

Shifting Inheritance Norms in Lakshadweep: A Sociological Study of Matrilineal Change

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ABSTRACT

*Lakshadweep, a group of coral islands off the southwestern coast of India, carries within it one of the most distinctive social inheritances of the subcontinent a matrilineal kinship system rooted in the Marumakkathayam tradition, practised by an entirely Muslim population. For generations, property in these islands descended not through sons but through daughters; not from father to child, but through the female bloodline of the tharavad, the matrilineal household. This article examines the processes through which this system of inheritance has been gradually **transformed**, not through any single dramatic rupture, but through the slow accumulation of pressures from movements, colonial and post-colonial legal transformation, administrative integration into the Indian Union, educational expansion, and the occupational restructuring of island life. Drawing on the foundational ethnographic work of Leela Dube, the comparative kinship scholarship of Kathleen Gough and David Schneider, and the historical and sociological literature on Muslim communities in South India, the article traces the social logic of matrilineal inheritance, the mechanisms of its change, and the consequences, particularly as a geographically isolated community. It argues that what is unfolding in Lakshadweep is not simply a shift in property law, but a transformation of social identity, household authority, and gender relations that deserves sustained sociological attention.*

Keywords: Matrilineal, Lakshadweep, Marumakkathayam, tharavad, inheritance, kinship,

1. Introduction: Islands in Isolation

There is something quietly remarkable about Lakshadweep that tends to be overlooked in mainstream accounts of Indian social life. The thirty-six islands of this archipelago, of which only ten are inhabited, sit in the Arabian Sea at a distance of two to four hundred kilometres from the south-west coast of southern India. Their population is entirely Muslim, deeply observant, and socially conservative in many outward respects. And yet, for most of recorded history, these

islands have organised their family life, property relations, and social identities around the female line. A man's heirs were his sister's children. A woman's home was her birthright. The household, the tharavad, belonged to the matriline, and it was through mothers, daughters, and sisters that wealth, land, and social standing passed from one generation to the next.

This is not merely a sociological curiosity. It is a social arrangement that has shaped the daily texture of island life, the structure of households, the authority of elders, the standing of women, the meaning of marriage, and the logic of property for centuries. And it is an arrangement that is now in serious informal reconditioning. Over the past half century, matrilineal inheritance norms in Lakshadweep have been contested, renegotiated, and in many communities substantially transformed. The conditions that once sustained the tharavad system, collective land ownership, subsistence island economy, social insularity, and the pragmatic accommodation of Islamic faith with local custom, have been progressively transformed by forces both external and internal to the islands.

This article offers a sociological account of the ongoing transformation of matriline in Lakshadweep. It is not an obituary for a social system that has disappeared, nor does it suggest that matriline has been completely displaced. Rather, it examines how a historically resilient kinship system has gradually adapted to changing economic, legal, educational, and social conditions. While many of its institutional features have been modified over time, matrilineal values and practices continue to shape family relations, inheritance patterns, household organization, and emotional attachments in diverse ways across the islands.

The questions guiding this inquiry are therefore not about the disappearance of matriline but about the nature and direction of its transformation. What forces have contributed to the gradual reconfiguration of matrilineal inheritance and kinship in Lakshadweep? How have these changes affected the position and security of women whose lives were historically anchored in the matrilineal household? And what does the Lakshadweep experience reveal about the capacity of customary institutions to adapt and endure in the context of contemporary social change in South Asia?

The Matrilineal System: Social Logic and Historical Roots

To understand the change of matrilineal inheritance in Lakshadweep, it is necessary first to understand what the system was not in abstract or typological terms, but in the lived social reality of island communities. Leela Dube's ethnographic work, conducted in the Laccadive Islands from the 1950s onwards and published most comprehensively in her monograph *Matriline and Islam* (1969), remains the indispensable starting point for any serious engagement with this question. Dube documented a society in which the fundamental unit of social

organisation was not the conjugal couple or the nuclear family, but the tharavad, the matrilineal joint household comprising a woman, her children, her sisters and their children, and the brothers of all these women. Men, upon marriage, did not bring their wives into their own household; instead, they lived primarily in their mother's and sisters' tharavad and visited their wives' homes.

