

The Role of Solitary Confinement in Shaping Anti-Colonial Thought in Cellular Jail

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ABSTRACT

The Cellular Jail in Andaman Islands continues to be a clear representation of repression by the British colonials and the Indian nationalist pushback. This paper examines the role of solitary confinement as a means of neutralizing dissent by means of complete isolation, which, however, served to develop a more sophisticated anti-colonial thinking. The paper uses examination of prison memoirs and archival documents to examine how extreme isolation affects the minds of prisoners to develop a high level of introspection coupled with ideological purification. Although the penal regime also intended to suppress revolutionary spirit with the help of hard work, the prison turned out to be the place of counter-knowledge production. The carceral space was transformed into intellectual forge through clandestine communications networks, hunger strike and literary actions. The study claims that seclusion had offered the time and mental state needed to make complex criticisms of the imperial governance. Finally, the Cellular Jail experience highlights the extent of the carceral discipline and the efficiency of the political imprisonment in the process of the decolonization.

KEYWORDS: Cellular Jail, Solitary Confinement, Anti-Colonialism, Political Prisoners, Knowledge Production, Panopticon.

INTRODUCTION

The Cellular Jail, located in Port Blair, Andaman Islands, was created as a conclusive measure to the problem of dealing with political unrest and revolutionary foment in colonial India by the British Raj. The architectural and administrative structure of the prison was planned in the end of the 19th century and built in 1906; it clearly was created as a regime of complete isolation and supervision. This is a penitentiary method commonly known as the Kala Pani that was meant to act as a deterrent and a place where neutralization of the especially dangerous prisoners who could threaten the stability of the imperial rule was to be done (Vaidik, 2010; Murthy, n.d.). The Cellular Jail was constructed according to the concept of solitary confinement in contrast with the more community-based setting of mainland Indian jails, where every prisoner was equipped with his or her own cell to help avoid the spread of revolutionary ideologies (Parida, n.d.; Sarangi et al., 2023).

The shift in more disciplined, psychological modes of control over physical punishment can be said to be representative of the evolution of colonial penal policy as a whole. However, as the Cellular Jail experience suggests, there is much irony in the nature of the fact that these disciplinary technologies were meant to atomize and demoralize but instead, provided the impetus to what can be termed as a more resilient and radically radicalized anti-colonial thought (Srivastava, 2003). In depriving prisoners of the distractions of immediate social and political life on the mainland, solitary confinement was the cause of their indulging in constant self-examination. It was combined with the severe conditions of the penal colony and a significant number of inmates started to re-evaluate their ideological positions and improve their strategies of opposition (Savarkar, n.d.; Arnold, n.d.).

The tendency toward more psychologically based methods of control, or the absence of physical punishment, is symptomatic of the transformation of the colonial penal policy in general. But, as the Cellular Jail experience reveals, all this generates a massive irony in the fact that despite the fact that such disciplinary technologies are designed to atomize and demoralize, in reality, they have given the impetus to what can be called the more resilient and radically radicalized anti-colonial thinking (Srivastava, 2003). Isolated confinement deprived prisoners of those distractions of physical life which are afforded by direct social and political life on the mainland, and caused them to amuse themselves with endless introspection of themselves. This was coupled with the inhuman environment of the penal settlement and a sizable proportion of inmates began reassess their ideological stand and polished their strategies of action (Savarkar, n.d.; Arnold, n.d.).

Historical Background

The history of the Andaman penal settlement can be traced to the post war period of 1857 Uprising, when the British rulers needed a safe and remote place to ship the mutineers and rebels to a distance that was not near their social and political networks. Kala Pani, or the crossing of the dark waters was also burdened with a certain socio-cultural implication, since it frequently meant that many Indians had lost their caste and social identity, and this added an additional sense of psychological fear to the physical exile (Vaidik, 2010). At the end of the 19th century, with the emergence of organized revolutionary forces in Bengal, Punjab, and Maharashtra, the colonial state had even more stringent methods of control in its demands. The Cellular Jail (1896-1906) was the endpoint of this endeavor because it shifted the previous semi-open barracks of the early settlement to an extremely organized carceral space (Murthy, n.d.).

The jail was designed according to the model of panopticon yet historians have observed that the jail was modified to local administrative logics (Priya, n.d.). It was comprised of seven wings that emanated around a main watch tower and enabled a few guards being able to patrol hundreds of cells without detection. The principle that ruled was the Auburn system of solitary confinement: the prisoners were to work in their cells all day and rest in them at night with the minimum amount of interaction (Murthy, n.d.). This design was clearly meant to segregate convicts without interacting with another, hence avoiding the collective organization that plagued other experiments of penal regimens (Parida, n.d.).

