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Political prisoners in the Andamans: A biographical analysis

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Abstract

This article explains the lives of three political prisoners who in an act of punishment were transported to the Andaman Islands in the twentieth century. It interrogates colonialism, transportation and punishment from biographical perspectives and places penal transportation in a broad global context. The present work focuses on political prisoners experiences of transportation to the Andamans by analyzing their autobiographies. The autobiographies of the political prisoners who were arrested and transported to the Andamans at the same time are taken into account in order to view transportation punishment with more systematic and accurate narratives. The present work is heavily relied on primary sources.

Keywords: Cellular jail, transportation, punishment, penal, newspaper

Introduction

There was a complex system of penal transportation, settlement, colonies and labour during the British rule. From 1788 to 1868, convicts were transported from Britain to New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land and Western Australia, and to Gibraltar and Bermuda. However, at the time, convict flow was also occurring between British colonies. After the revolt of 1857, Britain transported convicts to Andaman Islands, and it operated as penal colony until the Second World War. During the British rule, there was a pan-imperial transportation of convicts, which started from Britain, Ireland and Gibraltar to India, Aden, South Asia, southward to Australia, around the Cape Colony to Robben Island, and across the Atlantic to Bermuda and the Caribbean islands ^[1].

Convicts who were transported to the Andamans even wrote their memoirs such as V.D. Savarkar, Barindra Ghosh etc wrote their experiences of penal transportation. One could cite Clare Anderson in this context who wrote that "These individuals were drawn from a literate class of male elites, and perhaps most significantly the purpose of their texts was to create particular forms of anti-colonial solidarity with their readership on the Indian mainland ^[2]."

Biographical approach to penal transportation can be used as a mean of opening up a different perspective on colonialism and working through questions of punishment, labour, resistance and identity. Biographical study approaches from the particular to general to give an important individual dimension to larger history of penal transportation. Judith M. Brown also noted the importance of biographies and noted that individual lives can be brought together with general themes and theory to explore issues around identity, agency and the relationship between the local and the global ^[3].

Many male convicts transported to the Andamans and Robben Island are among the documented non-elites of the British period. They are mentioned in official records in the wake of their conviction, transportation, letters, diaries etc. V.D. Savarkar and Barindra Ghosh who were transported to the Andamans at the beginning of the twentieth century wrote about their transportation experiences. The focuses of their memories are on colonial brutalities that include labour, and privileges reduced to degrading circumstance. They represented penal colony as an arena of political struggle, as well as their fetters as a metaphor for India as nation in chains ^[4]. Their writings made them in stark contrast to other prisoners who were usually referred collectively and rarely by names.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar

An autobiography of particular importance concerning the penal transportation in the Andamans is of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.

He originally wrote his autobiography in Marathi under the title "Manjhi Janmathep" during his stay at Ratnagiri soon after his release from the prison in Andamans^[5]. This autobiography depicts the suffering not only of V.D. Savarkar but also of other political prisoners. On not writing his autobiography while he was serving his sentence in the Andamans, Savarkar wrote that he did not even had the end of broken pencil with him and he was not even allowed to have scrap of paper with him. Savarkar was arrested on 13th March 1910 in connection with a conspiracy in India and sent to Bombay. After a series of trial he was sentenced to fifty years imprisonment and sent to the Andamans.

In the autobiography, V.D. Savarkar wrote that there were very chances of the Andamans being cut off from contact with India, and the settlement being denuded of its Indian Population. Therefore, he undertook it as his duty to write few words in order to draw the attention of Indian public to a matter of such vital importance. Savarkar wrote about the situations in Andaman settlements and told that in every division of the island, there were barracks attached with a factory, where the prisoners were confined and made to work. Savarkar described the overworks given to prisoners, such as, prisoner were made to do hard labour in plantation, and they were also employed in cutting down jungle, which was more exhausting than working in plantation. On the matter of Cellular Jail, Savarkar wrote that "this prison has come to be known all over the place as Silver Jail or Cellular Jail wherein it was meant that political prisoners should spend their long term in solitary confinement, and not sound of their groans and agonies was to reach from it to the world without^[6]".