Property under this system was held collectively by the tharavad. The primary economic assets of the islands such as coconut groves, land, and to a lesser extent, fishing boats and equipment were not divided among individual members but held in common under the management of the karanavar, the senior male member of the matrilineal household. Crucially, however, the karanavar's authority was managerial rather than proprietary: he administered collective property on behalf of the matriline, but the property itself belonged to the female line and could not be alienated without the consent of the tharavad's members (Dube, 1969). When a man died, his property passed not to his wife and children, but to the matrilineal household to his sisters, his sisters' children, and through them, to subsequent generations in the female line.

Kathleen Gough's comparative analysis of matrilineal systems in South Asia helps place the Lakshadweep case within a broader structural context. Gough identified what she called the 'matrilineal puzzle' the structural tension inherent in all matrilineal societies between a man's obligations to his own matrilineal kin group and his emotional and social bonds with his wife and children (Gough, 1959). In societies where property descends through the female line, a man's legitimate heirs are his sister's children, not his own; his children are heirs not to him but to their own mother's brother. This arrangement creates a permanent structural ambiguity around paternal authority and conjugal solidarity. In Lakshadweep, this tension was managed through the practice of visiting marriage, duolocal residence, in which husband and wife maintained separate primary residences in their respective natal households. The conjugal bond was real and recognised, but it did not disrupt the structural primacy of the matrilineal household (AR Kutty, 1972).

What made the Lakshadweep case particularly striking and particularly complex was that this matrilineal system coexisted with a deep and sincere Islamic religious identity. The population of the islands has been Muslim for at least five centuries, and Islam has not been a superficial overlay on a pre-Islamic social structure but a genuinely lived religious tradition (Theodore, 1989). Dube was careful to document not only how matriliney and Islam coexisted but also the real tensions between them. Islamic jurisprudence, as derived from the Quran and hadith, prescribes a system of inheritance in which property devolves to specific named heirs, with male heirs generally receiving twice the share of equivalent female heirs. This system is explicitly patrilineal in its logic and fundamentally incompatible with matrilineal inheritance. Yet for centuries, the island communities navigated this incompatibility through a pragmatic

separation of domains: Islamic law governed ritual, marriage, divorce, and personal morality, while customary law governed property and inheritance (Dube, 1969).

This accommodation was not unique to Lakshadweep. Robert Miller's historical study of the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, the mainland Muslim community most closely related to the island population in terms of culture and origin, documented a similar pattern of coexistence between customary matrilineal practice and Islamic religious observance along the Malabar coast (Miller, 1976). The Mappilas maintained their own versions of matrilineal inheritance well into the colonial period, and the gradual erosion of these practices in the face of Islamic reform, colonial legal intervention, and economic change on the mainland offers a useful comparative frame for understanding parallel processes in Lakshadweep.

What the System Meant for Women

Before turning to the forces that have eroded matrilineal inheritance, it is worth pausing to consider what this system actually meant for women in Lakshadweep, because the relationship between matriliney and women's wellbeing is not as straightforward as it might initially appear, and because the consequences of the system's change cannot be properly assessed without clarity about what it offered and what it withheld.

The most significant material advantage of the matrilineal system for women was the security of the ancestral home. Under the tharavad arrangement, a woman's right to reside in and benefit from the ancestral household was guaranteed by birth. She could not be evicted by a husband, displaced by a divorce, or left destitute by widowhood. In a context where marriage was relatively fragile the Lakshadweep islands historically had high rates of divorce and remarriage, a pattern noted extensively by Dube, the stability of the natal household represented a crucial safety net that insulated women from the economic consequences of marital breakdown (Dube, 1969). The home and the land attached to it were hers by right of lineage, not by the grace of a husband or the goodwill of in-laws.

However, Dube was equally attentive to the limitations of matrilineal 'empowerment,' and her later work developed this critique more sharply. Writing in 1996, she argued that the matrilineal system in Lakshadweep gave women security of tenure but not autonomy of management. The karanavar, the senior male of the tharavad, exercised actual authority over collective property decisions, even though the property in question descended through the female line. Women held rights in property without necessarily holding decision making power over it (Dube, 1996). This distinction between holding rights and exercising authority is crucial. Matriliney, as actually practised in Lakshadweep, was not a system of women's property control but a system of female-line property succession managed by senior males.

