Domesticating Penal Libido: Andaman and the Empire[1]

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Abstract: *In immortalizing the political prisoners while the postcolonial nation has commemorated the Cellular Jail as a National Memorial, it has documented in detail their "sacrifices" for the "love of their beloved nation". Consequently, with popular representations, a sentence of transportation has been synonymous with political prisoners incarcerated in the Cellular Jail. Two significant phenomena occur during this period. First, it is established that between 1857 (Mutiny / First War of Independence) and 1942 (Japanese Occupation), the Empire negotiated with approximately twelve thousand Indian convicts to establish an elaborate convict society in the Andamans (among whom were the political prisoners caught in the act of militant nationalism). The second part of the factual "tale"—which I intend to explore in this paper—is lost in oblivion which invariably creates a subaltern site for/of postcolonial studies.*

In this paper, with archival resources and semi-biographical narratives, I intend to explore that the Empire practiced a libidinal logic in controlling the population of the Andamans. First, native sexualities found a splendid political move in juridical / administrative literatures. Second, the eventuality of colonial coital care provides a serious transgression to native sexual ideology. And third, in translating the alternative tongues to juridical tongue does the Administration negotiate in the formation of a convict society. In short, this paper reads colonial documents to argue in favour of an alternative site of postcolonial sexualities.

Key Words: Empire, Kālā Pāni; colonialism; (auto)biography; transportation; sexuality; penal libido

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I

There are two integrated facts about Kālā Pāni that should interest anyone who researches the history of penal ideas: that the government was too anxious and impatient to populate the islands by any means so that it could control the ocean and the Empire, and that it emphatically negotiated with the transported convicts in developing an elaborate convict society while showing its anxiety over the islands' overall governance. Among the numerous steps taken in the initial decades, the demand for well-behaved convicts and the demand for marriageable women remain so strong that the documents not only interrogate the intellectual and moral continence the British preached so much, but they also indicate, in principle, that the British were as lascivious as their native counterparts who, the British

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believed, embraced the Kāma Sutra in their everyday life. On the one hand, the deportation of 1857 mutineers, political prisoners, petty criminals and hard convicts projects British attitude of developing the Andamans as a regular penal settlement. On the other, the transportation of public women, infanticidal mothers and young female convicts remains another chapter that is relatively less explored. This article explores the repressive history of human copulation in Kālā Pāni which requires critical investigation. It also projects that the Empire practised a libidinal logic in controlling the population and in patronizing colonized spaces.

II

Among the numerous measures taken for which the masculine settlement would face less embarrassment in the process of colonization of the islands were an inscrutable desire to regulate and prevent unnatural offence, sodomy, frequent rapes and murders. Captain W.B. Birch proposed in 1873 that the free police of Port Blair required ample number of prostitutes and pleaded the government to arrange—for the satisfaction of the carnal desire of the Force—public women who would in turn make the police manly enough to work towards the smooth functioning of the Empire.[2] Had not such a question carried ample significance for the smooth functioning of the Empire, the colonial government would not have taken any measure towards its categorization. Though apprehensive of its negative outcome, owing to the standard set for gentlemen's morality, Major General D.M. Stewart, Supt. of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, communicated his vital thought to the Government of India: that the government may not enforce the importation of public women but the question is far more serious and needs much deliberation.[3] Captain Stewart sounded the alarm at the earliest:

[2] NAI. *Home Department Proceedings*, Port Blair, October 1874. 581. Nos. 60-62.

[3] Ibid., 581.

> The young convicts, and those of mature years who have the reputation of being addicted to unnatural crime, are segregated from the rest of the convicts, and kept under the surveillance of married petty officers on certain fixed stations where special accommodation is provided for them, but it cannot be supposed that the crime is thus wholly suppressed.[4]

Thus, without argument, General Stewart recommends that a certain number of female convicts were a necessity for the smooth functioning of the Settlement. Whether or not public women were transported directly owing to the result of Stewart's plea, the Government of India took numerous steps in subjugating the penal libido. Without much deliberation, within a month, the Government of India granted free passages to the families of the residents and directed the Settlement to provide public women.[5] Reference to carnal desire remains so central to judicial and home department proceedings that, it seems, it serves a much larger purpose of taming the Settlement. Biographical and autobiographical narratives of the period—like that of legal and colonial documentation—are full of metaphorical or literal allusions to such records. It, to certain extent, dismantles the glorified history of freedom struggle and resistance once we explore colonial historiography at length. What we have instead is an alternative history of the penal settlement that needs much deliberation and emphatic understanding.

