



The Cellular Jail.

I first heard of Kalapani as a boy in an Amritsar village. It was a place familiar to every Punjab villager, for that is where you were bound to be sent, if you were unfortunate enough to kill a neighbour, in a sudden fit of anger. When the 'Session' sahib pronounced 'Umr Qaid' on a sultry summer afternoon, while the flies droned around your head, you took a last look at your brother Banta Singh, for you were never likely to see him again. You looked at your Babu, who had mortgaged two good acres of well land, to fight the 'Mugadamma', as he stood in brave composure, in the sweating crush of litigants and lawyers, at the lower end of the court. For the old man, it was a cruel blow, from which he rarely recovered. One could at best weep over a son, brought home

with a spear point in his side, but to see a young lion, just walk away in a jingle of 'hath-karris', never to return, was something that broke a man's spirit. No wonder, the Punjab villagers' image of Kalapani, was that of a Dantesque hell. For a man bred in the limitless dry North Indian plains, the equally limitless dark and deep waters of the Bay of Bengal, were the ultimate terror.

These islands in the deep, had another claim to notoriety. The British had always had a penchant for exiling political prisoners. Napoleon had been sent to the island of St. Helena; the Burmese king to the Ratanagiri coast; Bhai Maharaj Singh, who carried on a guerrilla war after the second Sikh war, to Singapore; and Maharaja Dalip Singh, to Bihar and finally England.

After the Mutiny, they felt the need for a fairly large penal settlement. One was opened at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands, and the word 'Kalapani' burnt into the Indian consciousness.

While every province contributed its quota of freedom-fighters in the true, and not the debased sense of the word, Punjab certainly was in the forefront of this struggle. At the turn of the century the Babbar Akalis challenged the might of the British Raj. I remember talking to a very old retired British cavalry officer over a pink gin in a London club. His eyes lit up as he vividly recalled a winter spent as he put it, "in flushing Babbar Akalis out of the sugarcane fields of Hoshiarpur." He talked as of a morning's partridge shoot. Brave men that they were, the Babbar Akalis, unlike the partridge often came charging out of the cane, talwar in hand. Many died; those that did not find their way to the islands in the ocean.

At the time of the First World War, the Gaddar party fighters had nearly brought about a second army mutiny. They failed because of betrayal at the very last minute. Men of a cavalry regiment, some from my mother's village, were discovered when a bomb exploded at a railway station. Some were hung and the rest sent to Kalapani.

Then in the second and third decade of this century came the great revolutionaries, men like Ajit Singh, Lalpat Rai and the followers of the immortal Bhagat Singh. Sufficient it to say that so long as the penal settlement existed—that is up to the start of the second war—Punjab continued to supply it with its quota and more of fighters for liberty. All those men are no more save the ever green Baba Prithvi Singh Azad, but the memory endures.

I had always wanted to visit these islands, that meant so much to Punjab. Now that they were no longer Kalapani, but merely 'The Union Territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands', I had an additional reason for going there. This chain of islands nearly 350 in number, and ranging in size from an atoll of a couple of square kilometres, to islands of a thousand square miles or more, stretches down the Eastern end of the Bay of Bengal, like a loosely strung chain of pearls. The last of these islands—many uninhabited—is a mere 90 miles from Sumatra. In recent years the G.O.I. has taken many steps to make its possession secure. In the Northern islands of the group, Bengali refugees have been settled in fairly large numbers. In the very last island in the south—Great Nicobar—a settlement of

KALAPANI

Ex-servicemen farmers, is being tried since 1969. As you might have guessed, half of these frontiersmen, who have taken on a truly formidable challenge, are Punjabis. I wanted to see them. I had seen the Punjab pioneer in the malarial swamps of the Tarai, the dacoit lands of the Chambal, the Imperial valley of California, and of course the Southern Chawra bazar. All that remained, was to see how he was making out, as a south sea islander, stuck on a coral reef, in the middle of the ocean. The Punjabis have taken on many roles in his wandering across the globe. Could he now become a pearl fisherman?