Janaki Abraham's revisitation of Dube's legacy develops this point further, noting that Dube's work illuminated how gender was not simply expressed through kinship but constituted through it and that the apparent advantages of matrilineal organisation for women were always mediated by the specific social hierarchies of caste, class, religious authority, and age that operated within the matrilineal framework (Abraham, 2008). The karanavar's authority was gendered authority; the tharavad was not a space of female rule but a space of female-line succession within which male management remained normative.

These qualifications matter because they shape how we evaluate the consequences of matrilineal change. If matrilineality had been a system of genuine female property control, its erosion would represent an unambiguous loss for women. Because it was a more complex arrangement offering women residential security and lineage identity while confining actual economic authority to senior males the consequences of its change are more ambivalent and require careful disaggregation.

The Mechanisms of Change

Islamic Consciousness, Custom, and the Erosion of Matrilineal Inheritance

One of the most delicate and easily misread aspects of kinship change in Lakshadweep concerns the role of Islam. It is tempting and not entirely wrong to frame the change in matrilineal inheritance as a consequence of Islamic legal pressure on customary practice. But this framing, if handled carelessly, imports a narrative of organised reformist movements and doctrinal confrontation that does not accurately describe the Lakshadweep experience. Unlike the Mappila Muslim communities of the Malabar coast, where the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw sustained, organised Islamic reform movements that explicitly and aggressively challenged matrilineal custom as un-Islamic, Lakshadweep did not witness comparable reformist mobilisation of this kind (Miller, 1976). The islands' geographic insularity, their relatively homogeneous and close-knit social structure, and the absence of the kind of urban-commercial Muslim elite that drove reformism on the mainland meant that the Islam-custom tension in Lakshadweep operated differently more quietly, more internally, and over a longer arc.

What Dube documented was not a community under siege from reformist preachers, but a community living with a deepening awareness of the theological tension embedded in its own social arrangements. The island population was genuinely and devoutly Muslim. They prayed, fasted, observed Islamic dietary and moral norms, and identified strongly with the Islamic umma. And yet their inheritance practices departed fundamentally from what Islamic jurisprudence prescribed. This tension was not created by outside agitators; it was generated from within by the ordinary processes of religious education, increased literacy, and growing awareness — through

schooling, through contact with mainland Muslim communities, and through access to Islamic texts — of what sharia actually said about inheritance (Dube, 1969). Over time, educated islanders, particularly men, began to find it increasingly difficult to reconcile their sincere Islamic identity with the inheritance norms they practised. The shift was less a response to external pressure than a consequence of internal religious consciousness catching up with itself.

Miller's comparative study of the Mappilas provides a useful contrast rather than a parallel. On the Malabar coast, reformist organisations like the Samastha Kerala Jam-iiyyathul Ulama and later the Islamic Research Centre explicitly campaigned against matrilineal custom from the early twentieth century, framing it as a corruption of authentic Islamic practice (Miller, 1976). In Lakshadweep, no equivalent institutional campaign took hold. The erosion of matrilineal inheritance norms in the islands proceeded not through organised religious advocacy but through the quieter, more diffuse mechanism of changing individual and family-level decisions about how property should be distributed decisions increasingly shaped by a sense that the Islamic way was both religiously correct and socially modern.

What makes this dynamic particularly significant and what Dube's analysis was careful to foreground is the gendered consequence of the shift, regardless of how gradually or voluntarily it occurred. Islamic inheritance law (Sharia) does extend formal property rights to women as daughters, sisters, and wives rights that the tharavad system had not always made explicit in legal terms. On the surface, this might appear to represent an advance for women: individual, legally recognised, religiously sanctioned property rights, rather than diffuse collective rights mediated through male management. But Dube argued, with considerable force, that the practical consequence in Lakshadweep was often the reverse. Women who had held de facto tenure rights over substantial family property through the matriline rights secured by birth, by residence, by the simple fact of being a daughter of the tharavad now found themselves holding rights by the law to smaller, individually calculated shares in which sons received twice the allocation of daughters (Dube, 1996). The shift to Sharia rules, in this light, was not a gain for women but a redistribution of property toward the male line, dressed in the legitimate language of divine law. The religious framing of the change obscured what was, in material terms, a contraction of women's inherited wealth.

