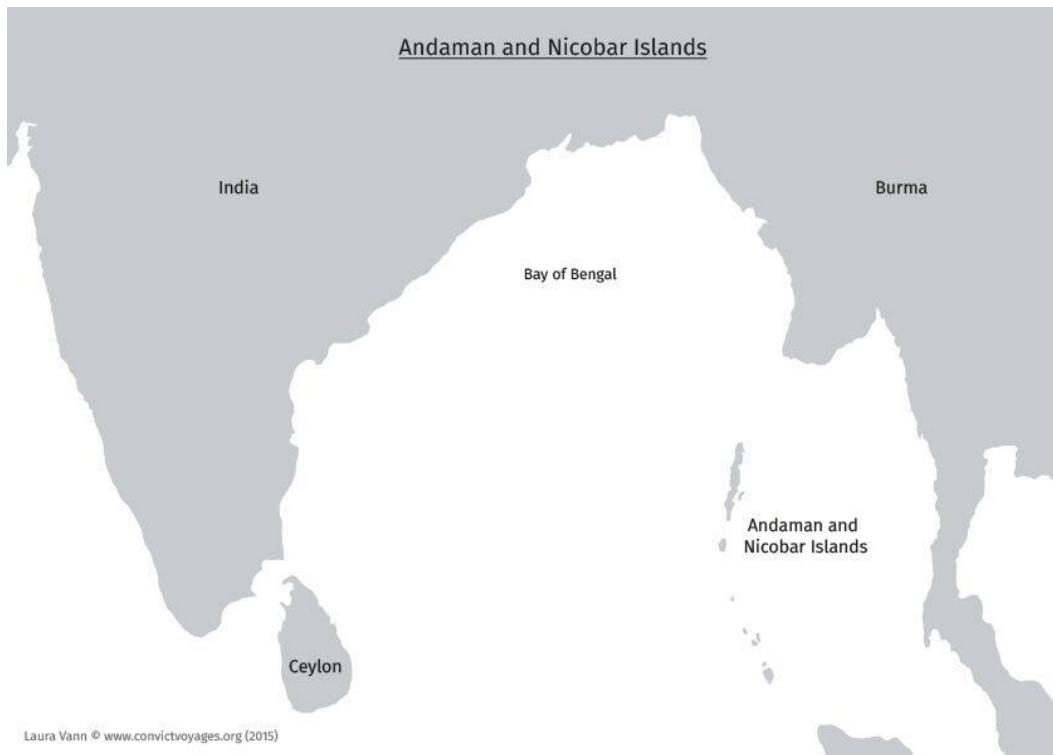


## Andaman Islands: 1793 – 1945

Clare Anderson

Lying on important East India Company trading routes in the Bay of Bengal, the British first colonized the Andamans in 1793, when they transported three hundred convicts from Bengal to establish a settlement on the Islands. After outbreaks of disease devastated the settlement, in 1796 the British abandoned the Islands, and sent the survivors to the neighbouring penal settlement of Prince of Wales Island (Penang). Due to their strategic position, the British remained interested in the Andamans, however, and after a series of Islander attacks on shipwrecked vessels and prospectors in the 1840s, they began to make plans to re-colonize. The catalyst was the Great Indian Revolt of 1857, when rebels destroyed dozens of jails, and the penal settlements in Burma and the Straits refused to take mutineer and rebel convicts. The British transported the first *challan* (gang) of 200 convicts to the Andamans in March 1858, and this laid the foundation for the establishment of the penal colony.



Penal transportation continued into the 1930s, with a total of about 80,000 convicted criminals and 1,000 political prisoners sent. They included convicts transported for serious offences like murder and armed robbery; as well as groups of Wahabis, the exiled Manipuri royal family, Mapilah rebels from Kerala, and a few hundred well-known nationalists. Over 90% of the convicts were men, including a substantial minority of people convicted in Burma. The penal colony was still operational in 1942, when the Japanese invaded and then occupied the Islands during the Second World War. Though they liberated all the convicts then in the Islands, it was only with the British reoccupation in 1945 that the penal colony was formally abolished, shortly before the Islands became a Union Territory of the newly independent Republic of India.