III

Barindra Kumar Ghosh, Sri Aurbindo's brother who spent twelve years in the Andamans (1909-1920), puts forward such an alternative perspective in hiding. His autobiography *Dwipantarer Katha* (1920)*,* translated as *The Tale of My Exile* (1922), is a retrospection towards dehumanization of the convicts—political, criminal or otherwise—in its

[4] Ibid., 581.

[5] Ibid., 581.

extreme form though the narrator is confined to the Cellular Jail only and possesses little exposure of barracks and the settlement.[6] The represented notion of morality, in any case, seems to be synonymous with nakedness: "…there was no such thing as gentleman, not even perhaps such a thing as man…" (2011, 46). The alternative reality of the sexual body continues further. History can be mirrored in literature which in turn becomes literary history that is more literal than constructive history. What the autobiography condemns is dehumanization of the convict; man against his fate, India against its ill-treated fate of colonialism. *Kala Pani* is a saga; biographical and autobiographical narratives, though very few in number, are its products. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Settlement was literal yet highly metaphorical and produced a tradition of great writing that depicted emphatic understanding of "Christian submission"; Frantz Kafka's suffering shows the technical imperfection of man and a fanatic religious epiphany where lies the genesis of human miseries; the colonial cantonment in *Kala Pani*, however, is blended with human suffering of the natives for the sake of the land and water.

In May 1882 Major T. Cadell, Chief Commissioner and Superintendent, in order to stop attempts to murder, appoints a committee, the business of which would be to suggest prevention of unnatural crime among convicts in Port Blair. The only suggestions the committee could provide are "the barrack should be better lighted and that prisoners whose apparent age is under 25 years, and those term-convicts whose characters warrant the belief that they practice unnatural crime, should not be sent to this Settlement."[7] Three decades later with the recommendation of the committee the darker prisons needed to be well lighted so that the prisoners could save their morality against their fellow prisoners and

[6] Kath Weston, "A Political Ecology of 'Unnatural Offences': State Security, Queer Embodiment, and the Environmental Impacts of Prison Migration," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14, no. 2-3 (2008), 218.

[7] NAI. *Home, Revenue and Agricultural Department Proceedings*. Govt. of India. May 1882. 61.

supervisors. As oil lamps had to be installed in dark prisons and dark barracks, men replaced animals in oil press. That also could not solve the problem of morality either. Barindra Ghosh writes: "When it becomes physically impossible to grind out 30 lbs of oil, one is forced to seek the aid of the more robust ruffians in order to avoid punishment and that means to sell, in return, one's body for the most abject ends" (2011, 108). Where did the problem lie then? What were the measures taken for the smooth control and supervision of the islands? In what ways did the anticipation of a second Mauritius take to the fears of the colonial modern? Measures ranged from transporting all petty and hard convicts, capable of hard work and capable of begetting children to that of European convicts who would be lending a cheap service for the control of the lands and the ocean.[8] The state of disturbance affected the native Andamanese as well. "In respect to morality, too, it must be confessed that they (trained native children of both sexes) have suffered from contact with the convict population," observes Captain E.H. Man who was in charge of the islands to see the affairs of the convicts.[9]

On the 1st of November 1887, Colonel T. Cadell, Superintendent of Port Blair and the Nicobars, sounded the alarm again and requested the government the following:

> …the number of convicts in the female jail at Port Blair is rapidly decreasing, and that, if a larger number of females are not transported than has been done during the past three years, it will be impossible to carry out the system of permitting

[8] 1863: The Superintendent of Port Blair writes to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department (1 August 1863) requesting the "service" of "two or three European Convicts who are by profession Blacksmiths and Carpenters" because their service is needed for the profit of the Settlement: "when tools are destroyed they are put aside and cause a heavy and useless expense to the Settlement, which should be avoided, and would be if we had a proper Blacksmith and Carpenter's Establishment" (Government of Bengal, *Judicial Department Proceeding*, September 1862. Proceeding no. 6/8).