Colonial Legislation and the Post-Colonial Legal Framework

The matrilineal system of Lakshadweep did not encounter the modern state only after Indian independence. Colonial administration had already begun to interact with customary property law in the Malabar region and its associated islands, and these interactions left lasting imprints. The British colonial administration's codification of personal law in India created a legal architecture that, while officially recognising the Marumakkathayam system in Kerala, also

introduced pressures toward individualisation of property holding through land settlement operations, revenue records, and civil court procedures that were structurally biased toward individual title.

The more decisive legal transformation, however, came after independence. The incorporation of Lakshadweep as a Union Territory in 1956 brought the islands under the direct legislative and administrative authority of the Government of India. From this point, the legal framework governing property in Lakshadweep was progressively aligned with mainland Indian norms. The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1937, which was extended to Lakshadweep, formally brought Muslim personal law including Islamic inheritance rules to bear on the island population, creating for the first time a legal mechanism through which matrilineal custom could be directly challenged by sharia-based claims in courts of law.

The administrative records of Lakshadweep from successive decades document the consequences of this legal shift. Land records increasingly registered property in individual names rather than under collective tharavad ownership. Government of Lakshadweep statistical handbooks from various years record a progressive fragmentation of landholding patterns and a shift toward smaller, individually held plots a pattern structurally incompatible with the collective tharavad estate (Lakshadweep Gazetteer, 1977). Once land is individually registered and by default, in a cultural context that is increasingly shaped by bilateral inheritance norms, registered in a man's name the formal legal basis for matrilineal inheritance claims is substantially weakened.

Patricia Uberoi's comprehensive analysis of family, kinship, and marriage in India provides an important framework for understanding this dynamic. Uberoi has argued that the Indian state has never been neutral with respect to kinship forms: through personal law, land revenue administration, and welfare legislation, the state has consistently privileged certain kinship arrangements particularly the nuclear families, while leaving customary matrilineal systems without formal institutional support (Uberoi, 1993). In Lakshadweep, this played out through the simple but consequential fact that state institutions courts, land registries, welfare agencies were not designed to recognise or reinforce the collective matrilineal household. When disputes arose, islanders who invoked matrilineal custom found themselves operating in a legal environment that was structurally more sympathetic to individual property rights and Islamic inheritance claims than to tharavad-based arguments.

Education, Employment, and the Redesign of the Tharavad Economy

The third major mechanism of matrilineal change in Lakshadweep has been economic and occupational transformation specifically, the radical shift in the island economy that followed

administrative integration with the Indian mainland. The Census of India 2011 recorded that Lakshadweep had achieved a literacy rate of over 91 percent one of the highest in the country (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, 2011). This figure represents a transformation that was, within living memory, remarkable. For generations, the island economy had been organised around coconut cultivation, fishing, and coir production activities conducted collectively, organised within the framework of the tharavad, and requiring neither formal education nor male geographic mobility.

The expansion of government employment, educational institutions, health services, and administrative infrastructure on the islands from the 1960s onwards fundamentally altered this economic base. Young men from the islands found employment as government officials, teachers, fisheries workers, and employment that was individual, salaried, and often required residence in district headquarters or on the mainland. This occupational shift had profound implications for the matrilineal household. A man working as a government employee in Kavaratti or Kochi earns a salary that is legally his own individual property. He lives in accommodation provided by his employer or rented individually. His economic life is not organised around the collective management of tharavad land, and his economic interests increasingly lie in providing for his wife and children, not in the maintenance of a distant matrilineal household, which often includes buying lands and building houses in the other islands or mainland.

Ministry of Home Affairs development reports on Lakshadweep from successive decades document this occupational transformation in aggregate terms, tracing the change of the primary sector and the rise of service and government employment as the dominant economic activity on the islands (Ministry of Home Affairs, various years). What these aggregate figures represent at the household level is the gradual erosion of the economic basis of the tharavad system. The tharavad made social and economic sense when the primary productive assets coconut groves, fishing rights, household production were collectively held and could not easily be divided. When the primary source of income is an individual salary, the logic of collective property holding and the logic of matrilineal inheritance reformulated in its own contextual means.

