

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Echoes from the Atoll

Inside India's First TB-Free Islands

Chapter 1

The Landing

By

Dr. Rakesh PS

Thank you for reading this complimentary excerpt.
If you enjoy this sample, please consider reading the complete book.

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FOREWORD

*F*ew places have taught the global tuberculosis community as much as a small chain of coral islands scattered across the Arabian Sea.

Lakshadweep's journey towards tuberculosis elimination stands among the most remarkable public health achievements of recent years. Across islands separated by distance, weather, and the unpredictability of the sea, communities came together to achieve what many would have considered improbable. Their success reflects the vision of the Government of India, the commitment of the Lakshadweep Administration, and the extraordinary efforts of health workers, community leaders, and island residents who refused to allow geography to determine their future.

For those of us engaged in the global effort to end tuberculosis, Lakshadweep offers an enduring lesson. It reminds us that even the most remote communities can become pioneers when political commitment, scientific innovation, and community ownership come together. In doing so, these islands have contributed not only to India's progress against TB but also to the global understanding of what is possible.

Yet long before I reached the final page of this book, I found myself asking a different question.

What kind of book is this?

FOREWORD

It is certainly more than a book about tuberculosis or public health.

The further I read, the harder it became to place it within a single genre. Part travel memoir, part public health narrative, part social chronicle, and part personal reflection, it moves effortlessly between island history and contemporary change, between scientific ambition and deeply human stories.

In these pages, readers will travel on fishing boats, walk along coral beaches, sit in village gatherings, listen to island songs, and encounter a society navigating the delicate balance between heritage and modernity. Through these experiences, Lakshadweep gradually comes alive—not as a collection of islands, but as a living community shaped by the sea, sustained by its people, and held together by an enduring sense of home.

The story of ending tuberculosis unfolds throughout the book, but often in the background. At its heart, this is a story about islands and the people who call them home. It is a story about community, hope, and the belief that ambitious dreams can be realized when people move together towards a common purpose.

Some books inform. A few transport us elsewhere. This book does both.

Long after the final page, readers may find themselves carrying these islands with them—the sound of the sea, the warmth of its

FOREWORD

people, the tensions and transformations of a society in transition, and the echoes of a story that reach far beyond the atoll itself.

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AUTHOR PROOF
Clever Fox

PREFACE

Some places stay with us long after we leave them.

Lakshadweep remained with me that way.

I first arrived in these islands in 2018, carrying the assumption that I was travelling there for a public health assignment. Over the next few years, however, the islands slowly pulled me into their own rhythm.

And slowly, without fully realizing it, I too became emotionally tied to the islands.

The world would eventually recognize Lakshadweep as India's first TB-free geography. But before that recognition arrived, I had already witnessed something extraordinary unfold across these small coral islands: ordinary people transforming a government program into a collective movement.

I completed most of this memoir during my fourteenth visit to Lakshadweep, writing over five reflective days spent between Agatti and Kavaratti. Many of these pages were written beside the sea itself, listening to the same waves that move through this story.

The memoir moves between that final visit and memories gathered across the years before it, much like the islands themselves—where past and present often seem to exist side by side.

PREFACE

The islands I first encountered moved slowly, lived collectively, and measured life differently from the mainland. Over recent years, however, I began to sense subtle changes reshaping island life, and with them, a growing fear that certain silences and ways of living might one day disappear unnoticed beyond these shores. I felt an increasing responsibility to document what I had witnessed.

Perhaps that is why I felt compelled to write this memoir now.

Not as a historian.

Not as an expert.

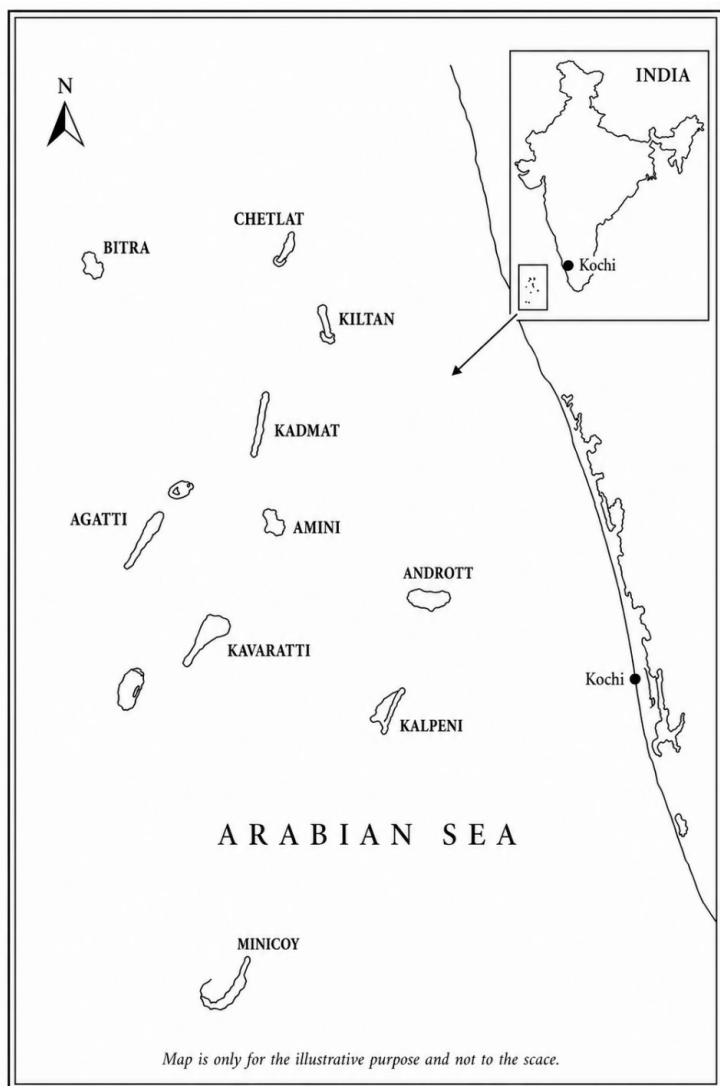
And not as someone claiming to fully understand the islands.

