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*From Hell to Paradise? Voluntary Transfer
of Convicts to the Andaman Islands,
1921–1940*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to understand the challenges and opportunities which the penal settlement at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands presented to colonial governments in twentieth-century India. To this end, the paper examines a scheme drawn up in the 1920s which saw the introduction of a much more liberal regime for convicts in Port Blair. Under these plans, convicts were granted access to land and encouraged to bring their families from the mainland. This research reveals that the policies which determined the history of the settlement in this period were defined by two tensions. First, there was a constant battle between the central authorities and provincial governments over the shape and purposes of the settlement. Second, there was a contradiction between the penal objectives of the colony and the larger strategies which aimed to develop the islands for the greater British empire.

Introduction

The reputation of the settlement at Port Blair as one of the most brutalising of colonial institutions is well deserved. The penal colony in the Andaman Islands, with its intemperate climate, inhospitable environment and often gruelling quotidian regime meant that to cross the *kala pani* (*lit.* black water) to serve a sentence in Port Blair was, at times, one of the harshest forms of punishment in colonial India.¹ In the historiography, however, often effect has been mistaken

¹ The term ‘kala pani’ was used to describe the loss of caste status which an Indian supposedly underwent when he or she crossed the seas. To the British, the term represented the separation from community which was supposed to have made transportation particularly dreadful to Indians.

for intent. Nationalist histories of this ‘terrible torture camp’ tend to assume that in the colonial prison imperialists found a unique opportunity to fulfil their racist objectives and experiment with new ‘bestly practices’.² Recent scholarship, though more balanced, has continued to focus on the sinister schemes of imperial administrators. In his study of convict life in the settlement in the nineteenth century, Satadru Sen has argued that because the colonial power had little hope of turning its subjects into disciplined, self-policing citizens, its aim was to manoeuvre Indians into positions where they could be more easily policed, or where they could be co-opted as collaborators who would in turn police others.³ His work, however, presupposes both an ability to coordinate policy formulation and an aptitude for execution that the colonial state in India simply did not possess. Sen also undervalues the differences between penitentiaries and penal colonies by arguing that the two systems were both based on Utilitarian principles. As a result, he has overlooked the place of transportation in the larger imperial project, and he has neglected to consider the special contradictions which arose when discipline and imperial development were combined.⁴ Finally, though he draws parallels between penal regimes in Europe and punishment in India, his analysis ends precisely when the extremely harsh prison routines which were in vogue in the mid-nineteenth century fell out of fashion. In almost every country, including India, the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of penal regimes which tended to eschew imprisonment by moving young offenders into borstals,

² Himanshu Joshi, *Yatana-Shivir Mein (Andaman ki Ankahi Kahani) [In the Torture Camp (The Untold Story of the Andamans)]* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons, 1998), p. 1. The translation is my own. See also, N. Iqbal Singh, *The Andaman Story* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Limited, 1978), L.P. Mathur, *Kala Pani: History of Andaman & Nicobar Islands with a study of India's Freedom Struggle* (Delhi: Eastern Book Corporation, 1985), S.N.P. Sinha, *Kala Pani: Andaman v Nicobar dweep samuh ke bhaugolik-samajik-sanskritik itihās ka dastawez [Black Water: Documents on the Geographical, Social and Cultural History of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands]* (Delhi: Manu Prakaashana, 2000).

³ Satadru Sen, *Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴ On transportation as a type of labour migration designed to further imperial projects see, e.g. Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Ian Duffield, and James Bradley (eds.), *Representing Convicts: New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815–1853* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), Anand A. Yang, ‘Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2004), pp. 179–208.

introducing remissions and parole, and abolishing transportation.⁵ Transportation survived in India because the Cellular Jail was only completed in 1906, and because overstretched prisons in the provinces needed to send prisoners away to avoid severe overcrowding. Though this punishment was retained, the experience of transportation was nonetheless moderated considerably in the twentieth century.

This paper follows the story of the Andaman penal settlement into the twentieth century. It analyses plans drawn up in the 1920s to develop the penal settlement at Port Blair as a free community. The seemingly inherent flaws of the penal colony prompted the Government of India to try to end the practice of transportation, and to develop the islands using free settlers. Provincial governments, however, intervened to frustrate the plan to end transportation altogether. This forced the Government of India to relax the penal regimen in order to develop the land and the economy of the islands using convicts rather than free men and women. As part of the scheme, 'volunteers' from Indian jails came to the Andamans, and were encouraged to bring their families with them. In the middle of the 1920s, Mappilas from the Malabar rebellion also took part in this new project. However, their transportation sparked uproar back on the mainland which induced the government of Madras to cancel the plan and to offer to repatriate these families.