The role of education deserves particular attention here. The expansion of formal schooling in Lakshadweep has produced a generation of young islanders who are educated in mainland Indian curricula, are fluent in social norms transmitted through national textbooks and media, and who are exposed to a broader cultural universe in which the nuclear family, bilateral inheritance, and conjugal household are presented as natural, modern, and desirable. Dube observed in her fieldwork that younger educated men in Lakshadweep were already beginning to articulate dissatisfaction with the matrilineal system not because it failed them materially, but because it conflicted with their emerging sense of what a modern, Islamic household should look like

(Dube, 1969). This cultural dimension of kinship change is easy to underestimate but difficult to overstate: when the ideology of the nuclear family becomes hegemonic through education, media, and social aspiration, the matrilineal household comes to be perceived not merely as inconvenient but as backward, improper, or un-Islamic.

What Has Been Lost: The Consequences of Change

The consequences of the shift away from matrilineal inheritance in Lakshadweep are not uniform, and they cannot be assessed through a single evaluative lens. But there are certain losses that are sociologically identifiable and empirically significant, and they deserve to be named clearly.

The most direct loss has been experienced by women whose residential security was grounded in matrilineal tenure. Under the tharavad system, a woman's right to the ancestral home could not be severed by divorce, widowhood, or a husband's financial failure. This mattered enormously in a social context where, as Dube documented, marriage was impermanent and divorce common (Dube, 1969). The matrilineal household functioned as a welfare institution a guaranteed home for women and children regardless of the fate of individual conjugal relationships. As the tharavad system has weakened and bilateral or Islamic inheritance norms have gained ground, this institutional safety net has frayed. Women who marry into conjugal nuclear households, or who depend on sharia-compliant inheritance shares for their property rights, find themselves in a significantly more precarious position when marriages end or husbands die.

The second significant loss concerns the social identity and authority of older women within the household. In the matrilineal system, senior women mothers and grandmothers held a position of genuine social authority within the tharavad. They were not property managers in the formal sense (that role belonged to the karanavar), but they were the moral and social anchors of the household, whose life histories, relationships, and judgements carried weight in family decisions. As the nuclear conjugal household displaces the matrilineal joint household, this informal authority is often lost. The conjugal couple becomes the unit of decision-making, and the senior woman of the natal household loses the social centrality that the tharavad system afforded her.

A third consequence that is less visible but sociologically significant concerns social cohesion and mutual support networks within island communities. The tharavad system, whatever its internal hierarchies and tensions, created extended networks of mutual obligation, shared property, and collective responsibility. These networks provided a form of social insurance when one member of the tharavad fell ill, lost income, or faced crisis, the collective household bore the burden. The individualisation of property and household that follows the change of matrilineal inheritance tends to weaken these collective networks. It places greater pressure on the conjugal

couple as the primary unit of economic support and leaves individuals particularly elderly women more exposed to the risks of individual household failure. Though these empirical evidence show the decline matrilineal it cannot be considered as sharp.

Dube's 1996 essay raised these concerns with particular force, noting that the shifts she was observing in her return fieldwork were not simply changes in legal convention but changes in the social fabric of island life in the density of kin networks, in the care of the elderly, in the security of children from dissolved marriages, and in the moral economy of mutual obligation that the tharavad system had sustained (Dube, 1996). Abraham's later assessment echoes this concern, observing that the scholarly legacy Dube left behind was precisely the insistence that kinship is never merely about who inherits what, but about the totality of social relations that inheritance systems both express and sustain (Abraham, 2017).

Negotiation, Adaptation and Continuity

It would be a significant distortion, however, to present the story of matrilineal change in Lakshadweep as a story of simple replacement of one system cleanly abolished and another smoothly installed in its place. The social reality is considerably more complicated, and in that complexity there is important sociological information about the resilience of customary institutions and the limits of external transformation.

First, variation across islands is substantial. The Lakshadweep archipelago is not a single social world but a collection of distinct island communities, each with its own history, social composition, and relationship to the wider world. Minicoy, the southernmost island, has had a different historical trajectory than Kavaratti or Androth, shaped by different patterns of trade, colonial contact, and religious influence. Dube's original fieldwork was primarily conducted on a single island, and subsequent researchers have noted that the pace and depth of matrilineal change has varied considerably across the archipelago (Dube, 1969). On some islands, elements of the tharavad system remain more practically active than on others; on some, Islamic inheritance claims have been pressed more assertively in family property disputes; on others, informal community norms continue to honour matrilineal custom even where formal legal instruments would support a different outcome.

