

History of Ross Island

Ross Island, now a popular tourist's destination is located at the entrance of Port Blair Harbor on the Eastward with a total area of 70 acres. Once the seat of British power, now stands as a ruin of the bygone days.

It was in Ross Island that the history of the modern Andaman was created and nurtured. The Ross Island was carefully chosen by Marine Surveyor Sir Daniel Ross, after whom it is named, to guard Port Blair harbor. Incidentally, Ross was also the name given to a survey ship often used by M.V. Portman, Officer in Charge of British relations with the Aborigines in the last quarter of the nineteenth Century.

The Andaman Islands was always viewed as an *Island of evil* *repute* for the reason that the islands appeared in the travelers' accounts as a group of *cannibal islands*. By this time the Government was in search of a suitable place for establishment of a convict settlement associated with a harbor of refuge.

Under these state of affairs Lord Cornwallis, the then Governor General of India ordered Lieutenant (later Captain) Archibald Blair, one of the early distinguished hydrographers of the East India Company and Colonel Colebrook, the Surveyor General of India in 1788, to survey the Andaman islands. Captain Blair's report was so strong and encouraging that the uphill task of establishment of the first settlement on the islands was assigned to him.

Captain Blair accomplished this responsibility by setting up of a small settlement on Chatham Island on the southern Bay of Port Cornwallis, now called Port Blair in the Great Andaman in September 1789. Blair also constructed a building at Ross Island, situated at the entrance of the harbor to be used as hospital for settlers. The downfall of this

flourishing first settlement of Andaman began with the shifting of the colony from Port Cornwallis to North East Harbor .The high death rate of the settlers resulted in the closure of the first settlement from Andamans in 1796. The islands went to its absolute isolation for the next sixty two years till it was reoccupied.

Six decades later the first war of independence forced the British rulers of India in 1857 to reconsider Andaman islands for establishment of a penal settlement to deal effectively with those who revolted against their paramount power .A committee of experts consisting of Dr. F.J.Mouat, Dr. G.R. Playfair and Lt. J.S. Heathcoat visited the Islands for a survey on 8th December 1857 and submitted a report to the Govt. of India on 15th January 1858 and the Union Jack was hoisted on 22nd January 1858 by Capt. H Man, the Executive Engineer, who was deputed to take formal possession of the islands.

Dr. James Pattison Walker, the first Superintendent of the penal settlement in Andamans reached here aboard the East India Company's steam frigate "Semiramis" with the first batch of 200 freedom fighters of 1857 on 10th March 1858 thus marking the beginning of the penal settlement.

Walker decided to set up the Headquarters of the settlement at Chatham Island where 62 years ago Lt. Archibald Blair had established the first every colony in the Andamans in 1789. But due to scarcity of water sources in the Chatham Island , Walker had to change his decision and selected Ross Island, hardly two and a half miles away from Chatham for the establishment of the Headquarters of the penal settlement. The shifting of the Headquarters from the originally proposed Chatham to Ross Island was approved by the Government of India on 7th May 1858. Since then, it remained the headquarter of the British Government till the occupation of the Islands by Japanese Imperial Forces on 23rd March 1942.

Ross Island started taking shape as the construction work was initiated in the cleared area. Good teak was available in abundance which was used in the development of the Island.

The jungle at Ross Island was continuous and had no plains or clear land in between. It was so dense that trees when cut could not be felled without using great force to ground them. In this immense, arduous task of jungle clearing, the hands that once held rifles against the British rulers in India in 1857 were, as fate destined, holding axes and choppers to fell the huge trees which could not be removed easily owing to the intricate binding by Century old giant creepers.

On the fourth day on the arrival of the first batch of freedom fighters, Niranjan Singh, convict no. 46 who was sentenced at Nadia to transportation for life, committed suicide by hanging himself at an isolated place in the south eastern jungles of Ross Island. Convict no. 61 Narain who was sentenced on the 31st July 1858 to transportation for life for having excited sedition in the cantonment of Dinapore attempted to escape but was captured and executed.

The heroes of our freedom struggle had to face untold miseries and sufferings in the Penal settlement of Andamans. British Officers tried all kinds of inhuman and brutal punishment including mass execution without any proper trial. The Officers chosen for the convict management at Port Blair had served during the First War of Independence in 1857. This was the reason that they treated the heroes of 1857 with great cruelty.

In the beginning, on frequent intervals ships namely Semiramis, Dalhousie, Pluto, Roman Emperor, Edward, Sesotris etc. continued to arrive at the penal settlement with prisoners on board from Rangoon, Moulemin, Karachi, Calcutta and so on.