The flight took us to Rangoon, and then after a refuelling halt, southwards across a placid blue sea. After almost two hours of flying, we came over the greenest islands, that I have ever seen. As the plane banked in a wide turn, one caught sight of rolling forested hills, pleasant meadows, and an absolutely marvellous harbour, that stretched like a giant blue lake among the islands. The plane came down on a small, hill surrounded airstrip, that reminded me of Kulu. As at Kulu, goats continued to graze, as the plane sped by them on the tarmac. And of course very much like Kulu, it was the sole flight for the day. The plane was tied up, and the crew went off to spend the night in the local tourist bungalow. Next flight back to Calcutta the next morning.

As the plane came to a halt, a dozen vehicles raced down the hill to greet it. We went through a wood panelled hall, that had on the wall a giant photo of Netaji landing on the same dusty strip during the Second World War. Among the vehicles standing outside were a couple of yellow backed cabs. By the nearest of them, lounged two Sikhs, youngmen, who eyed us with the typical bold, nearly insolent stare of Punjab. I said hello and tried a little friendly conversation. Believe it or not, they were Gills—from Gill village in Ludhiana; business was satisfactory and of course they had no complaints. The guest house overlooked the harbour on one side, and the limitless ocean on the other. I could have spent a month, lazing on its pleasant lawns.

Port Blair is a thriving small town, with a population drawn from every corner of the country. There are about two hundred Punjabi families. As always, their presence and impact, is far greater than their numbers, would warrant. The main bazaar, called Aberdeen by some homesick Scot, has a number of Punjabi owned shops. The biggest is owned by Sardar Nehchal Singh, who also does duty as the local Congress chief. Over dinner, I asked him a few questions. Originally from Lyallpur, he would not dream of going back to Punjab. As he tucked into yet another chicken leg, he waved his arms in an expressive gesture, and said, "We have been here many decades, and this is home for us. By the Gurus grace we haven't done too badly. And here we intend to stay." His shop, his girls and the easy bonhomie, with which Nehchal Singh slapped every local bigwig on the back, proclaimed indeed the truth of his assertion, that he had not done too badly.

Next morning another taxi, and of course yet another Sikh at the wheel. I think if the Moon is ever colonised the first air taxi will of course be run by Sikhs. Gurdial Singh was from Chamkaur Sahib. The father had come over long before the war. When the Japanese arrived, he suddenly displayed a latent talent for languages, and became one of the few people fluent in Japanese. So the Japs made him a police sub-inspector for their two years on the islands. After the war he went back to Ropar. Soon the new Indian Government called him back, and he retired an inspector. The sons are now all islanders, though once in a while they visit Punjab. As is the practice, they married locally, and not necessarily among Punjabis or Sikhs. The people of the islands are the most liberated of all the Indian communities. Muslims marry Hindus, and Hindus marry Christians. During the tour I met a police inspector who claimed the father from UP the mother from Andhra, and an uncle from among the Sikhs! He was equally proud of all of them.



Ex-soldiers from Punjab who have been settled in Great Nicobar. Notice the dense forest with which they have to contend.

from every corner of the country. There are about two hundred Punjabi families. As always, their presence and impact, is far greater than their numbers, would warrant. The main bazaar, called Aberdeen by some homesick Scot, has a number of Punjabi owned shops. The biggest is owned by Sardar Nehchal Singh, who also does duty as the local Congress chief. Over dinner, I asked him a few questions. Originally from Lyallpur, he would not dream of going back to Punjab. As he tucked into yet another chicken leg, he waved his arms in an expressive gesture, and said, "We have been here many decades, and this is home for us. By the Gurus grace we haven't done too badly. And here we intend to stay." His shop, his girls and the easy bonhomie, with which Nehchal Singh slapped every local bigwig on the back, proclaimed indeed the truth of his assertion, that he had not done too badly.

Next morning another taxi, and of course yet another Sikh at the wheel. I think if the Moon is ever colonised the first air taxi will of course be run by Sikhs. Gurdial Singh was from Chamkaur Sahib. The father had come over long before the war. When the Japanese arrived, he suddenly displayed a latent talent for languages, and became one of the few people fluent in Japanese. So the Japs made him a police sub-inspector for their two years on the islands. After the war he went back to Ropar. Soon the new Indian Government called him back, and he retired an inspector. The sons are now all islanders, though once in a while they visit Punjab. As is the practice, they married locally, and not necessarily among Punjabis or Sikhs. The people of the islands are the most liberated of all the Indian communities. Muslims marry Hindus, and Hindus marry Christians. During the tour I met a police inspector who claimed the father from UP the mother from Andhra, and an uncle from among the Sikhs! He was equally proud of all of them.

