Chapter 6

GEOGRAPHY: SACRED AND PROFANE ON THE HETEROTOPIA OF THE ISLAND COMMUNITIES

In the foregoing chapters we have discussed various problems pertaining to the place names of Androth and Kalpeni islands which have direct or indirect bearing on the economic pursuits, social order and cultural formations. We have also considered the linguistic aspects of the toponyms with a view to highlighting the basic paradigms and world views which determined the functional aspects of place names of the Lakshadweep islands. The present chapter deals with some heterotopicaic concepts of the islanders for investigating into their conceptual considerations of terrastrial and extra terrestrial spatialities.

The geographical position, structure of the soil, the environment etc. have contributed much to shape the life and culture of the people of the Lakshadweep islands. Being a narrow strip of land there was no scope in the islands for large scale paddy cultivation except some lintels and pulses in marginal way and some tubers and garden vegetables. Rice, the staple food of the people had to come from the mainland.
Coconut trees grow there in plenty and the major item produced by the people are coconuts and its by products such as coir and jaggery. The surrounding sea and the lagoons were perennial sources of fishes and other seafoods. Coconut, coir and seafoods had a steady demand in the mainland markets. This pattern of production forced the islanders to set sail to various ports on the western coast line of the Indian Sub continent for several centuries.

The monsoon winds and the rough sea with strong under-currents demanded special skills in boat building as well as sailing in the Arabian sea. The most remarkable achievement and invaluable contribution of the islanders to the traditional maritime activities is perhaps their knowledge of the sea and sea-faring. This knowledge in the form of a folk-wisdom has been preserved in the islands among elders and especially among a section in the tarawad islands called malis. This traditional knowledge was variously known as “malikanakku”, “Rehmani” etc. The malikanakku has several versions, which contain encyclopaedic information on different branches of folk-knowledges of local medicines and treatment, house building, agriculture etc. Among these, the most important is the portions on marine technology including calculation of time and hour and the
direction to reach various ports on the western coast of India from the
*Bilinchem* (vizhinjam near Trivandrum) in the south to Cutch and
beyond that, Hormuz on the coast of Persian Gulf.

This marine technology has developed a space-consciousness
which include the entire cosmic space with the starlit sky, the vast
oceanic waters and the horizon, with the *odam*, country vessel in the sea
as the central reference point. The *malikkanakku* divides the entire
sphere of circular horizon into two: ie, the eastern half of day and the
western half of night (see appendix - 8). Again the eastern hemisphere
is divided into sixteen portions from *Kau*, the pole star in the north to
*suvail* in the south. In the night or western hemisphere, the same is
repeated with *suvail* to *kau*. This division of cosmic space into sixteen
is connected with the Zodiac divisions of *rasis* and the twenty seven
constellations from *Asvati* to *Revati*. This highly complicated spatiality
is related to calculation of time, *yamam* or *chamam* in the local
parlance. This calculation of time and space helps the mariners to
adjust the direction of the sailing vessel to the port of destination. This
knowledge based on the concept of space is the result of observation
and practical knowledge of sailing between the islands and the Malabar
coast. The advantage of the *malikkanakku* is that it helps the sailors to
calculate the position of their vessel in relation to the nearest port on the malabar coast after observing the polestar. A method of calculation of time on the basis of the position of constellation helps the mariners to know the direction and also to calculate the time and hour of the day. An important aspect of this concept of space is that it is closely connected to the island's economic pursuits and not a mere conceptual exercise in relation to extra mundane or spiritual moorings.

The Sacred Geography of the Ujra Mosques

The spread of Islam in the Lakshadweep islands is explained in terms of an en masse conversion of the people by Ubaidulla, a legendary character and a descendant of the first khaleefa abubacker siddique. This story of conversion is further underscored by a few archeological finds from various places in several islands which indicate the presence of a group who were idolaters worshipping the Buddha in his later conceptions. Several survey fields with names suggesting the presence of non-brahmanical worship centers like palli supports the view that the islanders or a part of them were once upon a time followed non-Islamic, non-brahmanical religion. Our point is that a total conversion has taken place in the islands, thanks to the
prosletization activities of the Muslim religious leaders of Sufi saints or both. This observation is supported by the architectural remains of the three types of mosques which are found invariably on all islands except Minicoy, which culturally belong to a separate group retaining similarities with the ‘Male’ Islanders. These remains are the ujirapallis, Mohiyuddin pallis and the Juma Masjids. Juma Masjids are mosques for Juma prayer. Ujira and Muhiuddin pallis are two other religious institutions or worship centers of the Rifayithareequat and the Khadiriyaltareequat of the two famous Sufi movements respectively.

The Khadiriya Tareequat traces its origin to Mohiyuddin Abdul Khader Jeelani who was the 16th generation from the prophet. The Rifayi Thareequat was brought to the island by Muhammed Kasim who first came to Androth and established his Tareequat there and later went to Kavarathi to propagate the message there. All the islands have the two tareequat and their mosques. The Khadiriya Tareequat has not maintained any relation with each other. But the Ujirappallis of the Rifayi Thareequat has a network which is spread all over the islands. Interestingly, the Ujira mosques in all the islands form parts of a wide network of cult spots thereby establishing a sacred geography and attracting people to its cults performances and the ideology of Bhakthi.
There are stories about miracles practiced by the Sufi saints who stayed in the islands. Some of these stories relate how they treated snake bite and burns. It is interesting to note in this connection that this practice was prevalent among the Sufis of rifayi cult in the medieval Iraq. The region was marshy and therefore there were poisonous reptiles and the snake bite was a common disaster. Sufis, who were moving with the common people helped them in many ways and won their good will. Miracle was an integral part of the Sufi tradition. In other similar movements also, such as the Bhakti of the Shaiva and Vaishnava groups, myth, miracle and music were part and parcel of the tradition. The traditional dolippattu of the islanders seems to be an offshoot of the Sufi movement. Our observation, which has to be substantiated with more evidences, is based on the fact that the subject matter of those folk songs was the mystic experiences.

The mainland, especially Malabar area have special mosque dedicated to Muhiyuddin but the Ujira is not very common but rare. These heterotopias are in a way binding forces of the people who worship those centers. Ujira is thus the symptom of a mass movement in the islands which united people on the ground of extra-mundane level. These spots of Sufi tradition is not without place name relics. In
Androth there are places such as supiyakad and supiyakuli meaning, supi's forest and supis pond respectively. It is only logical to infer that the supi here denotes a Sufi since he is connected with a pond and a forest. This reminds us of the Sufi practice of keeping aloof from the people in the midst of a forest. However, the island geography would not allow big forests to grow and here, the kad, meaning forest is only a plot without residence.

The place name like Kalali, Kalalipacha, Kalalikundu, Kalalikunnu are the evidences for the cultural activities held in the islands excepting the religious matters. Kalali is the local rendering of Kalari. After dusk, the youths practiced their Kalari training under the leadership of Kurikals. It could be a military practice also which was in vogue for centuries to protect the society from invaders. Kalari came to the islands with its name from Kerala. The steps of Parichakali holding sword and buckler are practiced in Kalaris. Many kurikkals occasionally reached from Malabar to train the students. The position of Kurikkal was hereditary and the practice of Kalari was exclusively for melacheri groups in the traditional set up.