By following the history of these schemes, the present paper challenges the existing scholarly consensus on the settlement at Port Blair. It argues that the policies which determined the shape of the Andaman penal colony were not unified or coordinated. Instead, they were defined by two tensions. The first was a tension between the conflicting demands of imperial development and punishment. Though established in the aftermath of the mutiny/rebellion of 1857, the penal settlement at Port Blair was also designed to make the islands suitable for (non-indigenous) human habitation, and to secure the waterways of the Bay of Bengal for British trade and defence. While it was built according to principles drawn up for the Straights Settlement in Bencoolen (Sumatra), it was also heavily integrated into the Indian penal system because limited term prisoners were sent to the island alongside life prisoners. As a result, the colony was subject to pressures to conform to ideals of discipline and reform which were more appropriate to penitentiaries on mainland India. For this reason,

⁵ William James Forsythe, *Penal Discipline, Reformatory Projects and the English Prison Commission 1895-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991).

its administration always had to contend with the conflicting demands of imperial development and punishment.⁶ In the late nineteenth century, the camp's regime tended to favour discipline, but by the early twentieth century, developmental imperatives had come to the fore. The second tension was between centre and periphery.⁷ The colony may have been administered by the central Government of India, but it was populated by prisoners sent from the provinces. Provincial governments often shaped penal policies in ways which had little to do with either larger imperial strategies or disciplinary objectives. This paper examines how these administrative and political factors inadvertently combined to foster one of the most liberal penal regimes in British India.

Hell in Andamans

After the First World War, India's colonial government entered a period of relative political liberalisation. The introduction of a new constitution in December 1919 brought Indians into provincial assemblies with significant law-making powers.⁸ At the same time, Indian nationalists, led by Mohandas K. Gandhi, launched India's first mass campaign of civil disobedience, the non-cooperation movement.⁹ As a result of the confluence of these two events, colonial institutions came under fresh scrutiny in the early 1920s. The penal settlement in the Andamans was soon at the centre of these investigations. In this spirit, the Government of India appointed Sir Alexander Cardew to lead an official committee of enquiry into the state of Indian Jails.¹⁰ Shortly after the Cardew committee reported, Colonel Wedgwood, a politician of the British left, and an advocate of Indian independence, wrote a piece in London's *Daily Herald* on 29 December 1920, entitled 'Hell in Andamans', in which he decried the nature of convict life in

⁶ Kiran Dhingra, *The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 36.

⁷ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁸ Thomas R. Metcalf, *The New Cambridge History of India, volume III. 4: Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁹ Gail Minault, *Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915–1922* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

¹⁰ *Report of the Indian Jails Committee, 1919–1920*, India Office Records (IOR) L/PARL/2/407.

the Andamans. His piece was based on the stories of a former political prisoner whom he had encountered during a train journey.¹¹ Though conveyed in a more melodramatic form, Wedgwood's article revealed little about Port Blair which the Indian Jails Committee (IJC) did not also report upon. Both the IJC's report and Wedgwood's account criticised aspects of the penal colony which seemed to be inherent to it.

A persistent complaint was that life in the Andamans was unhealthy for those sent there. Being on tropical islands with numerous swamps, convicts in the Andamans were highly prone to malaria and to other mosquito-borne diseases, as well as to cholera and tuberculosis. Moreover, prisoners from the north of India found that they had no reprieve from the islands' incessant hot weather, as they had had during the winter months back home. So, whether they were confined to the Cellular Jail, as they were after their arrival, or labouring under the sun in their later years on the island, working in Port Blair was not only taxing to the convict but could endanger his health as well. The camp therefore gained a reputation for having a high death rate.¹²

Apart from environmental hazards, the organisation of the penal settlement seemed to foster exploitative relationships between prisoners. As in prisons on the sub-continent, certain convicts could earn the privilege of being warders over their fellow inmates in Port Blair. This system grew out of financial necessity, but was also intended to serve as an incentive for good conduct: well-behaved prisoners could work their way up to a position of greater responsibility with more privileges.¹³ However, this arrangement could equally encourage graft and abuse. According to Wedgwood this was the norm. This was because, 'the most violent and brutal are most efficient at getting the

¹¹ The Government of India surmised that Wedgwood's informant, who was described as the author of 'History of India', must have been Parmanand. See National Archives of India (NAI), Home Political (Deposit), f. 65, January 1921.

¹² 'Wedgwood wrote, 'the death rate is twice what it is in other Indian gaols, where all sorts are sent and no Indian gaol is a health resort.' *The Daily Herald*, 29 December 1920, NAI, Home Political (Deposit), f. 65, January 1921.

¹³ The IJC was in two minds about convict warders: 'the system of gradual promotion by which long-term non-habitual prisoners, many of whom are not of a criminal type, may hope to rise by their own exertions and good conduct from one grade to another until they reach the highest, is a valuable incentive for improvement and an unequalled training in character'. On the other hand, they recognised that a convict officer, 'however well behaved, is a criminal, a man whose actions have proved that he requires reformation'. *Report of the Indian Jails Committee (1919-1920)*, p. 68.

work done', which meant that they tended to be placed in positions of authority, from where they could take advantage of their fellow inmates.¹⁴

The relationship between convict warders and convicts was not the only exploitative one. Wedgwood recorded that, without many women in the colony, Burmans, who formed about one-third of the prisoners, were 'used as prostitutes'.¹⁵ The IJC was particularly unnerved by the proliferation of 'unnatural offences' on the island. Homosexual practice, the IJC argued, was the fault of the administration, which could not keep adequate watch over persons working outside the Cellular Jail. In order to reduce this practice, established prisoners had long been given the option of bringing their wives to the islands or marrying locally, though only after they had been in residence for at least 10 years.¹⁶ Though many did marry locally, and it appears some sent for their wives, some colonists refused this option, reportedly because they feared for the safety of their wives in such a setting.¹⁷