We spent the day visiting. The first halt was the local co-operative consumer store. Run efficiently, it kept the market in check, and provided people with most necessities at reasonable prices. We relaxed over coconut water in the Directors' room—no tea in these islands, matronly and cheerful. She had been in the islands for eighteen years. Her husband was a lawyer, and doing his bit to expand litigation. Yes, she missed Patiala, but only a little bit, as she put it.

The North Sentinelese and the Onge, too, are reduced to less than a hundred each. All through upto 1975 the Jarawas, who number a little over 200, refused any contact with so-called civilisation. Once in a while, if pestered too much, they killed with bows and arrows. A forest people, they live like stone age man, naked and free to the wind and the sky. The forest gives them fruits, honey and roots. Crop cultivation they do not know. Their isolation from us, has helped them to survive. The administration made many efforts over the years, to contact them. Gifts were left in the forest to establish our bona-fides.

Where everyone else failed, Bakhtawar Singh succeeded. In his home, over tea, I saw photos of the first contact. These innocent children of the forest, who have no body hair, were fascinated by his bushy beard. He stood smiling among these laughing dancing pigmies like a giant Santa Claus. I could have talked to him for hours, so fascinating were his tales from the Jarawas but we had to leave. But the idea that a simple Sikh policeman, who has never even heard the word anthropology, should beat all the professors, continues to amuse me. The Administration, of course, is taking every care to ensure, that their embrace is not the kiss of death, for the tribals. In fact, a great deal is

being done, to preserve these relics of stone age man, in their natural environment. In Port Blair, an excellent museum has been set up, which displays for the benefit of visitors, the unique culture of these people.

★
By the kindness of the Chief Commissioner, we sailed the next day, in his personal boat S.S. Tarnugli, for the southern islands. In one week of travelling we did a round trip of 700 miles, visiting various islands on the way. In itself a week's



The Singh Sabha Gurudwara put up in Campbell Bay which is the new and budding small town of Great Nicobar.

sea cruise, among the lovely islands of the Nicobars, is an experience never to be forgotten. I remember the clear blue sky, the open ocean, the flying fish, the dolphins that played around the ship, the perfect blue green unswilled water, and the sugar white beaches. The Nicobarese are as happy and cheerful a people as the better known Pacific islanders. The beauties of these islands are in no way less than those of Hawaii, and the other famous Pacific holiday resorts. The only difference is, that these islands are yet unpopulated by tourism and civilisation.

On the third day from Port Blair we approached Great Nicobar, the last island in the chain. It is fairly large about 50 miles x 30 miles and its southern most tip, Pygmillion Point, is in fact the southern tip of India. It has a lower latitude than Kanya Kumari and is approximately in line with Colombo. The island of Sumatra is only 90 miles away. Fortunately, the sea was calm and we could approach the Jetty at Campbell Bay. I was told with much amusement, of a recent visit by a High Powered Committee of Secretaries from the Government of India. The sea happened to be rough, and the ship could not approach the Jetty. It had to stay out some distance, and the poor gentlemen had to come ashore, tossed about in a small boat. Being that the lubbars so impressed were they by the hazards of the sea, that they sanctioned harbour works worth many crores

★
A visit to Port Blair could not be considered complete, without a call on Bakhtawar Singh. Who is he? Simply a retired Deputy Superintendent of Police. What is so special about him? He has succeeded where all others had failed — in establishing friendly ties with the Jarawas. Now who are these Jarawas? Relics of stone age man. One of the five tribes of the original inhabitants of the islands who are fast disappearing. These islands were once peopled by a Negrito people, who have much in common with the Polynesians, and the aborigines of Australasia. Short and dark with negroid features and curly hair, they are yet different from the people of Africa. In the 19th century the Great Andamense, the biggest

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

Continued From Page 5 Col. 8

on the spot, presumably to ensure that their next visit, should be smoother.

At the Jetty we were welcomed by local officers, and half a dozen Punjabis. The ex-servicemen have been settled on land reclaimed from the Jungle, along a 35 kilometre long coastal road. We drove to the farthest settlement and back. The forest has to be seen to be believed. Trees of a height of 150 to 200 ft — as tall as the minars in the Tarn Taran and Amritsar Gurdwaras — are common. Even where they have been cut down, their base and roots are so massive that a man standing near them is totally dwarfed.