Many charismatic personalities belonging to the first war of independence, Wahabi Movement and later revolutionary activities were deported to the penal settlement to undergo their sentences. They were Musai Singh, Allama Fazal Haq Khairabadi, Bahadur Singh , Bhima Naik, Moulavi Liaqat Ali , Garbadas Patel, Bhikaji Ganesh Gokhale, Venkat Roa, Syed Ala –ud din , father and son Himanchal Singh and Kura Singh ,Mohd Ismail Hussain Muneer ,Hattee Singh ,Maya Ram Jawahar Singh, Ahmedullah, Yahya Ali, Jafar Thaneswari,Maharaj Brij Kishore Singh Dev among others.

Life of a prisoner in the beginning of the settlement was very miserable. They were transported to the penal settlement without any prior arrangements. Even the basic needs for the establishment of the settlement were received after ten days of their arrival. Even during the rainy season they had no place for a safe shelter other than staying in tents. The condition was little improved by November 1858, when accommodation for one thousand prisoners on Ross Island was provided. The prisoners were accommodated in barracks of a temporary nature with thatched roofs and mat walls which leaks continuously during rainy season.

Dr. Walker was very harsh towards the prisoners, "Convicts were handcuffed together in pairs and these handcuffs were never opened. During working hours the worst characters were taken to sea beach, and an iron bar being passed through the fetters of a number of them, they were thus fastened to the earth, and made to do what they could in a sitting posture".

The prisoners were put on the hardest labour in the settlement. They had to work about nine hours a day in the tropical climate and dense forest. They were engaged not only for clearing thick tropical

jungles but also employed in digging wells, cutting earth, filling swamps, cooking and constructing huts.

The tortures imposed by Walker increased day by day. With the occupation of the Viper Island on 8 October 1858 a new form of punishment called the Chain-gang was introduced. The prisoners who were sentenced to undergo this punishment by the Superintendent's Court, was chained together and locked up at night by a chain running through their legs through the coupling of irons. In order to make the punishment more effective a jail was constructed at Viper Island during 1864-67.

The arrangements for food, clothing and shelter in the settlement were not adequate for human beings. In the absence of adequate medical care, lack of proper food, and unhealthy climate, they began to die of minor diseases such as malaria, dysentery, pneumonia etc. The freedom fighters were ruthlessly punished for violation of jail rules and regulations. These heroes of the First War of Independence not only faced the inhuman treatment of the British authorities in the settlement but also had to suffer at the hands of aborigines of the Andaman Islands. From the very beginning of the settlement the aborigines attacked the working parties, as a result of which a large number of them were killed while at work in different convict's stations of the penal settlement.

These circumstances encouraged frequent escapes from the settlement. At dead of night on 18th March 1858, a group of twenty one convicts escaped from Ross Island in rafts, made ready for the purpose hidden in the jungles. On 23rd March another group of eleven convicts escaped from Ross Island in a similar way. The escape of convicts continued in spite of the risks of life involved in it.

On the night of 23rd April 1858 a bigger group of 91 convicts escaped from Ross Island crossed over to the other side. One of them was convict No. 276 Dudnath Tiwari a sepoy in the 14th Bengal Native Infantry Regiment, sentenced to transportation for life for his role in the first War of independence. He was miraculously saved from certain death at the hands of the aborigines. He stayed with them in the jungles as one of them for about a year and moved with them from place to place. He married their two girls namely Leepa and Jigah. During the period he also learnt their language. Around 10th May 1859 he sensed that the aborigines are planning to attack the settlement. From Tarmugli alone about 300 Andamanese in 20 Canoes set out towards Port Blair. On their way they were joined by another big group of aborigines accompanied by an escaped convict Sadloo and other groups coming from different camps all armed with bows and arrows. On 16th May they encamped at a place about two and a half miles from Port Blair. Dudhnath and Sadloo were asked to stay there in the camp with the children and the women.

At the dead of night when all others were asleep, Dudhnath stealthily left the camp and rushed to the convict station at Aberdeen. Walker, the Superintendent was apprised of the situation. He immediately made all arrangements by placing guards and police in their positions. But even before he could complete his plans, the attack of the aborigines had already begun very early in the morning of 17th May 1859. The convict barrack at Aberdeen were occupied and tools and implements were carried away. In this most uneven battle of bows and arrows against guns and shells the aborigines were gunned down and ultimately forced to retreat into the forest leaving how many dead behind, 'no body knows'.

This engagement afterwards came to be known in the history as the "Battle of Aberdeen". This may rightly be considered as the war of

liberation launched by the native aborigines to oust the foreign rulers of their homeland.

The battle of Aberdeen fought by the aborigines to secure the liberation of their homeland also resulted in change of policy of the British administration towards the aborigines hoping to remove the scars of the battle with friendly gestures.

