

A Short history of the Andaman Islands

The Andamans are a chain of 184 odd islands in the Andaman sea at approx 1100 Kms to the south of Kolkata. The largest among them, The Andaman Island is 355 Kms long and 60 Kms wide. There was a time when ancient tribes lived here. Some of the natives it is said bore a remarkable resemblance to the aboriginal tribes of Australia. Today some tribes have receded into the deep forest while others have been resettled. Port Blair, it's principal port, is a picturesque and bustling town, full of greenery. It is well connected to the main land by regular passage of ships and scheduled flights from KolKata and Madras. Different communities are living in harmony and use hindi as their language.

Port Blair was named after the East India Companies' Lt. Archibald Blair who occupied the Andamans in 1789 to keep his ships safe and protected in the rains as a safe harbour and as a penal settlement for prisoners. But because of the unhygienic climate and outbreak of diseases and the expenses in maintaining the harbour he had to abandon the Andamans in 1796. Early in the first decade of the 19th century the roots of the East India Co. were firmly entrenched in India. The British were subjecting Indians to a lot of abject atrocities, snatching away land from peasants, destroying the livelihood of craftsmen, increasing taxes, usurping the states from the Nawabs and native kings. Ordinary people, soldiers, nawabs and kings were all being terrified and harassed. Generally everywhere there was resentment and revolt. People were determined to do away with the East India Co.

Recapture of Andaman Islands to keep Political Prisoners:

The Andamans reminds us of those freedom fighters who on 10th May 1857, gave the clarion call to rise against the British rule. This was our First War of Independence, what the British in their history books refer to as the Sepoy Mutiny. To totally stomp out the uprising the British sent thousands to the gallows and even hung them up from trees, tied them to cannons and blew them up, destroyed them with guns and swords as if they had gone mad and were out to get revenge.

The revolutionaries, who survived, were exiled for life to the Andamans so that their connection with their families and their country would be severed and their countrymen would forget them forever. For this reason, in January 1858, the British reoccupied Port Blair, Andamans. For the first time on 10th March 1858, Supdt. J.B. Walker arrived with a batch of 200 freedom fighters. The second batch of 733 freedom fighter prisoners arrived in April 1868 from Karachi. They had been sentenced for life imprisonment. After this however it is not known how many thousands of freedom fighters were sent to the Andamans from the harbours of Bombay, Kolkata and Madras. Their numbers, names and addresses are not known.

It is said that all records were burnt when the Japanese occupied the Andamans. Some preliminary research was done by our organisation in the India Office Library, London, but no light could be shed. This worried us because whatever else the British might have been they

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were excellent record keepers. The truth is still not known and it needs to be. It is the responsibility of our present Indian Government to have a thorough research done to fill these gaps and to put forward in front of our countrymen, the true history of our freedom struggle and the different streams and revolts involved. The Cellular Jail was inalienably linked to the long and glorious struggle of our revolutionary freedom movement fought on the mainland and it had deep political significance. Leading figures from revolutionary upsurges on the mainland were invariably banished to languish and suffer in the Andamans.

Atrocities committed on early freedom fighters:

In almost perennial rainy weather, with heavy bar fetters and shackles on their feet, surrounded by snakes, leeches and scorpions the freedom fighters were expected, in deep primeval forests to clear a path for roads through marshy land. They were punished and faced hard labour if they slowed down. In March 1868, 238 prisoners tried to escape. By April they were all caught. One committed suicide and of the remainder Supdt. Walker ordered 87 to be hanged.

Sher Ali: The killing of Lord Mayo.

Despite these atrocities the freedom fighters used to resist and fight for their self-respect and for the love of their country. Sher Ali was given life imprisonment during the Wahabi movement against the British Raj. He assassinated Lord Mayo, Viceroy of India with a knife on 8th February, 1872. He was hanged on Viper Island.

The Constuction of the Cellular Jail:

From 1896 the construction of Cellular Jail was started and it was completed in 1906 with 698 cells. The Jail was constructed with seven wings, spreading out like a seven-petal flower. In its centre it had a tower with a turret. Connected to this were the three storey high seven wings with 698 isolated cells. This is why it is called the Cellular Jail.