One can imagine the problems in clearing such forests to make land fit for cultivation. About 200 ex-servicemen families, were brought here in 69. Each has been given 10 acres of land and some assistance for a house, buffaloes, and initial settlement. As was to be expected, in opening up such a difficult frontier, the initial hardships are immense. The land is not yet fully clear, nor the forest tamed. Cattle have died of diseases, and the paddy too, lost to unknown pests.

We talked to the people in the settlements. In the non-Punjab villages, there were bitter complaints, some justified and some perhaps not so. Everyone demanded more from the Government. I looked carefully at the settlers. Most of them seemed to be a few years younger, they were in their sixties, and toothless. I wondered how such men could open up a frontier. I probed a little further and was amused and sad at my discovery. It seems that when the offer was advertised, it naturally looked very attractive. The Government was going to give land, cattle, houses and what not. The Babus in the army, mostly the clerical staff, were natural, and rushed to take easy advantage. Now they were complaining because they felt cheated.

It seemed to me that they were the wrong type of settlers to be put along a frontier. Physically fit men in the age group of 35 to 45 who would cultivate themselves should have been chosen. Many of the Babus in the settlement are looking for labour to do their work for them! If any more settlements are to be made, we could learn from the experience of the British Settlement Officers, who when choosing colonists for the canal colonies in West Punjab, personally went to the villages and examined the candidates. They made everyone put out their hands, and looked carefully at them. The men with the hard, calloused and knotted hands of a true cultivator, to these islands in a new venture, to well to do and soft men, who were only likely to become absentee landlords. The Andaman settlement has been grabbed by many as an easy benefit, and not seen by them as a hard frontier which has to be fought and conquered.

★
★
★

★
★
★

the very best type. She was large, matronly, and cheerful. She smiled a welcome and said, "Bha Ji come and have some Cha-pani." I asked her how they were making out. She replied "Bha Ji now that we have come, why should we think of Punjab and complain. We have to make good here. There are problems, but we will manage." A lump walked up in my throat, at the response of this brave woman.

We had very little time, and we quickly drove back to the settlement at Campbell Bay. No matter where the Sikh settler goes, he carries his Church with him. The first thing the hundred odd families have done at Campbell Bay is to build a Gurdwara. They invited me there, and after prayers, made me welcome. The Gurdwara is modest but effective. It also manages a Sarai for visitors from the Farms. In one respect it is unique, even amongst Gurdwaras. The accounts are written up on a Board in the main Hall. Knowing how frequently, Sikhs quarrel over Gurdwara accounts, all over the world, I thought this a uniquely progressive idea.

They asked me to sav a few words. I said bluntly and frankly that Punjabis have gone all over the world. This was one more frontier, and one more challenge for them. It has been our tradition never to refuse a challenge nor to run away. "Now that you have come here, make a success of it, and never look back to Punjab. If you fail and come back, you will not be able to look us in the eye. Our good wishes and support are with you, but these can be no substitute for your courage and stamina!" They laughed and agreed heartily.

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

★
★
★

POLITICAL INTERNEES INCARCERATED IN THE CELLULAR JAIL

FROM PUNJAB

- SHRI GURMUKH SINGH
- SHRI HARNAM SINGH
- SHRI HIRDA RAM
- SHRI JINDER SINGH
- SHRI JOWALA SINGH
- SHRI KALA SINGH, 1/10
- SHRI GHASITA SINGH
- SHRI KALA SINGH, 1/10
- SHRI GOLAB SINGH
- SHRI KENH SINGH, 1/10
- SHRI BHAL SINGH
- SHRI KIPAL SINGH
- SHRI LAL SINGH
- SHRI MADAN SINGH
- SHRI MANGAL SINGH 1/19
- SHRI KEESAR SINGH
- SHRI KHUSHAL SINGH
- SHRI NIDHAN SINGH
- SHRI PANDIT PARMA NAND
- SHRI PARAMANAND BHAI 1/20
- SHRI PIRTHI SINGH
- SHRI RAM SARAN DAS
- SHRI BOBA SINGH JAT 1/27
- SHRI PURU SINGH 1/29
- SHRI KULIA SINGH
- SHRI SAWAN SINGH
- SHRI SHER SINGH
- SHRI SHIV SINGH
- SARDAR SURAIN SINGH