In addition to these questions of mortality and propriety, financial considerations served to undermine government support for the colony. Transportation was commonly used throughout the empire to reduce the cost of imprisoning people in their home countries.¹⁸ The average cost per prisoner of running Port Blair, however, was up to three times as much as that in mainland jails. The Government of India therefore concluded that, '... the maintenance of the Andamans as a penal settlement cannot be justified much longer on financial grounds'.¹⁹

¹⁴ *The Daily Herald*, 29 December 1920, NAI, Home Political (Deposit), f. 65, January 1921.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Indeed, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, several attempts were made to bring women into the settlement in these ways. Satadru Sen, 'Rationing Sex: Female Convicts in the Andamans' *South Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1999), pp. 29–59, Aparna Vaidik, 'Settling the Convict: Matrimony and Domesticity in the Andamans' *Studies in History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2006), pp. 221–251.

¹⁷ *The Daily Herald*, 29 December 1920, NAI, Home Political (Deposit), f. 65, January 1921.

¹⁸ See, e.g. Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean*.

¹⁹ In the United Provinces the cost was Rs. 110 per convict per year; in the Andamans, in 1921–1922, it was Rs. 360. C.W. Gwynne, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 17 November 1922, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Proceedings of the Revenue Department (Jails Branch) for June 1923.

The Fall and Rise of the Penal Colony

Accordingly, in March 1921, the Home Member, Sir William Vincent, announced in the Legislative Assembly that the Government of India intended to abolish the punishment of transportation and to establish a free community in the Andamans. The government declared that, 'Abandonment could not for a moment be contemplated',²⁰ for too much money had been invested in the islands' colonisation, the forests were believed to have commercial potential, and, 'from the Imperial point of view it would be madness to abandon them . . . in the hands of another power they might be a source of irritation and even danger'.²¹

If the islands were to be converted into a free settlement by inviting ordinary emigrants from the mainland, what could be done with the 11,532 convicts and the 3,000 'local born' persons, i.e. the children of convicts, on the islands? The centre asked the provinces to take back their prisoners, starting with the ill, infirm and incorrigible. This was no small task for the provinces. Around 4,000 convicts were repatriated, but the bulk of the healthy ones stayed in Port Blair because the provinces were unwilling to make arrangements for their return. There were three factors which combined to prevent the repatriation of prisoners from Port Blair to the mainland. First, it was widely held that, compared to the conditions in jails on the mainland, life was relatively easy for a man in the Andamans on 'ticket leave', i.e. for a convict who, after around 10 years on the island, had earned the privilege of living in 'semi-independence', working for wages or on a plot of land and having a family. It was agreed that to repatriate these men to serve their sentences in close confinement in Indian jails would cause the prisoners 'serious hardship'.²² Second, under the severe financial constraints of the post-war period, it was difficult to find the funds necessary to build new prisons for the returning men. For example, the United Provinces (UP) Government had around 2,200 convicts in Port Blair for whom the Government would have to find space back in the UP. In addition to these men, they estimated that they would have to house an additional 250 inmates in each future year who would be sentenced to transportation, but who would

²⁰ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

²¹ C.W. Gwynne, 13 August 1921, NAI, Home (Jails) A, f. 157, 1922.

²² Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

not be sent to the Cellular Jail.²³ They concluded that in order to accommodate the increased population, they would require a new jail to be constructed at Meerut, at a cost of Rs. 5–10 *lakh*.²⁴ There was ‘no immediate prospect’ of the province finding these funds.²⁵

Logistical considerations were not the only impediment to repatriation. The Government of India’s plan ran roughshod over the new constitutional arrangement under which ‘jails’ was a subject for the provinces to manage. By closing the penal colony, the Government of India was shifting the expense of maintaining and housing these prisoners back to the provinces. Of course, retrenchment of central spending through such shifts was a major benefit of the new constitution. Given the large sums which the provinces had to transfer to the centre under the new constitutional arrangements, provincial governments were not happy to take up any new financial burden.²⁶ For this reason, the UP’s Finance Department responded insolently to the Government of India’s plan.

By making rules of this kind, India is imposing on the provinces a large additional expenditure and is setting aside the [UP Legislative] Council’s control over the purse. It is impossible to see what constitutional powers they imagine themselves to have to pass such rules at all: jails are a provincial subject.²⁷

The Finance Secretary felt that the central government was ‘asking for a rebuff’ from the UP’s Legislative Council, which could deliver one by not approving the money for new jails in the province.²⁸

Most provinces felt the same financial constraints as the UP, and only two, Central Provinces & Berar, and Bihar & Orissa, prepared

²³ Lieutenant-Colonel J.M. Woolley, Inspector-General of Prisons, to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of UP, 7 July 1922, Uttar Pradesh State Archives (UPSA), Judicial (Criminal), f. 1389/1921.

²⁴ Departmental note from the Finance Secretary to the Honourable Finance Member, 14 December 1922, UPSA, Judicial (Criminal), f. 1389/1921.

²⁵ Deputy Secretary to the Government of UP to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, 8 July 1922, UPSA, Judicial (Criminal), f. 1389/1921.

