

A Study on the Colonization of Britishers to Andaman & Nicobar Islands

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Introduction :

The history of the Andaman and Nicobar islands Starts from the Ramayana period. In the Ramayana period it was called as Handuman, as time passes away this place was renamed. In the 1st century this place was called as Agadaemon Angademan according to Ptolemy. Travellers from different parts of the world visited this place. Arab Travellers visited on 19th century, Marco Polo visited in 13th century who describes this place as Angamanian, Friar Odoric in 14th century, and Caesar Fredericke in 16th century. In the 17th century, Lieutenant Archibald Blair of the Royal Indian Navy founded a naval base on a small island adjoining South Andaman merely by clearing forests, setting up cottages, and planting kitchen gardens and orchards. Even so, the base marked the arrival of civilization, of human control over the vegetative wild.

Colonization :

The British first surveyed the Andaman Islands in 1789 in search of a place to establish a penal colony for offenders from British India. Such a colony was

established in 1790 but was abandoned just a few years later. In the mid-19th century, concern over native attacks on shipwrecked crews and the need for a penal settlement after the Indian Mutiny (1857-58) led the British to return to the Andamans. Meanwhile, the Danish, who had been the claimants of the Nicobar Islands - the ownership of which had since the 17th century shifted variously between France, Denmark, Austria, and Great Britain-relinquished their rights to the territory to the British in 1868.

The first colony was set up in Chatham Island with 12 acres of land. In 1857 “The Andaman Committee” under Dr. Frederic John Mouat was set up to examine best site for penal settlement. Captain H. Man raised Union Jack at Port Blair on 22 January 1858 (2nd time) to establish and manage Penal System. In the spring of 1858 the British Government in India started a penal settlement at South Andaman, at the same harbour (Chatham) where the first colony had stood almost a century earlier. It was named Port Blair. Three months later, on 16 June, Superintendent James Pattison walker recorded the following tally of convicts:

- Total received : 773
- Died in hospital : 64
- Escaped and not recaptured (probably died for starvation, or killed by the savages) : 140
- Suicide : 1
- Hanged for attempting to escape : 87

Source: Andaman & Nicobar official websites

The Battle of Aberdeen, on the Andaman Islands of India close to Port Blair, was an armed conflict that occurred on 14 May 1859 (according to Portman but 17 May according to other sources between the natives of the Andaman islands, armed with arrows and spears, and the gun-bearing officers and to some extent the convicts (Indian independence activists) of the Ross Island Penal Colony. There had been skirmishes with the British colonial’s right from 1857 when the penal settlement was established. The plan of the impending attack by the natives was revealed by Dudhnath Tewari, an escaped convict who had lived with them. Tewari, convict number 276, had escaped on 6 April 1858 with several other prisoners from Ross

Island and had been taken prisoner by the tribals after the others had been killed. Tewari had then been accepted and allowed to live with the tribals, and even made to marry two tribal girls. When he heard of the plan to attack the prison colony, Tewari returned on 23 April to inform the superintendent of the penal colony, Dr. J.P. Walker of the impending attack. The natives were armed with only bows and arrows, spears and knives while the British were equipped with firearms. Tewari had been imprisoned for his desertion and role in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and his account has been questioned by some authors.

The Britishers forced the prisoners to clear the jungle, which disturbed the natives, the natives began to hit back. This brings up the spark among the natives to fight against the Britishers for their freedom, which led the first war called “The Battle of Aberdeen” in 17th May 1859). Construction of the Cellular Jail was took place between 1896 and 1910 with a total of 668 cells having 7 wings in Star circular model. This jail was built to imprison the freedom fighters from the mainland. During that time, Andaman was called as Kala Pani by the Indians.

Conclusion :

The British established their colony in Andaman & Nicobar Islands. But, the island was abandoned by the British in 1796; yet, the British resumed control over Andamans in the 19th century. During the 19th century as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands history maintains, the British used Andaman and Nicobar as a penal colony, which was named ‘Kalapani’ or the Cellular Jail. The history of Andaman & Nicobar Islands proves that criminals convicted of a crime against the East India Company were sent to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with a life sentence the convicts were forced to live in exile in the Kalapani.

References :

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