



To Study the Indian Freedom Struggle in Cellular Jail Andaman & Nicobar Islands

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ABSTRACT

The Cellular Jail is an old colonial prison situated in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The term 'Kala Pani' is commonly used to refer to the Cellular Jail, and it means 'black water'. The term is a reference to the isolated location of the jail, which is surrounded by the sea on all sides. The word 'kala' means 'death' or 'time', and it is often used to signify the finality of a situation or the inevitability of death. The word 'pani' means 'water', and in this context, it refers to the sea that surrounds the jail.

The Indian freedom struggle was a long and unending struggle against British rule. History has witnessed that from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Assam to Gujarat both men and women participated in overwhelming numbers. Significantly, the story of India's freedom struggle is incomplete without discussing the contribution of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which was the most dangerous prison known as The Cellular Jail during the days of British rule. The land has been a witness to the brave freedom fighters who made sacrifices during the freedom struggle of India.

In course of time, the settlement grew in size, thus making it difficult for prison authorities to provide safe custody and enforce strict discipline. Consequently, it was decided to construct a jail. Subsequently, based on the inspection report of Charles James Lyall and A.S. Lethbridge submitted proposals for the construction of a Cellular Jail near Port Blair. The construction of the prison started in 1896 and took 10 years to be completed in 1906. The main objective behind the construction was to deport Indian political prisoners. The establishment of convict settlement was developed to crush the nationalist movement.

KEYWORDS: Andaman and Nicobar Islands, British, Cellular Jail, Freedom Struggle, Political Prisoners.

INTRODUCTION

While the Cellular Jail is indeed a historical landmark and tourist attraction, it is important to remember that it is also a site of great suffering and oppression by British colonial rule in India. It is often considered a pilgrimage destination for freedom fighters. The jail holds a special place in the hearts of many Indians, as it is a symbol of the sacrifices made by the freedom fighters who were imprisoned there. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, popularly also called Veer Savarkar used to say that “this is a great pilgrimage place¹, where many martyrs sacrificed their lives to ignite the light of freedom”. Contrary to popular belief, Cellular Jail in particular became a symbol of freedom struggle where many unsung heroes suffered horrifying torture and inhuman treatment. Their spirit of patriotism and sacrifice was utmost in our freedom struggle to achieve independence for their motherland. Similarly, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a prominent part have added glorious chapters of India’s freedom struggle. Indeed, it is time to revisit the role of islands because of their great historical importance to the country during colonial India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British government took several measures to reestablish its paramount power in India. The British government established a penal colony in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in order to suppress the rebellion and maintain their control over India. The first attempt to colonize the islands was made in 1789 by the British East India Company, but it was abandoned due to a lack of resources and hostile indigenous tribes. In 1857, the British Government set up the Andaman Committee to investigate the possibility of establishing a penal colony on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Dr Frederic John Mouat was appointed as the chief of the commission, with Dr G.R. Playfair and Lieutenant J.S. Heathcote serving as his two additional associates. The committee was tasked with examining suitable sites for a convict settlement on the islands. After visiting the islands on December 8, 1857, the committee submitted a report to the Government of India on January 15, 1858, recommending the establishment of a penal settlement on South Andaman Island. Later, in 1858, the actual penal settlement was established to accommodate a large number of prisoners and isolate them from the mainland. Port Blair, the capital city of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, is named after the British colonialist Archibald Blair who established the first penal colony in the region.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To Study the Indian Freedom Struggle in Cellular Jail Andaman & Nicobar Islands

The Transportation of Prisoners to The Penal Settlement

The Andaman Islands have a complex history, with various powers vying for control over the archipelago. The British East India Company established a penal colony on the islands in 1858, in order to house Indian convicts who had previously been sent to other British colonies such as Singapore and Mauritius. The first batch of 200 prisoners arrived in the Andaman Islands on March 10, 1858, under the supervision of Superintendent James Pattison Walker². Within three months, the number of convicts had increased to 773, and on June 16, 1858, a rebellion broke out among the prisoners against British. Despite the rebellion, the

British continued to transport more prisoners to the Andaman Islands. By September 28, 1858, the number of convicts had risen to about 1,330. The exact number of exiles is uncertain, but it is estimated that between 2,000 and 4,000 freedom fighters were sent to the islands between 1858 and 1860. from different regions of India. The prisoners were tasked with clearing the dense jungle and establishing a settlement on the islands. The hardships they had to endure were severe and often quite unbearable. This marked the beginning of the Andaman penal colony, which became notorious for its brutal treatment of prisoners.