During the early years of the British permanent settlement of the Andamans, the convicts were organized along military lines, placed in section gangs under convict gangsmen, and put to forced labour on various development projects. They cleared their initial base, Chatham Island, and were then sent outward to cut down jungle, clear swamps, and build basic infrastructure. Ross Island, with its grand colonial residences, swimming baths, tennis courts and bazaar, became the Islands' headquarters. Over time, the settlement expanded, and as the construction of barracks, stores and roads was completed, there were various experiments in agriculture, including in the cultivation of coffee, cotton and tea. It was always intended that the Islands would become self-sufficient, though this goal was never realized. This may have been due to the fundamental contradiction of penal work, which was supposed to both demean and reform convicts. And, as in many penal colonies (and prisons), there were ongoing tensions between the enforcement of adequate punishment and the extraction of labour. As the Andaman penal colony evolved over time, however, and as its basic needs were met, convict occupations further diversified, with convicts employed as servants, boatmen, cooks, *ayahs* (nursemaids), tailors and clerks.



Though the Andamans were supposedly isolated, and transportation across the *kala pani* (black waters) was intended to outcaste convicts from their home communities, some convicts were able to keep up communication with their families on the mainland, and others even hosted visits from them. The ease with which people and news seemed to travel between the supposedly isolated penal colony and the mainland (as well as the legitimate return home of time-expired convicts) led to accusations as early as the 1870s and 1880s that transportation was not deterrent, but attractive to prisoners. Efforts were made to tighten up discipline, and this underpinned the construction of the Cellular Jail (est. 1906), a Bentham-inspired panoptican structure in which it was intended that all male convicts would serve an initial penal stage, before their release into ordinary transportation discipline. After a further period of hard labour, they were eligible for gratuities and to themselves become overseers. Ten years later, they could receive a ticket-of-leave, with absolute pardon

granted perhaps a decade later. Convicts who resisted the system, who refused to work or were otherwise refractory, could be punished through demotion to a chain gang, incarceration on Viper Island (a place for secondary confinement of convicts), public flogging, or execution. Notoriously, just two months after the colony was established, the British superintendent carried out a mass hanging of 81 convicts who had attempted to escape. Female convicts worked in the "Female Factory," at "domestic" work including sewing, and could not leave until they found employment as servants or got married.

To some extent, this organizational model grew out of the convict class system previously used in the Straits Settlements and Burma. As in those settlements, after absolute pardon, ex-convicts were free to return home. However, given the colonizing intent of the British in the Andamans, liberated convicts were offered encouragements to stay, including being allowed to send for their families, and the right to bid at auction for licenses to occupy land. It is worth noting that the British did not pay the cost of their return passage; though we know that some ex-convicts did go back to India, and that some signed contracts of indenture and migrated to other colonies in the British Empire.

Despite some similarities in the labour and penal regimes of the Indian convict settlements, the character of the colony established in the Andamans was quite distinct from those elsewhere in Mauritius or the Bay of Bengal. Unlike Singapore, Malacca, Moulmein and elsewhere, the Islands did not have an alternative working population or labour supply, other than Indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples who were hostile to colonial invasion. In this respect the Andamans penal colony bore some resemblance to the early Australian colonies and to the French penal colony of New Caledonia. In each of these places, the colonial powers assumed that Indigenous people had no rightful claims to land ownership; used violence against them, and exposed them to new kinds of disease, with devastating effect. In the Andamans, Indigenous people responded to colonial violence with open warfare (Battle of Aberdeen, 1858). Ultimately, though, they were "pacified," and made subject to various kinds of coercion and confinement, including so-called industrial training in "Homes," and "Orphanages," and forced relocation onto reserved land. Though undoubtedly some convicts had intimate relationships with Islanders, there was no general, free labouring population with whom convicts could establish economic, social and cultural relations. This was the case in the penal settlements of Mauritius, Burma and the Straits, where convicts married, traded and worshipped with slaves, ex-slaves, indentured labourers and the local population.