Freedom Fighters of the National Revolutionary Movements:

National movements were flaring up against the British rule all over India and the freedom fighters related to these movements were sent to Andamans or the "Kala Pani" with long sentences. Prominent among these were those from The Wahabi Movement (1830 - 1869), Mopla Rebellion (1792 - 1947), First Rampa Rebellion (1878 - 1879), Second Rampa Rebellion (1922 - 1924), Tharawadi Peasant Rebellion, Burma (1930). Etc.

The National Revolutionary Movement had prominent among them in Punjab, the Heroes of The Gadar party, The Hinduthan Republican Association in U.P. formed by Sachin Sanyal, in Maharashtra with the Savarkar brothers and of course with the partition of Bengal in 1905, secret societies and lots of underground groups were beginning to form. Lots of conspiracy cases started in the courts and the number of revolutionary freedom fighters in the jails began to

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swell. Most of the leaders of these movements if not hanged outright were deported to the Andaman Cellular Jail. Several died due to inhuman treatment and torture.

Alipore Conspiracy Case

Bengal's Alipore Conspiracy Case (1908) saw 34 revolutionaries being accused. In which were Barin Ghosh, Ullaskar Dutt, Upendranath Banerjee and Hem Chandra Das. They were sent to the Andamans in 1909. Later revolutionaries from U.P. and Maharashtra were also sent.

Veer Savarkar

For the assassination of Collector Jackson of Nasik District in the Nasik Conspiracy Case Veer Vinayak savarkar was convicted and sent to the Cellular jail on 7th April, 1911. According to Savarkar Freedom Fighters were made to do hard labour. They had to peel coconuts and take out oil from them. They were forced to go around like bullocks to take out oil from mustard seeds. Outside they were forced to clear the jungles and trees on hillside levelling marshy land. They were flogged on refusal. On top of this they did not even get a full meal every day.

Gadar Party Revolutionaries in Cellular Jail (1914):

The Gadar Party whose president was Baba Sohan Singh and the secretary was Lala Har Dayal was formed in America to get our country free from the British. In 1914, with arms and ammunition, Gadar Party members, travelling by the ship Kama Gata Maru arrived in Calcutta. They were arrested by the British.

Repatriation of prisoners from Andamans (1921)

The rise of socialism in Russia and the rising influence of the Chinese Revolution gave rise to revolutionary thoughts and action here in our country, and were very popular with the young. The Bengal revolutionary parties like Anushilan and Yugantar again became active. In Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, the Naujavan Bharat Sabha provided a good platform for the youth. The Hindusthan Socialist Republican Association and its leader Shaheed Bhagat Singh's ideas are symptomatic of those times.

Assembly Bomb Case (1929)

On 8 April 1929 in protest against the trade dispute bill Sardar Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt threw a bomb in the central constituent assembly. They threw leaflets and got themselves arrested. There was a tremendous impact on the nation. On 12 June 1929 both were given life imprisonment.

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The Second Lahore Conspiracy Case

The British government filed the second Lahore Conspiracy Case against Bhagat Singh and 16 of his colleagues. In 1930, Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Rajguru were hanged. Shri Yatendra Nath died because of hunger strike. Bhagat Singh's other friends Batukeshwar Dutt, Bejoy Kumar Sinha, Shiv Verma, Jaidev Kapoor, Dr. Gaya Prasad, Kamal Nath Tiwari, Mahabir Singh were given life imprisonment and were sent to Andaman Cellular Jail.

The Chittagong Revolt (1930)

On the night of 18th April 1930 revolutionaries occupied Chittagong Armoury. For many days they battled with British army on the hills of Jalalabad. Many died a heroic death and many were arrested on 1st March 1932., 12 out of 32 people were given life imprisonment. Revolutionary leader (Master Da Surya Sen) was arrested and hanged on 12th Jan 1934. Ambika Chakraborty, Ganesh Ghosh, Anant Singh, Lok Nath Bal, Anand Gupta, Randhir Dass Gupta, Fakir Sen and other compatriots were sent to Cellular Jail.

The Reopening of the Andaman Cellular Jail (1932)

All around the country there were revolts against the British. In Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab a chain of revolutionary conspiracies started. On a large scale there were arrests and long sentences were given. National revolutionary movement leaders and active participants started being sent to the Cellular Jail in Andamans.