On the treatment of prisoners in the Andaman jails, Savarkar wrote in his autobiography that the sepoy used insolent language with prisoners as they believed that speaking rudely with prisoners would give them quicker promotion. Even when it was bathing time, the prisoners had to follow the Jamadar's instruction. Savarkar also mentioned that since he was educated, the jailor named Barrie tried to talk politely with him, and his (Barrie's) European friends were eager to see Savarkar as they had heard a great deal about him. Savarkar further wrote that the prisoners were not allowed to talk to one another and sometimes if they wanted to exchange words they (prisoners) somehow arranged a piece of paper, wrote the information on it, and bound the paper up to the stone and threw it to the recipient. However, it was really risky affair as the noise of the stone roused the Pathan warder. Savarkar further described that all the political prisoners were called 'Bomb-golawalla' in spite the fact that most of them did not use pistols and bombs to fight, but rather fought only with their pens. Barrie did not allow addressing them as political prisoners or 'Raj-Kaidi' in vernacular. Apart from this, all the political prisoners were branded as 'D', which signified dangerous.

Again on the status of educated political prisoner and uneducated ordinary prisoners, Savarkar wrote that the educated political prisoners were employed in 'picking Oakum' which was technical term for hard labour while the ordinary prisoners who could hardly spell the three 'R's were employed to do light desk work and they at once became 'Babus.' Savarkar wrote a great deal about oil mill in which political prisoners were employed to turn the wheel of the oil- mill, and twenty turns of the wheel were enough to drain away the strength of the strongest coolie. No dacoit was put to do that hard labour, but only political prisoner

were employed on such hard labour. All the ordinary work was to be stopped between ten and twelve, but the 'kolu' or oil-mill labour was to continue throughout. Political prisoners who were employed in kolu were not given enough water to drink, and a prisoner was given only two cups of water to drink. Apart from this, the Jamadar used to severely beat those who could not complete their daily quota of thirty pounds of coconut oil. Berry cut their food and announced that they would not be given anything to eat till they finished their quota.

Savarkar in his autobiography also mentioned about the medical facilities denied to political prisoners. V.D. 'Savarkar's brother Ganesh Savarkar was suffering from hemicranias, but he was still given added work of the grinding mill. Savarkar wrote that a hospital assistant realised the pitiable case of his (Savarkar) brother and sent the doctor to check him. The doctor instructed the Jamadar to take Ganesh Savarkar to hospital. However, Barrie suddenly appeared and shouted to Jamadar "Where is this bomb- thrower going?" The Jamadar shivered all over, and told that he was going on doctor's advice; Barrie said "Why the hell, did you not ask me? Who is the wretched doctor to give the law here? Take him back to work; I shall take care of the doctor. I must rate you as well; you, to take him out without my orders?^[7] Take him back to work."

Savarkar was confined to the cell and put on mill work. Barrie never allowed the admission of a political prisoner in the jail hospital without his consent. Barrie also threatened the Hindu doctor by saying that he should not believe these prisoners and only those prisoners would be considered sick who were so declared by him (Barrie)^[8].

Barrie sometimes used to remark that there is one God in the Universe and He lives in the Heavens above. But there are two in Port Blair: One, the God of Heaven and another, the God of Earth. Indeed, the God of Earth in Port Blair is myself. You may complain to any superior against me, my word shall prevail^[9].

Savarkar wrote that the condition of political prisoner in the Andamans was worse than the cattle under the yoke as even cattle enjoyed the freedom of movement. Political prisoners who were suffering from diarrhea were locked in the cell and they had to discharge it in their own cell. Even in diarrhea the political prisoners were made to do hard labour. Finally Savarkar and other political prisoners including Nand Gopal carried an agitation and their grievance reached the Home Member of the Government and that disgusting practice ended. After this success, the political prisoners began to question the harsh conditions and as Savarkar described at that it was about "to live or not to live." Earlier the Pathan Jamadar (wader) used to slap and abuse the political prisoners, but now the same political prisoners had turned against the Pathan warder to the extent of returning word for word, abuse for abuse, slap for slap, and they did not even spare Barrie from humiliation. In his autobiography Savarkar also wrote about the activities of other political prisoners in the Andamans. One was Nand Gopal, a Punjabi prisoner who humiliated Barrie, and his resistance against Barrie encouraged other political prisoners to resist the tortures. Nand Gopal, Uallaskar Dutt and Hoti Lal started strike against work on the mill. Barrie tried several forms of punishment, but all of no avail. In the end, the authorities assured them to work outside the jail with no work on the oil-mills. It was the first major victory of the political prisoners against the British authorities in the

Andamans.