PRISON INMATES

The islands of Andaman and Nicobar played a very important role during the struggle for India's independence. Our freedom fighters made a great sacrifice to gain our Independence. Many patriots were prosecuted and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Cellular Jail, some of them were convicted at a very young age. It was designed by the British with the sole purpose of keeping the rebels isolated, far away from the mainland of India. The 'prisoners', on the other hand, were taken to a deep-water settlement, where there was no hope of escape nor their allies could establish any contact with them as surrounded on all sides by the sea. Most notable dissidents⁵ such as Savarkar brothers-Babarao and Vinayak Damodar (Nasik Conspiracy Case, 21 December 1909), Barindra Kumar Ghosh (Alipore Bomb Case, 2 May 1908), Batukeshwar Dutt (Assembly Bomb Case, 8 April 1929)⁶, Diwan Singh Kalepani (Punishment for his nationalistic views, April 1927), Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi (Jehad against British 1857, sent to Kala Pani in 1858), Abdul Rahim Sadiqpuri (Wahabi Movement), Maulvi Liaquat Ali (Uprising of 1857), Nand Gopal (Seditious writing 1911), Bhai Parmanand (Lahore Conspiracy Case, 13 September 1915), Sachindra Nath Sanyal⁷ (Delhi Conspiracy Trial, 23 December 1912), Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna

(Ghadar Conspiracy, February 1915), Subodh Roy (Chittagong Armoury Raid, 18 April. 1930), Trailokyanath Chakravarty (Barisal Conspiracy Case, June 1913) Waman Daji Narayan Joshi (Jackson Murder Case, 30 December 1909) and Yogendra Shukla (Tirhut Conspiracy Case), among others, were prisoners of the Cellular Jail during the struggle for independence. They became prisoners and were kept in solitary confinement in the jail. This was the extreme form of punishment. The political prisoners were not allowed to communicate with each other. For example, at the time, when Savarkar was serving his sentence at the Cellular jail, his elder brother Ganesh Savarkar was also a prisoner there. And yet these two brothers did not know that they were kept in the same jail for two years. Alike, history cannot forget the contribution of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army comrades as a complemented to a momentous event in the history of Andaman and Nicobar Islands through his commitment, struggle and spirit as a way of achieving Independence. Apart from the aforementioned freedom fighters, we hardly know about the contribution of those martyrs who were all exiled to the Andaman. Their supreme sacrifice has enabled us to live in an independent nation especially Jatish Chandra Pal, Maulana Ahmadullah and Shadan Chandra Chatterjee. In addition, the prison has witnessed many unsung heroines as well who gave up their lives in the quest for freedom. These women convicts have remained in oblivion from the writing of history. A few compelling names are Bina Das (Bhaumik) and Kalyani Das (Bhattacharjee). These two Indian women revolutionaries and nationalists were the daughter of Beni Madhab Das and Sarala Devi, a renowned Brahmo teacher and social reformer from Bengal. They were arrested and transported from Bengal to Andaman⁸ as these valiant

