

Chapter IV

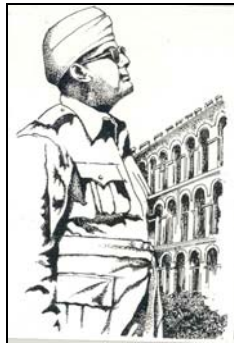
THE HISTORY

The Islands have been known to mariners since ancient times and find mention in the travelogues of geographers like Ptolemy and Marco Polo. The colonial powers started showing interest in the islands during the 17th & 18th centuries as the islands offered safe anchorages to ships sailing in the Bay of Bengal. The Nicobars changed hands from the Danes to the Dutch and later came under the British rule. The documented history of the islands starts with the arrival of Lt. Archibald Blair of the Royal Indian Navy in 1788 when he was commissioned to survey and establish a settlement on the islands. Based on his report the Governor General, Lord Cornwallis, ordered the setting up of a settlement, to be inhabited and supported by ex-convicts and convict labourers. Blair and Colebrooke landed on Chatham Island and developed it into a flourishing settlement. The harbour was named Port Cornwallis (now Port Blair). The settlement was shifted north, to the present day Diglipur, in 1792, which was considered a better heaven for sailing ships. But inhospitable climate and sickness forced this settlement to be closed down in 1796.

The First War of Independence in 1857 brought the islands into prominence again. The islands were thought to be the best place for the deportation of the so-called 'mutineers'. As the first settlement at Chatham Island proved to be healthy it was decided to set up the penal settlement in its

vicinity. The harbour was renamed Port Blair in honour of Lt. Archibald Blair, and the first batch of convicts arrived in March 1858.

The imperial Japanese Navy occupied the islands on 23 April 1942 after firing only a warning shot. From that day till the end of the war, and the subsequent liberation of the islands by the allied forces on 9th October 1945, the Andaman & Nicobar islands again saw brutality like tortures and massacres by the Japanese. The worst act of cruelty was the cold-blooded murder of several citizens of Port Blair at a place called Hamfrygunj on suspicion of being British spies. Similar atrocities were committed in the Nicobar too.



An important event during the Japanese occupation was the visit of **Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose**. On 29th December 1943, Netaji flew into the Islands and visited the Cellular Jail. On 30th December 1943 he addressed a public meeting in the historic Gymkhana grounds, where he hoisted the National Tricolour and declared the islands the first Indian Territory to be freed from foreign rule. Japan handed over the Andaman & Nicobar Islands to the Provincial Government of Free India under the leadership of Netaji. However the islands continued to be administered by the Japanese till the end of the war.