²⁶ On the Meston Award and the transfer of funds from province to centre see, K.M. Pannikar, (“Kerala Putra”), *The Working of Dyarchy in India, 1919–1928* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Company, 1928), A. Appadorai, *Dyarchy in Practice* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1937).

²⁷ Departmental note from the Finance Secretary to the Honourable Finance Member, 14 December 1922, UPSA, Judicial (Criminal), f. 1389/1921.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

to build new prisons, when the Government of India requested so.²⁹ Even before the UP's Finance Department had had its say, the UP's Inspector-General of Prisons had urged his government to re-open transportation because the prison system had been nearing its capacity. Taking this opportunity to defy the centre, the government of UP decided to interpret the centre's orders to suit the province's needs.

The directions of the Government of India that deportation was to be stopped were not absolute, but only indicated the object to be carried out 'as far as practicable'. How far the object can be attained obviously depends on the amount of accommodation available and in view of the Inspector-General's report there seems no alternative but to begin deporting again. It will not be necessary to refer to the Government of India for orders, but they will have to be informed what is being done.³⁰

The Government of India did not receive this news with equanimity, but they had no power to force the construction of provincial jails. There was deadlock.

The Government of India could not send the prisoners back, and nor could they find anyone to replace them. Recruiting free persons to settle on the islands proved to be a difficult task for, as it turned out, 'the islands had acquired a sinister reputation as a place of banishment'.³¹ Thus, though the practice of transportation was somewhat anomalous in the 1920s, and there was little ideological justification for the retention of the penal colony, the settlement at Port Blair remained in use not because of its exemplary disciplinary regime, but because no compromise could be found between the centre and the provinces which would facilitate the transformation of the penal settlement into a free colony.

Unable to continue as they had set out to, the Government of India changed course. In late 1925, they decided to make the best of 'the material at hand' and to use the convicts as the 'nucleus' for a free community on the islands. This entailed a radical transformation both

²⁹ Bengal's Revenue Department determined, 'in the present financial position the Government are not prepared to begin the construction of any new jails.' Memo by M.C. McAlpon, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, 25 January 1923, WBSA, Proceedings of the Revenue Department (Jails Branch) for June 1923.

³⁰ Note by L.S. White, Deputy Secretary to the Government of UP, 25 April 1922, UPJA, Judicial (Criminal), f. 1389/1921.

³¹ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

of the penal colony and of the lives of its convicts. The settlement at Port Blair was revolutionised through a number of changes, most of which aimed to get convicts out of the jail and onto the land. Whereas, in the past, a person would have spent at least nine and a half years in a labour corps, toiling on public works, before earning 'ticket leave' to work on the land, the new regulations provided for the grant of this dispensation after only one month on the islands.³² Further, the administration changed the system of land rights. Under the old system, convicts on ticket leave worked on the land, but their property reverted to the state when they were released.³³ In recognition of the fact that agricultural development had 'suffered' from the 'artificial nature of the settlement and the lack of any security of tenure of land',³⁴ it was decided that after five years as a paid labourer, a convict would be given a piece of land 'to maintain himself and his family'. Upon release, he would be entitled to the occupancy rights.³⁵ These measures fundamentally altered life in the colony. Whereas, before this action, only 10% of inmates had been on ticket leave, by 1926, 56% had been granted this self-supporter status.³⁶ The Government of India began to see the new arrangement as an 'experiment in penology which will give selected convicts an opportunity of rehabilitating themselves in new surroundings'.³⁷ The authorities were optimistic. These self-supporters, the Chief Commissioner reported, worked harder, claimed less sick-days, and were more productive and better behaved than before.³⁸

Having sent 4,000 ill, infirm and incorrigible individuals away, however, the colony was under-populated, even for this more modest scheme. To remedy this, the Government of India initiated a recruitment drive to induce prisoners from India to volunteer to serve

³² T. Sloan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal, 19 December 1925, WBSA, Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Jails Branch, for the quarter ending March 1926.

³³ Sen, 'Rationing Sex', p. 31.

³⁴ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

³⁵ T. Sloan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal, 19 December 1925, WBSA, Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Jails Branch, for the quarter ending March 1926.

³⁶ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

out their sentences in Port Blair. In order to persuade convicts to come, and to rid themselves of those on the island who did not wish to participate in the new arrangement, liberal remissions were offered. These remissions embroiled the authorities in a predicament which demonstrated the extent to which administrative convenience and the imperative of having a uniform policy could eclipse the drive to instil discipline in prisoners.

Normally, a prisoner could earn remissions for work and for other good behaviour and thereby reduce his sentence. During British rule, those serving their sentence in Indian jails could earn remissions, but in the Andamans they were not eligible to do so. Under the original plan to close the penal settlement, convicts who returned to the mainland were offered remissions of one-third of their sentence. This was intended both as an inducement to return and 'partly as compensation for the increased rigour of an Indian jail'.³⁹ However, this did not prove to be good penal practice. Ferrar, the Chief Commissioner in the Andamans, did not like the idea of offering remissions to only a select group of prisoners for fear that it would provoke resentment amongst inmates.⁴⁰ To treat one class of prisoners differently to another without reason was not consistent with the principle that confinement should be an egalitarian form of punishment. Further, if the object was to entice men to stay and participate in the new regime, remissions provided to those who left for the Central Provinces or for Bihar & Orissa would hardly achieve this result. Thus, it followed that 'to grant remissions to convicts of these two provinces and to deny them to the convicts of other provinces who have been kept in the islands for administrative reasons would be inequitable'.⁴¹ In the end, all prisoners, whether they returned to India or remained in the Andamans, were granted remission of one-third of their sentence. The Government of Bengal protested that there was 'no logical basis' for this course of action.⁴² Indeed, such a

