

Synopsis Seminar

Seminar Title	: Political Prisoners in the Andamans and the Question of Indian Nation
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Venue	: HS Seminar Room
Date and Time	: 04 Dec 2024 (10.30am)
Abstract	: After the Sepoy Mutiny (1857), a penal settlement in the Andamans started operating to transport “mutiny” and other prisoners, and gradually, a convict society in the Andaman Islands was formed, devised by class, caste, and religion. Starting 1909, the colonial government transported “political prisoners” whom they termed “terrorist prisoners,” and eventually, the penal settlement witnessed a revolutionary history from the much-hyped Cellular Jail. Post-independence, the Indian nation, in an effort to immortalize the political prisoners, commemorated the Cellular Jail as a National Memorial and documented in detail their “sacrifices” from post-colonial perspectives. Two significant phenomena occur during this period. First, it is established that between 1857 (Mutiny / First War of Independence) and 1942 (Japanese Occupation of the Islands), the Empire negotiated with Indian convicts to establish an elaborate convict society in the Andamans. The second part of the factual “tale” of the negotiations of the political prisoners with the colonial Government and Gandhian political system is lost in oblivion, which invariably creates a subaltern site for postcolonial studies. Juridical petitions, native speeches on the political prisoners incarcerated in the Cellular Jail and case files of political prisoners are sites hardly ever explored in Indian academia.

The memoirs and autobiographies of the convicts, such as Barindra Ghosh’s *The Tale of My Exile* and V.D. Savarkar’s *My Transportation for Life*, composed after their release, present the struggle of the convicts appropriating them as “national heroes” while their juridical petitions complicate this history. This appropriation not only contradicts the colonial representation of these convicts as “terrorists” but also significantly ignores the negotiations that the prisoners had with the colonial government, Gandhi, and other Indian spokespersons to secure their release. Focusing on the political prisoners’ case files, diary entries, petitions, and autobiographical narratives, this thesis highlights how the political prisoners in the Andamans sought freedom—both personal and political—from within the penal system by negotiating with contrasting ideological frames. In short, divided into six chapters, this thesis while taking into account the history behind the colonisation of the Andamans, highlights its evolution, locates the narrative history behind incarceration of “political prisoners” in the Andamans and suggests that it is when the Empire transported the “political prisoners” did the Andamans gain prominence and were integrated into the Indian nation. A shift in the image of the Andamans as a “far distant land” in the colonial times to the contemporary image of “Muktirth” has only been possible because of the struggle of the “political prisoners” in the Cellular Jail and their subsequent integration with the nation’s freedom struggle movement.

Keywords: Sepoy Mutiny Andaman Penal Settlement Cellular Jail Political Prisoners Hunger Strike Indian Nation