Second, the gap between formal legal change and lived social practice remains wide in many communities. This is a pattern well recognised in the sociological literature on South Asian kinship: the law on paper and the law in practice often diverge substantially, and customary norms persist in daily life long after they have lost formal legal recognition (Uberoi, 1993). In Lakshadweep, this manifests in practices such as informal family agreements that distribute property along matrilineal lines even when formal documentation reflects a different legal logic;

the continuing emotional and moral authority of the karanavar figure within families even as his formal economic role has diminished; and the persistence of matrilineal kinship terminology and identity even among younger islanders who may not inherit matrilineally in a strict legal sense.

Third, the relationship between Islamic reform and matrilineal erosion is not deterministic or unidirectional. Reformist Islamic discourse in Lakshadweep has not been monolithic. There are strands of Islamic jurisprudence and religious leadership that have been more willing to accommodate elements of customary practice, and there have been debates within island communities about the proper interpretation of Islamic inheritance rules in the specific social context of the islands. The negotiation between religious authority and customary practice is an ongoing and contested process. Miller's comparative study of Mappila Muslims suggests that even within reformist Islamic frameworks, there is often more flexibility in the accommodation of customary practice than the formal legal positions might imply (Miller, 1976).

What persists most durably in the face of formal matrilineal change is perhaps something less tangible but no less real: the deep cultural identification of Lakshadweep families with their matrilineal origins. The tharavad remains a referent for social identity for knowing who one's people are, where one comes from, and where one belongs even when it no longer functions as a legal unit of property holding. This identification is itself a sociological fact of considerable importance. It suggests that the change of matrilineal inheritance is not the same as the disappearance of matrilineal consciousness and that the social material from which a different kind of matrilineal institution might eventually be constructed remains present in the culture, even as the specific legal and economic forms of the old system continue to weaken.

Conclusion: Kinship, Change, and the Question of What Endures

The matrilineal inheritance system of Lakshadweep is not going to disappear overnight. Social institutions of this depth and durability do not dissolve quickly, even under sustained pressure from religious reform, legal change, and economic transformation. What is happening in Lakshadweep is something more gradual and more complex: a slow renegotiation of the terms on which property, identity, and household belonging are organised, in which the formal legal rules are shifting faster than the informal social norms, and in which individual families navigate between competing frameworks of legitimacy religious, customary, and administrative in ways that produce outcomes that are neither purely matrilineal nor purely sharia-compliant but something in between.

What this case demands of sociological analysis is a willingness to resist the temptation of clean narratives. The change of matrilineal inheritance in Lakshadweep is not a story of modernisation triumphing over tradition. It is a messier story one in which multiple systems of value and power

are in active competition, in which women are not passive subjects of kinship transformation but active agents navigating its consequences, and in which what appears as legal change often masks a more complex social negotiation whose outcomes are genuinely uncertain.

What can be said with confidence is that certain things are being lost in this transition that deserve to be valued and, where possible, preserved or reimagined. The residential security that the tharavad offered women in a context of marital instability was a real and significant good. The networks of mutual obligation and care that the matrilineal household sustained were a form of social insurance that formal welfare institutions have not fully replaced. The moral authority of senior women within the matrilineal household represented a form of intergenerational female power that the nuclear conjugal family tends to change.

It is in this spirit that the transformation of matrilineal inheritance in Lakshadweep deserves continued attention not as a curiosity of comparative kinship studies, but as a live social question with real consequences for the lives of real people navigating profound institutional change on a set of islands where the sea is never far away and the weight of history is felt in every household.

Future sociological research on this question would benefit enormously from sustained fieldwork that attends to the diversity of experience across different islands, social classes, and generations; from careful analysis of court records and land registration data that can illuminate the formal legal dimensions of inheritance change; and from qualitative research that gives voice to the women whose lives are most directly shaped by these transformations. Leela Dube left a methodological legacy as well as an intellectual one the insistence that kinship can only be understood from the inside, in the lives of those who live within it. That legacy is the most important inheritance the scholarship on Lakshadweep has to offer.

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