³⁹ T. Sloan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal, 6 March 1926, WBSA, Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Jails Branch, for the quarter ending June 1926.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² W.S. Hopkyns, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 15 April 1926, WBSA, Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Jails Branch, for the quarter ending June 1926.

programme provided no incentive for good behaviour, and therefore ran counter to the principles of the remissions system. Having granted remissions to one group, however, the Government found itself in a position where not only were they not encouraging convicts to stay in Port Blair, but they were fostering resentment amongst those who did. Thus, in the words of the Government of Bengal, the sole object of the grant of remissions was to 'secure administrative convenience'.⁴³ The remissions quagmire and the solution found for it demonstrate the extent to which the tools of modern penology could be used for purposes other than discipline. Administrative convenience was often the dominant motive for the policies which governed India's prisons, even in Port Blair.

Wanted: Convicts

Once the new course of action had been agreed upon, and it was certain that convicts would form the 'nucleus' of the new life in the Andamans, there remained the problem of recruiting suitable persons to inhabit the colony. Requesting provincial governments to send volunteers, the Government of India described the kind of man which they wished to join the settlement.

... the object of the Government of India is to attract volunteers from prisoners of the casual or accidental type, preferably men who have not been over three years in jail. Habitual offenders such as thieves or house breakers are not wanted. Adolescent convicts after three or four years of Borstal treatment would be particularly welcome as colonists. These classes are not intended to be exhaustive but they are sufficient to indicate in a general way the type of volunteer who is wanted and the type who is not.⁴⁴

The recruitment drive appears to have been reasonably successful: in the first 18 months of the programme 276 men volunteered to go to Port Blair.⁴⁵ One major obstacle to the prosperous development

⁴³ W.S. Hopkyns, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 30 November 1925, WBSA, Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Jails Branch, for the quarter ending June 1926.

⁴⁴ T. Sloan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal, 15 March 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-1 Progs A 18-21, May 1926.

⁴⁵ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

of the land on the islands, however, was the 'paucity' of women. While the population of women had always been lower than the authorities desired, the transportation of women had been halted altogether in 1921 when the plan to abandon the penal colony had been announced. Even though 31 volunteers from amongst the female convict population in India had transferred to Port Blair after the commencement of the volunteer programme, the proportion of women to men remained extremely low. When most of the convicts had been in the labour corps, this had not been a problem, but after the majority had been granted the privilege of working their own piece of land, the scarcity was felt more acutely. The Government observed, '... experience has shown that a single convict cannot satisfactorily cultivate a holding by himself'.⁴⁶ In order to successfully tend a piece of land a family was desirable as, it was believed, the division of labour within a family was tailored to suit land cultivation. Men on ticket leave had been encouraged to marry locally or to import their wives, but many were 'unable to obtain wives for themselves'.⁴⁷

The family was central to British conceptions of stability and prosperity in India. As such, since the inception of the penal colony several attempts had been made to bring women to Port Blair to assist in the reformation of men by curtailing homosexual activity, encouraging domesticity and improving male economic productivity.⁴⁸ It is no surprise, therefore, that in the 1920s the authorities devised two schemes to foster the creation of families in the Andamans. First, they encouraged volunteers from amongst the women in Indian jails. Ferrar believed that female convicts on the mainland could be persuaded to move by the promise of a better life.

It is possible that there are many convicts . . . who would be ready to exchange the rigour and monotony of Indian Female Jails for the comparative freedom of the Andamans by marrying self-supporters.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

⁴⁷ J.D.V. Hodge, Additional Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 26 January 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails), 2T-1 Progs A 1-3, March 1925.

⁴⁸ On the various schemes to bring women to the islands before 1920, see Sen, 'Rationing Sex', and Vaidik, 'Settling the Convict'.

⁴⁹ J.D.V. Hodge, Additional Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 26 January 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails), 2T-1 Progs A 1-3, March 1925.

Such women had to be of marriageable age and either unmarried or widowed. Upon arrival it was expected that they select a husband and settle down with him.⁵⁰

In her prison diary, Urmila Shastri, a civil disobedience prisoner, recounted the deplorable conditions which women faced in ordinary jails in India. Though Shastri was in Meerut's *zillah* (district) jail, her diary records the stories of women who passed through her barrack. From these accounts, a picture emerges of an environment where women were beaten by warders, and abused by their fellow inmates. Bribery appears to have been widespread. There were indications that sex was a major currency in many of these transactions, for one of the prisoners told Shastri, 'Those girls who were pretty, they lived easily'. Shastri refused to record the rest of her cell-mate's story, writing instead, 'Oh God! I cannot write of those matters. I cannot say up to what point her stories were true, but from her images, my heart was alarmed'.⁵¹