A prisoner in the Andamans was allowed only to write one letter home during the year. The letter has to be as brief as possible and it was scrutinized and censored by the colonial officers. The political prisoners wanted to inform the mainland people about the tyranny of officers in the Andamans in the wild hope that the Editors, Professors and Barristers would take some step in redressing their issues. A prisoner from U.P. named Hotilal who had been sentenced to ten-year imprisonment somehow managed to smuggle out the letter in which he wrote information about the condition of political prisoners in the Cellular Jails of the Andamans. The letter reached Calcutta and went into the Hands of none other than Surendranath Bannerji of Calcutta who was the editor of the Bengali. In those days of terrorism and Press Act, Bannerji did not hesitate to publish it entirely in his widely circulated daily, and Bannerji further wrote a leaderette on it. As soon as the Bengali had published the letter, other newspaper had no hesitation in taking shelter behind that paper and writing their own comments upon it. The printing of the letter in the Bengali enraged Barrie. Not only he exchanged hot words on Hotilal but also issued a fiat that no political prisoner was to come within ten feet of one another and the violation of that order meant a sack from the warder, the petty officer and the jamadar without fear or favour. The prisoners were not allowed to come together for dinner. Barrie told about this letter to his confidants the 'gentlemen' political prisoners who had become his allies. These 'gentlemen' informed other political prisoners that the Bengali, which had published the letter, was prosecuted and its press was confiscated, which caused this daily the loss worth from two to three lakh of rupees. Those 'gentleman' further told that all the political prisoners would suffer the consequences of Hotilal's letter. Still the political prisoners were openly congratulating Hotilal for they had nothing to lose and everything to gain step by step ^[10].

In the Andamans the Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Dussera were celebrated. Savarkar wrote that he used these festivals for purpose of preaching their ideas of nationality to illiterate and ignorant Hindu prisoners. In the temples, the priest and the Puranik were also persuaded to help the political prisoners in the task. With the passage of time, V.D. Savarkar also started a primary school to educate prisoners. Savarkar also appointed a political convict as a teacher above them. The teacher carried out his task with great efficiency and he also instructed them in subjects which made them sound in their morals and well-grounded in all that concerned national language. The prisoners were made to read and write in Hindi and in Nagari script. They were also taught national songs in Hindi. Savarkar wrote that one Mr. Diggins became the head of the institution and he was a lover of learning. It was him who responded to Savarkar's petitions of providing slates and books to prisoners at Government expense. Somehow Savarkar managed to arrange a large collection of books in Tamil, Andhra, Malayalam and Canarese languages for prisoners. Savarkar claimed that he went into prison statics and got to know that the fruit of his efforts in education was that literary reached eighty percent among the prisoners ^[11].

Finally, it was announced that the prison-colony in the Andamans was closing and thus ended the chapter of the sufferings of political prisoners at 'Kala Pani'. On his departure from the Andamans, Savarkar wrote that. "The

iron threshold of that iron gate, as we crossed it, made us aware that we were leaving the Andamans alive... From death we are crossing into life only by stepping athwart the threshold ^[12]."

Ullaskar Dutta

Ullaskar Dutta was tried in the Alipur Bomb Case along with Barindra Kumar Ghose and others. Initially, Ullaskar Dutta was given the capital punishment by the Sessions court at Alipur, on a charge of conspiracy and waging war against the king. However, Calcutta High Court revised the sentence and Ullaskar Dutta was transported for life to the Penal settlement in the Andamans at the end of 1909.

Ullaskar Dutta wrote that in the Andamans political prisoners were sent in a Cellular Jail which was a towering structure built of massive brickwork on the top of a hill, and it was erected with the double purpose of a prison and a fort. Ullaskar Dutta further claimed that the prisoners were supposed to be kept in a Cellular Jail for a period of six months or one year at most, under observation. On expiry of that term, they were sent away to different stations within the settlement to work there, under convict supervision. However, in the case of political prisoners the authorities looked upon them (political prisoners) with worse suspicion than that with which one would look upon a murderer or a dacoit. The authorities confined political prisoners namely Ullaskar Dutta, Hem Chandra Das, Bibhuti, Indu Bhushan, Hrishikesh and Abinash for more than two and a half years in prison. Apart from this, the political prisoners were made to do hard labour; beginning with coir pounding and ending in the oil mills ^[13].