As in penal colonies all over the world, convicts in the Andamans displayed a remarkable degree of agency in their transportation. They went slow at work, feigned illness, attacked their overseers, and escaped into the jungles. In 1858 there was apparently a widespread belief that there was a road linking the Islands to Burma, and several convicts fled the penal colony to look for it. In one incident, two escaped convicts got as far as London, having been picked up at sea as shipwrecked sailors. They were lodged in the Strangers' Home for Asiatic Seamen in the docks, and were taken to visit Crystal Palace. The most extraordinary incident of all was the assassination of the Viceroy of India, the Earl of Mayo, during an official visit to the Andamans in 1872. He had climbed Mount Harriet to enjoy the sunset, and after descending to Hope Town, convict Shere Ali jumped on him and stabbed him in the back. A subsequent investigation amongst convicts living in the town revealed that Ali has been in receipt of letters describing mainland Wahabi agitation, and had thrown a feast the night before the well-planned attack.

As mentioned above, the large majority of the convicts were men. Within the context of a largely homosocial colony, there were intermittent efforts to introduce women, including through family emigration schemes. None were very successful. One feature of the penal colony was the "marriage parade," through which convict men and women were brought together to negotiate unions, giving

women some power in the grossly gender imbalanced colony. Children were being born to convicts in the Islands as early as the 1860s, and through to the 1900s convict descendants became a relatively cohesive community that was known as "local born." In the 1920s, the colonial administration became concerned to boost local born morale, which it believed was affected by the convict stigma, and introduced agricultural shows, sporting events, and even Boy Scouting and Girl Guiding, to restore pride. Part of the issue for the colonial administration was local born rejection of the manual labour associated with convictism, and as it became increasingly obvious that the colony was unlikely to become self-sufficient, the British also sought to introduce an alternative labour supply.

The Indian Jails Committee of 1919-20 recommended the general abolition of transportation to the Andamans, proposing that only especially dangerous offenders be sent. In 1921, the government of India started the process of repatriating Andaman convicts to mainland jails. Provincial governments were unable to cope with resultant prison overcrowding, however, and so at the beginning of 1922 transportation for male, non-political convicts was renewed. Given the difficulties associated with imprisoning political prisoners on the mainland, and the desire to remove them far away from their supporters, in 1932 the government decided to reintroduce their transportation, too. There were also explicit attempts to populate the colony. In the 1920s volunteers from mainland prisons were sent under favourable terms. A so-called Criminal Tribe (Bhantu) was resettled in the Islands, and groups of Ranchis and Karens were brought over from the United Provinces of mainland India and Burma respectively, under semi-coerced conditions, to work in forestry. Until the Japanese occupation, the Salvation Army took charge of the "rehabilitation" of the Bhantu.

Nationalist prisoners from the mainland were subject to a quite different penal regime to ordinary offenders. They were isolated from the mass of convicts, were kept in the cellular jail for the whole term of their sentence and were put to non-productive (penal) forms of labour like oakum picking and oil grinding. These were punishments that aimed to humiliate and to degrade. Several nationalists published memoirs after their release in which they described the inhumanity of transportation. Middle class and high-caste prisoners were unfamiliar with many aspects of prison life, especially common messing and communal bathing, and thus felt its many deprivations acutely. Some went on hunger strike and after a mass protest in 1937 all the political prisoners then in the Cellular Jail were repatriated to India.



The Andaman Islands are today celebrated for their association with Indian nationalism, and the history of ordinary convicts is sidelined against the celebration of Freedom Fighting. Convict descendants are still known as local born (or with other colonial-era settlers as “pre-42s”), and have been successful in acquiring particular economic and political rights. Otherwise, monuments are dotted around the capital, Port Blair, celebrating the Islands’ colonization by patriot heroes of the First War of Indian Independence (1857), and the sacrifices of nationalist martyrs later on in the early twentieth century. The Cellular Jail is now a museum and national monument, and is visited annually by politicians and the families of incarcerated nationalists, who pay their respects to the fathers of Independence. Since the devastating tsunami of 2005 brought the Islands to national and international prominence, the Islands have also become a popular tourist destination. Each year thousands of mainland Indian visitors go to the Andamans, and enjoy tours of the colonial ruins at Ross Island, the dilapidated jail and gallows at Viper Island, and the Sound and Light show at the Cellular Jail Museum. Moreover, with mainland social and caste distinctions undergoing profound changes in the peculiar context of the penal colony, and with a population descended from convicts transported from all over India, the Islands are today celebrated as a mini-India, a place of unity in diversity.

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