[9] E.H. Man, "On the Andaman Islands, and Their Inhabitants," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 14 (1885), 265.

female convicts to marry, after five years' imprisonment, convicts who have obtained tickets as self-supporters, and to carry on the weaving manufactory which is productive of larger savings to Government.[10]

Everything is written between the lines. How on heavens a single weaving manufactory by a few convicts be so profitable against the cost of transportation and maintenance of convicts? The issue remains more serious than it appears to be. With such communication and hurried response, the government sent many a prisoner to the Andamans about whom records spoke less but they were backbone of the Empire, strengthening it and protecting it on a larger scale. In 1862 J.P.H. Ward, Officiating Superintendent, Allipore Jail, writes to the Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal (No. 132, dated 29 July 1862) enquiring about the real nature of the original offence for which Kirthea Rajowar was sentenced to transportation to the Andamans on 13 July 1858. Upon investigation it was found that the prisoner was convicted on 28 October 1857 by the Principal Assistant Commissioner at Hazareebaugh of rape and robbery and was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment with labor in irons.[11] In documentation there remain thus two sets of erroneous stories: that the colonial government hurriedly convicted many an Indian to strengthen the Settlement and that the postcolonial nation paid homage to many a petty rapist and murderer as the nation's martyrs. In short, in the biographical details the postcolonial nation includes such convicts as martyrs and forgets the larger history of sexuality that made the Settlement a full-scale habitat.

But that is not all however. The home department proceedings of Port Blair are a clear indicator. In December 1873, a person who had passed seven years at Port Blair as

[10] NAI. *Home Department Proceedings*. No. 497, dated Port Blair, the 1st November 1887.

[11] Government of Bengal, *Judicial Department Proceeding*, September 1862. Proceeding no. 13/8.

Euthalla Gunga who was convicted at Nellore on 17 July 1866 turned out having a fake identity. Major General D.M. Stewart wrote to the Government of India that "Men who are now alive in the Settlement had been years ago reported dead or escaped, and others who had really died or escaped or supposed to be alive and still at Port Blair according to the records."[12] The penal settlement was a mockery of human condition; it worked according to the whims and fancies of the colonial administration. Hence however glorious the freedom struggle might have been, the contribution of convicts—hereditary criminals, murderers, petty offenders—remains central to the colonization of the Andaman Islands. One of the major rewards that came to a convict if and only when he had a strong hand in defending the islands, protecting it and nurturing its further colonization. To conclude this paper I cite the example of Doodnath Tewarry, whose case remains of ample importance to the colonial government:

Doodnath Twarry, an 1857 convict, who escaped from Ross Island as soon as he was brought to the penal settlement in Port Blair. From 23 April 1858 to 17 May 1859 he wondered with the local tribals who were hostile to the British and were uncontrollable. He moved with them, married one of the tribal girls, adventured in the jungle with them, witnessed their customs and everyday life, and deserted his pregnant wife to return to the settlement voluntarily on 17 May 1859 to report that the tribals were plotting to overthrow the settlers. Had Tewarry's adventures been not of ample significance and highly beneficial in the colonization of the geographical spaces, Tewarry would have faced the gallows. He however reported in the settlement the misadventure of tribals to free the islands of the aliens, the Red Court after the Battle of Aberdeen, documented his statement and gave him a safe passage home for his service towards the protection of the islands.

[12] NAI. *Home Department Proceedings*, Port Blair. December 1873. 637.

Many a valuable document of the colonial period was destroyed during the Japanese occupation. The case of Divyasingh Dev III may be cited as an example, which has remained controversial even today. Truth can neither be established citing colonial documentation in its extreme form, nor can historicity be strongly challenged without the support of the actual cases. History wiped out is history erased. History not written is history wiped out. Colonial historiography needs further exploration in the field of prison transportation.

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