On oil mills, Ullaskar Dutta account matches with Savarkar's account to a great extent. Ullaskar wrote that in bullock- driven indigenous oil mills, the quantity of mustard oil that a bullock could give did not exceed more than eight seers or sixteen pounds at most whereas the political prisoners had to give one mound or eighty ponds per diem. There was also a big cauldron in the centre, in which dried coconuts were poured and three men had to drag the iron cross-bar. From morning till evening only a few minutes were spared that had to be spent for the taking of meals. Three men had to drag that iron thing, going round and round, not slow like the bullock but like a horse running all the time without halt or stoppage, for the convicts feared punishment if they fall short on daily quota. Ullaskar Dutta himself witnessed a case in which a convict's hand and foot were tied to the cross bar, while others dragged, simply because he lagged behind a little and could not keep pace with them. It was the most pitiable scene to witness for his whole body scratched and bleeding all the while ^[14].

The first six months passed this way, but still Ullaskar Dutta and other political prisoners were not released from the Cellular Jail. Months after months passed and someday orders arrived concerning their transfer to the settlements. Ullaskar Dutta described it that at the time they did not know that they (political prisoners) were only going to fall from the frying pan to the fire.

The authorities divided Ullaskar Dutta's batch into two halves, one was meant for eastern district where the Cellular Jail was also situated, and the other for the western district, of which an island known by the name of Viper Island stood for its head-quarters where he given the tasks of stone breaking, road metalling etc. Here, Ullaskar Dutta seemed to have some visions which he claimed were supernatural and

those visions made him believe on the existence of a mysterious world.

After some time, Ullaskar Dutta was transferred to Dundas Point. There, he was given the task of shifting clay bricks, three at a time, on of a plank of wood, from the cutter. As a result, he had to keep running from early morning till one or two o'clock in the afternoon, without stoppage. Then, the prisoners got a very short respite for a mid-day meal and had to resume works as soon as possible. Considering the fatiguing nature of this work, some of the prisoners were given an extra allowance of one or two pints of milk per head, but what extra milk they got, they had to give it to the Supervising Tindale or petty officer in order to pacify them. However, Ullaskar Dutta did not give his milk to petty officer, so the officer changed him (Ullaskar Dutta) to some other work for which there was no milk allowance sanctioned.

Ullaskar Dutta, later, was given the task to carry water (near a mound in weight) for the pond down below, up the steep hill, to the Saheb's Bungalow (Overseer's Bungalow) on top. In the beginning Ullaskar Dutta faithfully carried this task, but later his health did not permit it so he refused to work. After a small trial, Ullaskar Dutta was sentenced to three months' additional rigorous imprisonment and was sent to the Cellular Jail. Even in the Cellular Jail, Ullaskar Dutta was determined not to work; the jailor took it as an insult to him and imposed one week standing hand-cuffs on Ullaskar^[15].

After some time Ullaskar Dutta was transferred to the lunatic asylum, a step which he appreciated, for there he escaped from the hard labour. Ullaskar Dutta wrote that in the lunatic asylum a Bengali Brahmin doctor gave a paternal care to Ullaskar Dutta. In the lunatic asylum there was considerable area of lands which was used for cultivation, and Dutta was given the task of keeping the vegetable accounts. In the lunatic asylum, Ullaskar Dutta was also given a petty officer and two watchmen to keep constant watch and ward over him, so as to make sure that he did not again attempt to take his life^[16]. In the time of his loneliness in lunatic asylum^[17], Baboo Hari Ram, Hema, Upendra, Barindra, Bibhuti, Sudhir, Abinash, Nand Gopal and other political prisoners often managed to meet Ullaskar Dutta and tried in their own way to cheer him up a bit^[18].

Barindra Kumar Ghosh

Both Ullaskar Dutta and Barindra Kumar Ghosh were initially sentenced to death in Alipore Bomb Case, but later their death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment in the Andamans. In his autobiography Barindra Kumar Ghosh gave a full description of the Cellular Jail architecture and arrangements. On the arrival of Barindra Ghosh's batch, Berry gave a detailed speech in which he stated: "If you disobey me, may God help you, at least I will not, that is certain. Remember also that God does not come within three miles of Port Blair^[19]."