Ordering in women in the same manner as the authorities had requisitioned other 'necessities', such as tools and land, to raise productivity does seem like a particularly egregious example of patriarchal thinking. Yet, the women involved did exercise their own agency to some degree. It was almost certainly a choice between two evils, but it was the woman's decision to come to the islands to marry under the new scheme. Given the stigma attached to an ex-prisoner, especially a female one, women convicts may have reckoned that their best chance of escaping the grim conditions in Indian jails and finding a stable life was in the Andamans. Women who took this gamble selected a husband and settled with him on his land.⁵²

The second prong of the scheme was to have convicts ask their wives and children to join them in the settlement. To this end, the Bengal Government provided the means for Bengali inmates serving sentences of transportation for life to return to the province in order to persuade their wives and children to join them in Port Blair.⁵³ It is unclear how successful this endeavour was. After years away from home, many of these people may have lost contact with their relatives,

⁵⁰ Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

⁵¹ Urmila Shastri, *Karagar [Prison]* (2nd edn., Delhi: Atmaram and Sons, 1980), pp. 34-35. The translation is my own.

⁵² Home Department Resolution, 27 February 1926, WBSA, Revenue (Jails) 2T-3 Progs A 10-11, May 1926.

⁵³ See file, NAI Home, f. 94, 1928.

and to return and ask one's family to leave everything to go to live in a penal colony may have been no easy task. One group which did emigrate in large numbers were the Mappilas, from the southern districts of inner Malabar in Madras, in present-day Kerala.

The Mappila Rebellion and the Mappila Colony in the Andamans

Mappilas (or Moplahs), as the Muslims of Malabar were known, tended to be peasant cultivators. Since the early nineteenth century, they periodically had risen against their landlords and the landlords' protectors, the law enforcement officers of the British Raj. At the root of these revolts was disgruntlement with the system of land tenure in the districts. Since the penetration of the British into the area, the *jenmis* (landlords) had acquired an increasingly tyrannous position over the *verampattomdars* (tenant cultivators). Prostrate under the weight of arbitrary evictions and predatory rent-rises, the peasant cultivators periodically took up arms. Though various pieces of legislation had sought both to deter them from resorting to violence, and to improve their rights vis-à-vis landlords, their grievances remained after the First World War.⁵⁴ In August 1921, at the height of the Khilafat/non-cooperation movement, the Mappilas rose again. Though Khilafat and non-cooperation movement leaders distanced themselves from the revolt, many Mappilas invoked the name of the Khilafat during the uprising, and the British did not hesitate to blame the national movement after the outbreak of violence on 1 August 1921.⁵⁵ After six months of fighting, which included assaults on government and landlord property, guerrilla attacks on government troops and forcible conversions to Islam, the rebels had been utterly routed.⁵⁶ Official figures of Mappila casualties recorded 2,339 killed, 1,652 injured and 5,995 captured, while another 39,348 voluntarily surrendered.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Conrad Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion and its Genesis* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1987), K.N. Pannikar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵⁵ Report by his Excellency General Lord Rawlinson of Trent, Commander-in-Chief in India, on the Operations in Malabar for the period 20th August 1921 to 25th February 1922, 6 October 1922, IOR L/MIL/17/12/33.

⁵⁶ Wood, *Moplah Rebellion*, and Pannikar, *Against Lord and State*.

⁵⁷ These figures dwarfed those for the Government, which amounted to 43 killed and 126 injured. Report by his Excellency General Lord Rawlinson of Trent,

As the uprising was crushed, jails filled. In order to relieve crowding in Madras's jails, around 1,000 men sentenced to life imprisonment were sent to Port Blair in 1922. These rebels were accorded all the benefits of the new, more liberal regime in the Andamans. According to officials, the Mappilas 'made very good settlers', as they proved extremely useful to the Forest Department.⁵⁸ Thus, when the Government of Madras proposed that these prisoners be allowed to bring their families to the Andamans, the Government of India readily agreed to the plan.⁵⁹ In accordance with the new arrangement, the Mappilas in Port Blair were given the choice between bringing their families to the islands and being repatriated to jails in Madras. According to the Government of India, the former option proved tempting because,

The climate of the Andamans is very similar to that of Malabar and the conditions under which the Mappilas will hold land in the Island will be very much better than those . . . in their own Province.⁶⁰

When the first ship arrived at Port Blair on 12 July 1925, 292 Mappila women and children disembarked to join their relations on the island.⁶¹ Shortly thereafter, the Chief Commissioner began making preparations for another 150 Mappilas, 'with appropriate women and children', to settle in the islands. This group had elected to exchange the barbed-wire camps which had been their homes for the past 30–36 months for the settled life they had been promised in the Andamans.⁶² By late 1926, 1,326 Mappila rebellion prisoners and 528 members of their families had settled in exclusively Mappila villages in the Andamans. The volunteer programme appears to have been popular, for in that year, another 534 men had volunteered, and the Government had to ease its eligibility criteria in order to allow

Commander-in-Chief in India, on the Operations in Malabar for the period 20th August 1921 to 25th February 1922, 6 October 1922, IOR L/MIL/17/12/33.

⁵⁸ Home Department Summary, [undated], NAI, Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925.

⁵⁹ 'The Government of India consider that the scheme holds promise of success and will be of benefit both to the Government of Madras and the Forest Department in the Andamans which is faced with the difficulty of obtaining cheap free labour.' C.W. Gwynne, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, to R.A. Graham, Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, 5 October 1922, NAI, Home (Jails), f. 527, 1922.