The British were eager at this stage, to develop cordial relationship with the aboriginal tribes so that they could live in the Islands in peace and harmony. A British Officer, M.V. Portman was appointed and was made entirely responsible for the welfare of the tribes. Gradually, the Andaman Home was set up at the Ross Island where the Andamanese could come and stay. Reverend Carbyn was the Officer - in -charge of the same.

New arrivals during this period are landed on Ross Island to have their tickets prepared but this system discontinued with the construction of Cellular Jail at Aberdeen.

Meanwhile on 8th February 1872 Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India arrived on the islands aboard the ship H.M. Glasgow accompanied by other ships S.S. Dacca and Scotia .He never knew that he is undertaking the last journey of his life. The Viceroy's arrival was welcomed with 21 Cannon fires. He spent his entire day touring the workshops and factories of the prisoners .He visited Ross Island and inspected public buildings. Bazar, Church, Hospital, etc. accompanied by his staff officers, family members and Mr. Stewart, Superintendent of the penal settlement.

At the end of his official visit, the Viceroy expressed his desire to visit the Mount Harriet .The settlement officers made all security arrangements there but in spite of this on his return from Mount Harriet, he was

assassinated by a convict named Sher Ali, who was residing in the Hope Town as a convict on ticket of leave. Sher Ali was later executed at the Viper Island Gallows.

With the passage of time ,Ross Island was transformed into a comfortable place for the British who were posted there. The forest was entirely cleared. The seventy acre Island was divided into halves by a wall measuring from the east to the west. The accommodation of the British officers and soldier's barracks remained in the north of the wall on the hilltop, while the convicts and the barracks of Indian soldiers were in the south.

Among the long list of freedom fighters who were sentenced to transportation for life to the Andaman in connection with the first war of Indians the name of Musai Singh and Fazal Haq Khairabadi occupies an important place. Musai Singh is known as the hero of 1857. He was associated with *Bhadohi Rebellion* of June 1857.

Musai Singh was only 21 years of age at the time of First War of Independence. He was sentenced to transportation for life on the charges of "being a ring leader in the murder of Mr. Moore and arson, dacoity and rebellion." After twenty five years of his arrival in Andaman, in March 1884, he was sanctioned partial.

Musai Singh, prisoner number 4568 was released from the penal settlement of Andamans in May 1907 at the age of seventy one. It was decided to conditionally 'release him with permission to reside at Rangoon under Police surveillance'.

Viceroy Lord Minto sent a Telegram dated 1st May 1907 to this effect to the Secretary of State which reads as under:-

"Please refer Home department dispatch dated 11th May on the subject. I have just seen the dispatch, and consider that his conditional release with permission to reside in Rangoon under Police surveillance should be sanctioned. He is the last survivor of the Mutiny convicts in the Andamans, where his record has been excellent. I strongly recommend his release which could be most appropriate on the 50th anniversary of the Mutiny.

Finally, Musai Singh was released from the penal settlement of Andaman after 47 years. He reached Rangoon in July 1907, where he was directed to present himself before the Superintendent of Police on the first day of every month.

Historians consider Musai Singh as the *hero of 1857*, as when the Indians were observing the fifty years of *1857*, he was released from the penal settlement of Andaman Islands after forty seven years, the longest ever incarceration.

Another stalwart of the first war of Independence was Fazal Haq Khairabadi. He was sentenced to transportation for life to Kala Pani with confiscation of his property. He, along with other Freedom Fighters of *1857* reached Andamans on 8 October 1859 aboard the Steam Frigate *Fire Queen*, where he was registered as prisoner number 3687.

During his imprisonment in the penal settlement, Fazal Haq wrote on pieces of cloth with charcoal sticks and sent these clothes to his son Maulana Abdul Haq in the mainland in the year 1860 through Mufti Inayat Ahmed Kakurri, another scholar who took part in the *First War of Independence*. Both the works were rendered in Arabic which later came to be known as *Al-Surat-ul Hindia* and *Al-Fitnat-ul-Hindia*. It contained all the incidents of the *First War of Independence* and his days in *Kala Pani* respectively.

Colonel Haughton, the then Superintendent of Port Blair recommended the Government for the release of Fazal Haq. Meanwhile his son Shams-ul-Haq also appealed to the Government for the release of his father. At last he managed to obtain the release order of his father from the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon. But, on arrival at Port Blair in 1861, he could only join the funeral procession of his father.

