no harm in seeing the natural parlours. They had ayurvedic doctor and equipments with trained massagers (both male and female). There was a Government tourist guest house. But I was informed that it is always booked well-in-advance. Though my resort in Agatti was also for over Rs.10000/- per day for a normal tourist, but still I could feel that it is more costly in *Bangara*. Chicken, meat, cigarette were available, but not drugs. Lot of coconuts, sea animals, crabs, corals were there. People swim near the sea shore. You can see few meters inside the sea with the naked eye. I took some pieces of wood from there. I had to face a big problem at the airport for getting it cleared, because it was giving the look of horns of deer. Well, I could manage to have some beautiful corals which were gifted by the people. These are priceless.

My return journey from *Bangara* to Agatti was a nightmare because all of a sudden, in the midway, some mechanical problem occurred when the diesel supply was blocked due to air gap. You cannot believe what kind of thoughts comes to my mind. I was just looking and praying for the sunlight to remain for few hours, because the boat man told that if it is dark, there cannot be any rescue operation

for us, since it will be difficult to locate our boat, if he calls for another boat from Agatti or Bangara.

I was just seeing Islands one or two miles away. Our boat in the water was struggling. It was difficult to stand because of the waves. I just confirmed from the boat man that it may not sink with the pressure of the waves. He smiled and assured “no sir, it will not happen, unless there is a high tide”. It was about an hour or so. Finally, they managed to pump out and removed the air gap. The boat started functioning. It was almost dark when we came back to Agatti. Why I am writing all these for my readers? My purpose is to tell you don't get panic because the boat man narrated some old stories and he showed me certain suicide points also, where people jumped out of anxiety and frustration.

The wooden articles prepared in Agatti are very good because the indigenous wood can be carved, make the things looking like in teaks. The wood is not in abundance. People make single story houses and for everything they are dependent on Cochin and Calicut. The labours were really expert in their job because the houses were built taking care of all architectural aspects. Earthquakes are quite normal, but they take proper precaution, having safeguards. The people celebrate evenings on the sea shores. Though 100% population is Muslim, they don't wear *burkha*. I am happy for my maiden's effort to ensure that there is a flood light at the entrance of the airport. Now, I suppose there is no darkness in the night in that area. Still my heart beats for the mosque adjacent to the airport. If someday, somebody will take care to renovate it,

I look forward for that day. When some industrialists like Mittal, Ambani or Mallya will look for having an industry there for refining the coconut and making good fishery, I am confident that there can be export from there directly.

Ours is a great country. We have places like Lakshadweep. I have narrated only about 2-3 islands of the Lakshadweep. But there are 30 islands. I look forward for my visit to Minicoy, Kavaratti and some other Islands which are much more developed than Agatti. This time it will be with my family to have the pleasure of Helicopter flight to Kavaratti and Minicoy. So wait for my next article with more inputs.