⁶⁰ Home Department Summary, [undated], NAI, Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925.

⁶¹ Letter from M.L. Ferrar to his mother, dated 13 July 1925, Ferrar Papers, CSAS.

⁶² Letter from M.L. Ferrar to his mother, dated 31 July 1925, Ferrar Papers, CSAS.

more of them to take up the opportunity to go to the islands.⁶³ Once they had been transferred to their new living quarters, these men and women began 'living the normal village life'.⁶⁴ They worked on the land cultivating rice, coconuts, sugarcane, maize and turmeric. Their children attended school.⁶⁵ A number of newspapers, including *The Hindu*, visited the new villages and wrote glowing accounts of the life of the Mappilas there.⁶⁶

While the administration in the Andamans praised the adaptability and industriousness of the Mappilas, nationalist Muslims in Madras mounted a public campaign against their transportation. This took the form of public meetings of protest, as well as resolutions condemning the scheme in the Madras Provincial Legislative Council and in the Central Legislative Assembly. The objections raised included the complaint that minor participants in the unrest were being sent to a life of exile which was not warranted by their crime. Further, there was anxiety that the removal of young men and their families from the community would have negative economic repercussions.⁶⁷ At public meetings fear was expressed for the health of Mappilas and their relations who had been sent to islands which 'have been pronounced to be uninhabitable for human beings'. Some members of the public were convinced that the government aimed not only to 'wreck the moral, material and social well-being of the migrants' but also to depopulate the southern districts of Malabar of the Mappila population and thereby ruin economically those who remained.⁶⁸

⁶³ Whereas the unexpired portion of a prisoner's sentence formerly had to be at least five years, three years was made the minimum for these prisoners. Colonisation of the Andamans by the Mappila convicts – note in this connection for the information of the Hon'ble the Home Member with the Government of India by Lt-Col J.P. Cameron, Inspector-General of Prisons, Madras, [undated], NAI, Home (Jails), f. 17, 1927.

⁶⁴ Home Department Summary, [undated], NAI, Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925.

⁶⁵ Letter from M.L. Ferrar to his mother, dated 31 July 1925, Ferrar Papers, CSAS.

⁶⁶ Governor of Madras to Sir Alexander Muddiman, Home Member, Executive Council, Government of Madras, 3 September 1925, NAI, Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925.

⁶⁷ '... though some Moplals were only tools in the hands of the agitators they have suffered enough for their folly and many of them were innocent and their continued imprisonment will only tend to aggravate the poverty and the general economic condition of the Moplals.' Certain Members of the Madras Legislative Assembly to Sir Alexander Muddiman, Home Member, Executive Council, Government of Madras, 24 March 1925, NAI, Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925.

⁶⁸ Saiyed Mohammed Padshah, Chairman of Muslim Public meeting to the Viceroy, 16 July 1925, NAI Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925. See also Certain Members of the Madras Legislative Assembly to Sir Alexander Muddiman, Home Member, Executive Council, Government of Madras, 24 March 1925, NAI, Home (Jails), f. 297, 1925.

In the Legislative Assembly, Maulvi Sayad Murtuza Sahib Bahadur called for the Mappilas to be sent home, and for the colony to be closed.⁶⁹ Prompted by the above accusations, Alexander Muddiman, the Home Member in the Viceroy's Council, as well as a deputation of Mappilas visited the settlements in the winter of 1925. Ferrar, the Chief Commissioner, seems to have convinced Muddiman of the merits of the scheme, but he was not successful with the Mappila delegation.⁷⁰ The debate continued, and the Government of India stepped in to secure a compromise. According to the Government of India's order of 4 October 1926, Mappilas in the Andamans were once more given the opportunity to choose to return (this time with their families) to jails in Madras, while those imprisoned in Madras could volunteer to go to Port Blair. Ferrar reported that another 448 convicts in Madras elected to establish themselves in the islands, while the option to return to the mainland, 'was made use of by 80 single men only'.⁷¹ Ferrar speculated that, though single men may decide to go back to Madras, 'it appears probable that the bulk of the married will remain in Port Blair where they have ample land with occupancy right[s] and [are] in healthy surroundings'.⁷² This did not satisfy the Madras Legislative Council which nevertheless organised the accelerated release of the Mappila rebellion convict-settlers. It is clear that political pragmatism shaped policy towards the Mappilas far more than disciplinary dogmatism.

It was politically expedient to export the Mappilas from Madras to a land where they could cause less trouble to the authorities, even if this meant that they would not be punished for treason in the same way as previous rebels. But while discipline may have had a political end, the politics played over the settlement in the Andamans did not necessarily have disciplinary aims. The scheme for the transportation of the Mappilas was not unambiguously iniquitous, however. On the one hand, a number of Mappilas were able to become landowners in the Andamans, and to enjoy thereby a more secure existence. And yet, they were not able to achieve this without leaving their homeland.

⁶⁹ Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, Volume VIII, pp. 246–279, 1926, IOR, V/9/74.

⁷⁰ M.L. Ferrar to his mother, dated 6 November 1925 and 14 December 1925, Ferrar Papers, CSAS.