Barindra Kumar Ghosh wrote about common bathing system, and how they were locked separately that too at the interval of 3 or 4 cells so that there could be no communication between them. The total number of cells in the whole jail was 690. There was no barrack for the prisoners. There were only cells and hence it was called the Cellular Jail. In the Andamans, the convict's only identity was his number plate which was a 3 inches long, two inches broad and 1 inch thick wooden piece on which the date of

conviction and the term of sentence were written. It was called the neck-ticket and they were of three types, the rectangular, the circular and the triangular. Prisoners who were accused of murders got the first variety, dacoits and political prisoners get the second variety, and those who unsuccessfully tried to flee from Port Blair were given the third variety^[20].

Ghosh also wrote about the rope making work and interactions with people from different regions such as Madras and Burma. Ghosh on occasion also praised Captain Murray who unlike Barry, was lenient towards political prisoners. The political prisoners were not allowed to talk with one another, and Ghosh further claimed that Hindu guards were not kept to oversee Hindu political prisoners; for the authorities feared that they (Hindu Guards) might sympathize and fraternize with them. In his autobiography Barindra Ghosh described the terror of a Pathan named Khoyedad. On the command of this particular Pathan, Barindra Ghosh wrote that "you had to sit in couples in a row facing the latrine and then, as the order sounded, to enter it in batches of 8 or 10. In the meanwhile you had to practice self-control. The prisoners had to stand up as soon as the order khara ho jao was given and lay by their clothes for search with the order uthaleo they took up the clothes; and they sat down when ordered baithjao^[21]."

On authorities in the Andamans, Ghosh wrote that Warder, Petty officer, Tindal and Jamadar were in charge of everything and had the authority. They were convicts who had passed six of seven years in prison and attained that position. They were perfect in the art of beating and abusing. On their tortures Ghosh further wrote that other convicts hid their bit of coins in a hole in throat, and the jail authorities gave them tortures to extract that money. Barindra was sick and was given 12 oz. of milk from the hospital. In order to escape the trouble he had to give that milk to petty officer, Khoyedad Mian. Ghosh further wrote that the most regrettable part was that there was no remedy for these oppressions. Apart from this, if one could not prove the charge there was the fear of punishment.

On the horrors of oil mills Barindra wrote that the passed days in turning the oil mill and laying flat on their beds dead-tired during the night. On the deaths of the political prisoners in the Andamans, Ghosh wrote that "some would die by hanging, other would die by going mad^[22]." He wrote it in the context of Indu Bhusan's suicide and Ullaskar Dutta's insanity.

Gadar Party followers were also transported to Port Blair of the Andaman. Many Sikh soldiers were also transported for political crime, and some 15-20 convicts came from Bengal. The Port Blair became a lively hell, with such a crowd of political prisoners. Many died of phthisis, another committed suicide, and some went mad. There was no end to events of this kind. Ghosh even claimed that it was the casual offenders, weak-minded and harmless creatures who formed the bulk of prisoner population.

These thoughts and tortures joined the political prisoners against the authorities, and they started hunger strike and demanded three things; chiefly- proper food, releases from labour, and freedom to associate with one another. The authorities did not agree to their demand and the result was that the hunger-strike spread again like wild fire. The authorities tried to prevent it, but the news about Indubhushan, Ullaskar and Nani Gopal reached the country. As a result, the press started a vigorous agitation.

On the result of hunger strikes, Ghosh wrote that their struggles also inspired ordinary convicts, and by now punishment was not the effective method of keeping peace. All on a sudden around seven or eight political prisoners who were term convicts were sent back to prisons in India and the jailor who never hesitated to abuse began approaching very politely. In a few days everybody was transported back to country except Barindra, Hem Chandra, Ullaskar of Alipore Case, Pulin Behari and Suresh Chandra of Dacca and the Savarkar brothers and Joshi of Nasik. Those left had to remain in the prison for 14 years including the remissions^[23].

The political prisoners suspended the hunger strike on the assurance that the whole country had taken up to their cause. This was the victory for political prisoners as from 22 September, 1937 onwards the political prisoners were began to be repatriated to mainland jails, and thereafter most of them were subsequently released. The last batch left the Andamans on 18 January 1938. With this ended the punishment of transportation to the Andamans.

Thus, the three autobiographies are of the same time and their experiences are somewhat very similar. The claims that were made by the political prisoners against the authorities in the Andamans are very similar to one another as they suffered similar tortures. The penal transportation to the Andamans was used by the British colonial authorities to crush the anti-colonial resistance. However, after much struggles by the prisoners in the Andamans against the authorities, it emerged as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. In this way the three autobiographies had systematically narrated not only the heydays of penal transportation punishment but also its decline.

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