He expressed about the miserable life in the Andaman in his book. In his words, "All huts of the prisoners had temporary roofs which leaks frequently like non ending tears of my eyes .No sorrow of the world can be compared with the painful life here. When a prisoner dies, he is buried in the sandy shore without performing any last rituals such as bath and coffin. Neither proper grave is dug nor is the last prayer offered. If this would have not been the practice adopted here for burial of dead bodies, death in the Andamans would have been everyone's desire."

Though the life of the prisoners in the Ross Island was a tale of torture and sufferings but the settlement officers did not leave a stone turn to make the isolated Ross a paradise for themselves. The Chief Commissioner's residence, swimming pool and tennis court for officers and all other facilities such as bakery, distilling water plant, Eurasian and European schools were constructed at the Ross Island for the British settlement officers. A temple and a mosque were also constructed here . The inscription on the graves in the European Cemetery of the Ross Island describes the mental status of the European officers.

The Bazar at Ross Island was the hub of all activities during the end of nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century till the occupation of Japanese .The ruins of Bazar still remind us the bygone era where European and Indian customers come for purchases of their necessities from the shops of philanthropist Farzand Ali .The shops selling various

commodities of life owned by Dawood Jan , Malhotra, Belumal, Appalswamy , Nabi Bux and Muriwali old lady Roop Kunwar .

On 26.6.1941 at 5.21 PM (Local time, (IST 4.21 PM) an earth quake of greater magnitude rocked the Island. As a result of earth quake a crack was developed in the whole Island from its central part of the road. A number of buildings on the Ross Island were damaged.

During the penal settlement, Ross Island saw 24 Chief Commissioners including Stewart after 1872 when the post of Superintendent was upgraded. The downfall of this "Paris of the East" began with the occupation of Andaman Islands by the Japanese Imperial Forces .As a result of Japanese air raids; the Chief Commissioner C.F. Waterfall shifted his residence and the seat of Administration to Aberdeen, Port Blair in January 1942. The Japanese forces occupied Andaman and Nicobar Islands on 23.3.1942 .The Chief Commissioner surrendered before the Japanese and taken as POW and camped at Ross Island, along with his Secretary and few Anglo Indians. The civilians and shop owners were forced to leave the Ross Island. Japanese forces converted Ross island into a Military Base.

The Supreme commander of INA and Head of state and Azad Hind Govt., Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose visited the islands on 29th December 1943.He stayed at Ross Island in the former Govt. House of the then Chief Commissioner. Tricolor was hoisted during Netaji's stay for four days. Netaji had a group photo along with the member of the Indian Independence league, Andaman branch. The Executive members of the Indian Independence League (IIL), Andaman branch hoisted a dinner in honour of Netaji at Ross Island where Netaji addressed .Executive Members , Ramakrishna, Durga Prasad , Abdul Subhan were also present on that occasion.

The allied forces reoccupied the Islands on 7.10.1945. Bridge. JA Saloman of 116 Indian Infantry Brigade got Japanese forces surrendered on 9.10.1945 and all the Japanese Officers were taken as POW and detained in Ross Island.

In the process of making operational bunkers, they destroyed the settlement. The earth quake also caused the damage to the structures of Ross Island. Though the British allied force occupied the Andaman in 1945, Ross Island never regained its status as the headquarter of the British settlement, which was by then permanently shifted to Port Blair.

After the reoccupation of the Islands by the Allied forces, 87 years old Penal Settlement was finally abolished on 7/10/1945. For the civil affairs N.K. Patterson, designated Chief Commissioner took over control. The allied forces of Rajputana Infantry planted a victorious War memorial at Ross Island during 1945.

The Japanese forces had demolished the public buildings at Ross Island, extracted materials for various strategic constructions works all over the Islands. The Ross Island remained to remind the past glory and the citadel of the Indian Penal settlement. When it became uninhabited, nature occupied the dilapidated buildings with huge trees and arial roots to thrive on the neglected remnants. Ross Island was used as segregation camp during epidemics.

During 1960, a nursery of coconut was developed and raring of deer and peacocks were also here. Now the Ross Island is under the control of Andaman and Nicobar Command and it is one of the important tourist destinations. The abandoned fortress of the British period has its attractions carried as a place where not too long ago a history was born... where a history died while still young.

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The script is based on:-

1. "The Lost Horizon" by Priten Roy & Swapanesh Chowdhury
2. The penal settlement in Andaman by RC Majumdar
3. Archival records available at Cellular Jail Library and State Archives
4. Script prepared by Shri Gauri Shankar Pandey
5. Script prepared by Smti. Rashida Iqbal

Script prepared by:-

1. Shri G.S. Pandey, Historian , Writer
2. Shri M.A.Mujtaba , Historian , Writer
3. Shri Hasan Ali , Assistant Archivist, State archives
4. Smti. Rashida Iqbal, Curator, National Memorial