

Cellular Jail – An Embodiment of Sacrifice

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“Oh, my dear Motherland, why are you crying?

The rule of foreigners is about to end!

They are packing up!

The national shame and misfortune will not last long!

The wind of freedom has begun to blow,

Old and young are yearning for freedom!

When India becomes free,

‘Hari’ will also enjoy his freedom!”

✘ Who is that ‘Hari’ who wanted to enjoy his freedom? Shri Babu Ram Hari was from Qadian, Gurdaspur District of Punjab, and Editor of ‘Swarajya’, who was awarded sentence of transportation to Cellular Jail in Andamans for 21 years for penning three editorials considered ‘seditious’ by the British colonizers.

Lives were thus mercilessly plucked by the British rulers as offerings for upholding the cause of India’s independence. The dreaded Cellular jail was one such sacrificial altar. Equipped specially for solitary confinement in individual cells (hence aptly named Cellular Jail), this jail is indelibly linked with India’s fight for freedom.

Indian Bastille

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose rightly described it as the ‘Indian Bastille’. In a statement issued on 8th November 1943, after the Andamans were won by the Japanese during World War II, Netaji remarked, “Like the fort of Bastille in Paris which was liberated first during the French Revolution setting free political prisoners, the Adnamans, where Indian prisoners suffered, is the first to be liberated in India’s fight for independence”. (Later, however, the Islands were recaptured by the Allies.)

Penal Settlement

For prisoners convicted of high crimes in colonial India and Burma, the British established penal settlements at Benkoelen (the first ever in 1787), Malacca, Singapore, Arakan and Tenasserim. The Andamans was the last in the series and also the first to be established on Indian soil. However, much earlier in 1789 itself such a penal settlement was started in Port Cornwallis, North Andaman, but was abandoned after seven years.

The idea was revived in the wake of the First War of Indian Independence (1857) which the British chose to call the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’. To deport and imprison the so-called mutineers, deserters and rebels, the far-off Andamans was chosen. On 10th March 1858, the first batch of 200 ‘grievous political offenders’ touched

the shores of Chatham Island within Port Blair harbour in South Andaman. The second batch was of 216 from Punjab province. As on 16th June 1858, the settlement position was - Total received-773, Died in Hospital-64, Escaped and not recaptured-140, Suicide-1, Hanged after recapture-87, Left-481. By 28th September 1858 about 1,330 prisoners had landed. Between 1858 and 1860, about 2,000-4,000 freedom fighters had been deported to Andamans from different parts of India. Sadly, many of them perished under the most agonizing living and working conditions. Neither of those who escaped into the jungle could escape death. Later, criminal convicts were also sent there for penal servitude. A century later, on 15th August 1957, a Martyrs' Column was dedicated in Port Blair to commemorate those heroes who died unsung and unknown.

Cellular Jail

Fearing that political prisoners would spread revolutionary ideas among other prisoners and also mingle within their group, the British rulers decided on solitary cells in a far off place. Thus was completed the notorious Cellular Jail in 1906 whose solitary cells finally rose to a total of 693! As the freedom movement picked up, 80 revolutionaries from Poona were deported in 1889. As the freedom struggle saw a resurgence, 132 were deported (1909- 1921), followed by 379 (1932-38). Political prisoners involved in various conspiracy cases were deported to Cellular Jail. Some of such cases include Alipur Bomb Case (also known as Maniktola Conspiracy Case), Nasik Conspiracy Case, Lahore Conspiracy Case (Ghaddar party revolutionaries), Banaras Conspiracy Case, Chittagong Armoury Case, Dacca Conspiracy Case, Inter-Provincial Conspiracy Case, Gaya Conspiracy Case and Burma Conspiracy Case, etc. Besides these, Wahabi rebels, Moplah agitators of Malabar Coast, Rampa revolutionaries of Andhra, Manipur freedom fighters, Tharwardy peasants of Burma were also located to the Andamans.

Life in the jail

Life in the Cellular Jail was most inhuman and barbaric, especially for the early prisoners. With little food and clothing, the political prisoners were compelled to do gruelling manual work. Unused to such hard manual labour, they failed in their daily work quota resulting in further severe punishments. The intention was to humiliate them and shatter their will power. They were set upon to manually press oil, dehusk coconuts, pound coir, make rope, cut hills, fill up swamps, clear forests, lay roads, etc. The most feared was 'picking oakum', the 'art of rope making' out of Ramban grass with high acidity content that caused continuous itching, scratching and bleeding!

Hunger strike

When Congress ministries were formed in seven provinces of India in July 1937, the demand of Cellular Jail political prisoners for repatriation to mainland gained momentum. As their repeated appeals and agitations did not yield result, 183 of them went on a 37-day hunger strike from 24 July 1937. This created a wave of support and their counterparts in the mainland jails also went on hunger strike. Demonstrations were held all over India. The British bowed down and the first batch of freedom fighters left Andamans on 22 Sept. 1937. The last batch had also left by 18 January 1938. Criminal convicts, however, were deported till the penal settlement was abolished in 1946.

National Memorial

Many charismatic personalities were imprisoned in this Jail. Savarkar brothers, Motilal Verma, Babu Ram Hari, Pandit Permanand, Ladha Ram, Ullaskar Dutt, Barin Kumar Ghosh, Bhai Parmanand, Indu Bhushan Roy, Prithvi Singh Azad, Pulin Das, Trailokyanath Chakravarthy, Gurumukh Singh, among others. The list is long and distinguished. To remember and venerate the invaluable sacrifice of our freedom fighters interned in Cellular Jail, this was dedicated as a National Memorial on 11 February 1979 by the then Prime Minister, Shri Morarji Desai. The museum and the Sound & Light show there depict the hard life which, in essence, is their sacrifice so that we could live in independence and peace. Cellular Jail is in UNESCO's tentative list of World Heritage Site as there are no sites comparable to it at national level.

Once a dreaded place, Cellular Jail is now a national monument, an embodiment of sacrifice, a place to remind that freedom does not come that easily.

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