revolutionaries were involved in cases of conspiracy against British colonial rule. Bina Das attempted to shoot Bengal's Governor Sir Stanley Jackson on February 6, 1932, as a protest against the detention of Indian nationalist leader Surya Sen. She was sentenced to nine years of arduous imprisonment in the Cellular Jail. Likewise, Kalyani Das, her elder sister was sentenced to transportation of life. She was also imprisoned in the same jail but was kept entirely separate with no danger of association with other convicts. It is indeed unfortunate that the sacrifices of these young inmates who were incarcerated in the Cellular Jail are not widely known or recognized. But many remain unsung and even sometimes, unheard of. Here are the forgotten stories of six prisoners among children who were most particularly Anand Prasad Gupta (Chittagong Armoury Raid Case, 1930), Sahairam Das, Fakir Chandra Sen (The Chittagong Revolt, 1930), Sudhendu Bikash Dastidar and Hira Mohan Chatterjee – when transported to the Andamans were youths below 18 years of age. Unfortunately, history does not mention the sacrifice of these young inmates incarcerated in the Cellular Jail. The youngest convict was 15-yearold Haripada Bhattacharjee. He was arrested in connection with the Birbhum Conspiracy case on 17 February 1934. Their contribution to the freedom struggle of India is significant and deserves to be remembered and celebrated. It is important to remember that the struggle for independence was not just fought by famous leaders and activists, but also by ordinary people, including young children, who were willing to make great sacrifices for the cause of freedom. Hence, their stories also give strength to all those who cherish freedom, justice and human dignity around the world. The fight was not merely for the political rights of self-determination from foreign rule but for freedom from tyranny as well. The saga of their exemplary courage and persuasion has served as an inspiration to the people of India.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, in his memoirs, who was himself a political prisoner in the Cellular Jail, recalls that political prisoners were made to wear badges with the letter "D" inscribed on them. According to Savarkar, this stood for "dangerous" and was used to identify prisoners who were considered to be a threat to the British colonial system. The purpose was to prevent them from mixing with each other during meal times and working hours. The jail authorities believed that if political prisoners were allowed to mix with other prisoners, they might spread their ideas and beliefs, leading to a greater risk of rebellion or unrest. Thus, due to brutal colonial repression the most notable convicts V.D. Savarkar, B.K. Ghosh, Bhai Parmanand, and Ullaskar Dutt went on strike in Cellular Jail as they were demanding the issue of status and degrading treatment in prison of those convicted of politically motivated crimes. They wanted to change the nomenclature used to describe those convicted of a political crime as 'seditionist prisoners'. Instead "political prisoners" appeared as a flexible designation. Apart from recognition, other demands of the prisoners revolved around better treatment in prison including reform of labour rules, access to extensive and varied diet needs, health-care facilities, library, sufficient reading and writing materials and communication with their family etc. Later, inside the prison were intersected by tensions between the political prisoners and the prison establishments due to the suicide of Indu Bhushan Roy in May 1912 and the 'insanity' of Ullaskar Dutta on June 10, 1912. Soon thereafter, this further increased the demand for maintaining order in the prison. Consequently, this led to the second general strike. Thus, a few months later, some Cellular Jail distressed prisoners began a series of concerted hunger strikes and work stoppages to protest against the conditions in the prison. In September 1912, Ladha Ram and Noni

Gopal Mukherjee went on a hunger strike for 72 days to protest against the prevailing inhuman conditions¹⁵. Their protests were against the nature of their incarceration and demanded less harsh labour than that performed by a common convict. These political prisoners demanded equal status to the convicts of the penal settlement. In the end, the prison authorities agreed to some of the demands partially such as regarding working conditions and access to reading materials. On the other hand, they were refusing to grant status in prison as “political prisoners.”

CONCLUSION

In accordance with the theme ‘Celebrating Unsung Freedom Fighters’ it is time to enthuse new energy by remembering the significant contributions made by political prisoners of Andaman and Nicobar Islands whilst the country celebrates the ‘Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav’ to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of India’s Independence. The idea of unsung heroes is inextricably linked with the element of inclusion under the campaign of "Dekho Apna Desh". Hence, these islands have been privileged to share emblematic and rich historical events through the journey of the freedom struggle, which goes beyond black water. Notably, when we look through the pages of the past, we find that the Cellular Jail is a symbol of untold miseries, sufferings and extreme atrocities imposed on prisoners who were fighting for the freedom of their motherland. In last, it helps us to understand that the Cellular Jail in Andaman and Nicobar Islands mark as one of the grimmest and dark eras of British rule in the Indian subcontinent.

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