Inhuman treatment in Jail (1932)

The food that was given was not fit for human consumption. There were worms when you opened the bread and wild grass was boiled and served in lieu of vegetables. Rain drinking water was full of insects and worms. The 13' X 6' cells were dark and damp and dingy thickly coated with moss. There were no toilets. There were no lights, no reading material. Prisoners were not allowed to meet with each other. The guards carried out physical torture and flogging. Their behaviour was insulting. Things had become unbearable.

The first mass hunger strike:

12 May 1933 The only alternative before the freedom fighters was to resort to a hunger strike against these atrocities. On 12 May 1933 they started a fast unto death. Mahavir Singh, Mohan Kishore Namoo Das and Mohit Moitra died during this hunger strike. Their bodies were quietly ferreted away and thrown out to sea. Punjab's jail inspector Barker was called to break the hunger strike. He issued orders to stop the issuing of drinking water. The freedom fighters were resolute. There was a huge outcry throughout India because of this hunger strike. After 46 days the British Raj had to bow and the demands of the freedom fighters had to be accepted. The

hunger strike ended on 26 June 1933.

Facilities obtained after the hunger strike

After the death of three colleagues the facilities won from jail authorities proved beneficial for the future. There was light in the cells. The prisoners started getting newspapers, books and periodicals. They were allowed to meet. The facility to read individually or on a collective basis was allowed. The opportunity to play sports and organise cultural events was given. The jail work was reduced to minimal. Above all there was respect for the freedom fighters from the prison officials and a marked improvement in their behaviour. A new environment was created as the freedom fighters met to discuss and read. A thirst for books and knowledge began. There were students, doctors, lawyers, peasants, and workers all together. They discussed politics, economics, history and philosophy.

There were classes in biology and physiology given by the doctors amongst them. Others gave classes in historical and dialectical materialism. Knowledge, experience and books were hungrily shared. A jail library was started. A veritable university of freedom fighters had begun where revolutionaries were learning about Marxist and socialist ideas and how to disseminate these amongst the people whose freedom they were fighting for. A Communist consolidation was formed of 39 prisoners on 26 April 1935. This number later swelled to 200. The freedom fighters started feeling that the atmosphere for a world war was gathering and that before the war starts we should get back to our country to be with our people and take active part in the upheaval that was imminent. A petition was sent to the Viceroy on 9 July 1937 by the freedom fighters that all political prisoners should be repatriated to the mainland and released. An ultimatum was given that if these demands were not met a hunger strike would begin.

The second hunger strike for the repatriation of freedom fighters began on 25 July 1937

A country wide movement on the mainland in support of the demands of the Andaman freedom fighters began as other political prisoners in other jails on the mainland also started hunger strikes in support. There was a mass demonstration of working people, intellectuals and students. This upsurge clearly showed that their people on the mainland did not forget them. After four weeks telegrams from Bengal's chief minister, leaders of the nation Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sharad Chandra Bose, Rabindra Nath Tagore etc poured in imploring the freedom fighters to end their hunger strike.

On 28 August 1937, Gandhiji, poet Rabindra Nath Tagore and the Congress Working Committee sent a telegram... "the whole nation appeals to you to end the hunger strike... and assures you to take up your demands and to see them fulfilled..." After a lot of deliberation and discussion this historic 36-day hunger strike of 200 revolutionary freedom fighters ended. The process of repatriation started in September 1937. There were a total of 385 freedom fighters in jail at the time. 339 from Bengal, 19 from Bihar, 11 from Uttar Pradesh, 5 from Assam, 3 from Punjab, 2 from Delhi and 2 from Madras.

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Netaji in Andamans

Netaji's Azad Hind Fauz first of all gave independence to Port Blair, Andaman. Netaji visited the Andaman Island and hoisted the tricolour flag on 30 December 1943. He had declared that the very first bastion to be relieved of the British yolk was Andamans, the Indian Bastille revolutionary freedom fighters were kept, very much like the Bastille in Paris during the French Revolution. The British reoccupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and abolished the Penal Settlement in 1945.

The Demolition of the Cellular Jail

We do not know on whose initiative the demolition of the Cellular Jail was begun. We revolutionaries who were incarcerated in the Cellular Jail intervened. We felt strongly that this symbol of tyranny needed to be preserved as a National Memorial to remind our future generations of the tremendous cost that was paid in Indian blood for the freedom of our country.

source: <http://www.andamancellularjail.org/History.htm>