Only as a visitor who stayed long enough for the sea, the people, and the quiet rhythms of Lakshadweep to leave a permanent mark on him.

Rakesh PS

July 2026

THE ISLANDS



Lakshadweep is a scattered archipelago of thirty-six islands, only ten of them inhabited. Across these tiny islands, surrounded by the vast Arabian Sea, I discovered stories of resilience, community, and belonging.

As you turn the page, let this map guide you through those distant shores, where this journey begins.

AUTHOR PROOF
Clever Fox



THE LANDING

“We will commence our descent shortly,” announced the captain.

I looked out the window. Beyond the spinning propeller blades, white clouds drifted past like scattered cotton.

Five years.

It had been five years since I last saw this view.

This was my fourteenth journey to the islands. The first thirteen had all been official—field visits, review meetings, discussions with bureaucrats, and endless coordination with health staff across distant islands. This time, I carried no laptop.

I came back because I owed these islands a story.

Lakshadweep had always been my escape. Whenever I felt myself nearing burnout, or whenever my mind needed complete silence, I would disappear here for a few days. Every time, I returned calmer.

As the aircraft descended, old memories resurfaced.

I remembered traveling deep into the sea on tiny fishing boats alongside local fishermen to conduct training programs on remote islands. I remembered our midnight conversations on the

shore beneath the stars, and afternoon naps on hammocks tied between coconut trees while the ocean breeze rocked me to sleep.

Out here, phone networks were notoriously weak. Having visited the islands thirteen times before, I knew exactly what to expect: a complete disconnect from the digital world. Even checking emails required something close to a religious ritual. I had to step out of my room, walk exactly due east, and stand beneath the eighth coconut tree. Then switch the phone off, switch it back on, hold my breath, and wait. If the mobile gods were pleased, a tiny notification might appear announcing that somebody had sent me a message. Actually, downloading it required a miracle.

Around sixty-nine thousand people live across these ten small islands. On the map of India, they appear almost as an afterthought—a handful of tiny dots scattered across the vast Arabian Sea, easy to overlook unless one knows where to look. The community is so small that almost everyone knows one another.

Officially, the islanders are classified as Scheduled Tribes. But Lakshadweep challenges many mainland assumptions about tribal life. The people here are highly literate, deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, and far closer to the Malabar coast in physical appearance and culture. Yet the surrounding ocean has shaped them into a society distinctly its own—closely knit, communal, and bound by strong family ties.

Life moves differently there. People spend long evenings talking beneath coconut trees. Fishermen returned without the

frantic urgency I was used to seeing on the mainland, and daily life seemed far less governed by anxiety. During my earlier visits, I was always struck by how slowly time moved across these islands.

Suddenly, the aircraft broke through the cloud layer.

The blue expanse of the Arabian Sea filled my window. I leaned forward, searching for the bright green lagoons below. Knowing this route by heart, I had intentionally paid extra for this side seat just to witness the view again.

From above, the geography looked just as stunning as it had during my first visit. Lakshadweep was not formed from mountains or volcanic rock, but from fragile coral reefs built gradually beneath the sea over centuries. The reefs formed protective rings around the islands, creating calm turquoise lagoons within while the open Arabian Sea crashed endlessly beyond them.

The mood inside the cabin shifted.

Even on my fourteenth arrival, I still felt the familiar thrill of the landing.

The ATR aircraft began swaying gently in the wind as it lined up with Agatti Island. My heart still raced a little. The runway looked impossibly narrow—a thin strip of black asphalt stretching from one end of the island to the other. To land safely, the pilots had to descend very low over the lagoons. From my window, I watched the familiar illusion I always waited for: it felt as though the aircraft was diving straight into the sea.

Bump.

With a heavy jolt, the tires struck the runway. The propellers roared into reverse thrust, pulling me hard against the seatbelt before settling into a mechanical rumble.

Agatti remains the only island in Lakshadweep with an airport because very few islands are long and straight enough to hold a runway. Even here, only small propeller aircraft like the ATR-72 can safely operate.

The aircraft rolled to a stop beside a terminal that looked more like a beach house than an airport. There was only one boarding gate, one check-in counter, and one security desk. Beyond the airport fence lay public beaches, coconut groves, and fishing boats resting on the sand.

Inside the terminal, I handed my entry permit to the police officer at the desk. Every non-islander has to show this permit before stepping outside.

It is a strange feeling.

This is probably one of the very few places in India where I need special permission to enter, even though I am an Indian citizen.

During my earliest visits, I often found myself wondering:

Why do I need a permit to walk inside my own country?

.....



TOO FAR

I stepped out of the airport and took a deep breath of fresh air, closing my eyes. Endless shades of blue and green stretched before me—the turquoise lagoon, the open sky, and coconut trees swaying in the wind.

After taking a moment to absorb the familiar scene, I pulled out my phone and called Ameer. He had been my regular taxi driver during all my previous visits, always picking me up from the airport and helping me move around Agatti.

As expected, the moment he answered, he gave me his usual reply.

“Oh, sir! You landed? I am too far. I will start right now!”

The words instantly made me smile. But it had not always been funny.

During my very first visit years ago, that exact sentence had irritated me deeply. I had already shared my flight details and even sent him my boarding pass. Yet here he was, calmly telling me he was “too far.”

“How far, Ameer?” I had asked impatiently, assuming he was at least an hour away.

“Too far, sir,” he repeated casually.