⁷¹ Survey of the State of the Andaman Islands, 1 January 1930, Ferrar Papers, CSAS.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Moreover, many of the first settlers, like those who initially colonised Australia and North America, did not willingly go to their new homes.

Conclusion

While the 1920s witnessed a short period of moderate political liberalisation, the early 1930s saw a reversal of this trend as the colonial regime cracked down on both a second nationalist civil disobedience campaign, and violent revolutionary activities.⁷³ With the revival of the activities of small groups of revolutionaries (in colonial India, these groups were called terrorists) in the 1930s, the Government of Bengal begged the central government to re-open Port Blair to terrorist prisoners. The authorities in Bengal argued that this step was necessary because, without transportation, the ordinary penalties available were insufficiently severe to combat terrorism. In the absence of this punishment, men awarded a life sentence were eligible not only for release after 14 years, but also for remissions.⁷⁴ This was not, in the opinion of the Bengal Government, sufficient punishment for terrorists. The Government of India agreed, but decided that those sent to Port Blair for offences related to terrorism would not take part in the settlement, but would 'serve the entire period of their sentence in jail'.⁷⁵ Thus, while ordinary convicts in the Andamans enjoyed a life of relative comfort, and political prisoners in mainland jails, especially those who were non-violent middle-class offenders, were earning numerous concessions and privileges from the authorities, conditions for the few hundred terrorist prisoners housed

⁷³ On the government response to the new nationalist campaign see, D.A. Low, "'Civil Martial Law": the Government of India and the Civil Disobedience Movements 1930-1934' in D.A. Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917-1947* (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 165-198. On the revival of terrorism see, Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 97, Taylor C. Sherman, 'State Practice, Nationalist Politics and the Hunger Strikes of the Lahore Conspiracy Case Prisoners, 1929-1939' *Journal of Cultural and Social History* (forthcoming).

⁷⁴ 'The practical result of this is that a prisoner sentenced to transportation for life may be due for release in about 12 years.' Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 7 January 1932, WBSA, Political (Jails), f. 2T-2 of 1931.

⁷⁵ C.W. Gwynne, Joint Secretary to the Government of India, to all Provincial Governments, 4 November 1932, WBSA, Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Jails Branch, for the quarter ending December 1932.

in the Cellular Jail may have been the harshest in the country.⁷⁶ This is how the Andamans achieved its place in the nationalist imagination.

Between 1937 and 1939, as Indians governed in autonomous provincial assemblies, the number of ‘volunteers’ from Indian jails seems to have fallen. The colony did not revert to its previous condition, however. Endeavouring to recruit more volunteers, the Government of India published a pamphlet in 1940 which was designed to encourage convicts to leave behind their jails in India and to embark upon a new life in Port Blair. ‘Free’ was the catchword. They were promised free health care and free education for themselves and their families, as well as the use of facilities for sport, recreation and worship, ‘without let or hindrance’.⁷⁷ Describing the living quarters in which recently arrived convicts called *talabdars* were housed, it was written, ‘These barracks are not surrounded by walls or fences and the talabdar leads a free life except that he has to do the daily task of Government work assigned to him’.⁷⁸ The *talabdar* earned wages for his work, the pamphlet explained, and ‘after the day’s work the talabdar is free till 8 pm’.⁷⁹ In addition, association with other inhabitants was relatively unrestricted, ‘the talabdar wears his own clothes and buys his own food or forms a “mess” with some of his friends’.⁸⁰ In conclusion, the pamphlet promised, ‘The system developed affords an excellent opportunity for a man, should he so desire, to make a new start in a new country where prejudices do not exist’.⁸¹

Twenty years earlier, conditions in Port Blair appeared to have been bleak. This paper has not been intended to serve as an apology for British activities in the Andaman Islands. Nor would it seek to obscure the suffering of convicts in the penal settlement. But it has argued for a re-evaluation of the settlement in two respects. First, the grim state of life in the Cellular Jail ought to be compared with the dire conditions in many ordinary Indian jails, and with the prison regimes in other countries, rather than with the life of a free man. There were indications that, even before the initiation of the reforms, the life

⁷⁶ On the concessions made to political prisoners in the 1930s, see, Taylor C. Sherman, ‘The Politics of Punishment and State Violence’ (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2006), Chapter 7.

⁷⁷ Note on the Andamans for the Information of Volunteer Convicts, 1 August 1940, NAI, Home (Jails) f. 86, 1938.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

of convicts was not as unbearable in Port Blair as it was elsewhere. For example, prison officials felt that men being repatriated to the mainland ought to be given liberal remissions, in order to compensate them for the hardships which they would have to endure in provincial prisons.

Whether comfortable or dreadful, the system of punishment at Port Blair was not always driven by the unrelenting pursuit of 'discipline'. Scholars are bound to find evidence of the desire to discipline subjects when they only study the rules which dictated the quotidian regime to be followed by inmates. However, these accounts of the colonial penal system contend that discipline was the primary factor which shaped not only prisoners' daily lives, but the entire penal system and the colonial state itself. By shifting one's gaze to examine the policy-making process, it becomes clear, however, that practices of punishment were never independent of administrative, political or financial constraints. Even in a penal settlement, the colonial state had to square the desire to maintain control with the imperatives of 'development'. It had to reconcile its imperial ambitions both with the autonomy of the lower levels of government and with the political circumstances of the time.

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