The prisoners in the Cellular Jail were categorized by the colonial government as an ordinary inmate and a political (or seditionist) one. They were particularly targeted at the leaders such as V. D. Savarkar, Barindra Kumar Ghosh and then a host of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) leaders. They were often left with the guardians who were encouraged to maintain a hostile and alienating atmosphere (Sarangi et al., 2023). The methods were the separation by crime, caste, and religion and placing political prisoners in the worst forms of work like the so-called oil mill (kolhu), where they were forced to extract coconut and mustard oil quantities under the threat of physical punishment (Sarangi et al., 2023; Srivastava, 2003).

Regardless of such attempts at preserving the imperial control with distance and separation, the Cellular Jail turned out to be a globally known location of colonial oppression. The triple isolation, the isolation off the mainland, segregation with ordinary convicts, and internal solitary confinement, was to restrict political organizing, but it also produced a special crucible of the creation of a special carceral identity. This therefore turned the Andamans into a hub in the British imperial system of penalizing, which aimed to support the administrative and scientific imaginary of the colonial state and at the same time give life to the very opposition the system was meant to eliminate (Anderson, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic interest in the Cellular Jail and the colonial carcerality in India has passed through a number of phases. The early literature tended to be more heroic in nature with the stories of freedom fighters being told through memoirs and biographies where the atrocities of the "Kala Pani" are being recorded. More recently though, the prison has been the subject of application of theoretical frameworks by historians and social scientists to comprehend the prison as a place of institutionalized power and resistance. The first impact in this respect is the activity of Michel Foucault, especially his notions of disciplinary power and panopticon. Other scholars like Priya have been provincializing the panopticon, with claims suggesting that though the design of the Cellular Jail was based on Foucaults models of surveillance, local colonial administrative demands and the particular aim of eliminating any insurgency activity by Indians motivated the functioning of the Cellular Jail (Priya, n.d.). According to Foucault, the prison is a productive space of power, which does not only punish, but also creates knowledge about the people it controls (Alexander, 2019). The legal regime created by the colonialism in India gave rise to modes of criminality and sedition which were to be dealt with in the carceral space. The Cellular Jail was a node whereby the state knowledge regarding the social order and the colonial subjects were created and argued out in prisons (Dube et al., 2015). This view ends the emphasis on the jail as a setting of captivity to a place of biopolitics that is the control and monitoring of the body in order to perpetuate imperial domination (Bhattacharya, 2009; Anderson, 2018). A second critical literature examines the prison as a place of generation of counter-knowledge. This paper focuses on how political prisoners who were residing in various colonial environments transformed their confinement into a period of active learning and writing. The comparative analyses of H-Blocks in Northern Ireland and Robben Island in South Africa can also prove helpful. A case in point is that according to Buntman (2003), the incarcerated ANC leaders transformed the prison into a sort of a university where they used the time to learn and teach other people about political theory and political strategy. Similarly, the H-Blocks turned into the place of the protracted political contest and the change in the common debate on rights and status (McCann, 2021). More formal asseverances of such a formal system of a university are weaker, but memoirs of prisoners like V. D. Savarkar and Barindra Kumar Ghosh are explicit records of a similar system of intellectual activity and the exchange of ideas in secret (Savarkar, n.d.; Saiwa, n.d.). Besides, the field of research of prison writing has become a highly significant one. Not only are memoirs, letters, even petitions of mercy, now being perused as books of anguish, but as books of policy in an existing political game. In their discussion about the mercy petitions of Andaman prisoners Sarangi et al. (2023) find out that the petitions were used as a way of communication with the mainland, and as a means of bargaining in the cruel carceral environment. These writings comprise an anthology of what I would term prison knowledge that helped the activists to transform their detention into a site of moral strength and of revolutionary authority (Nagel, 2008). This is why the Cellular Jail is constructed by the literature as a controversial epistemic site at which the rules of state discipline interacted with counter-knowledge generated by inmates, which later entered into the broader anti-colonial discourse (Desai, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative and comparative approach used in the research article, however, is a historical approach to the study of the relevance of solitary confinement in the development of anti-colonial ideas. The primary information of the paper is acquired due

to the systematic examination of two groups of sources: first-person reports (memoirs and petitions) and scholarly writings about the Andaman penal colony. It specifically focuses on those years between the construction of the Cellular Jail between 1906 and the great repatriations of political prisoners in the late 1930s.

It was done by initially examining the memoirs of some of the greatest political prisoners, such as *My Transportation for Life* by V. D. Savarkar and *The Tale of My Exile* by Barindra Kumar Ghosh. These accounts provide valuable interior perspectives regarding the mental impact of loneliness and the strategies of preserving the mind and reasoning. Besides, the paper contains a case study of the so-called mercy petitions filed by inmates. They are not considered as indicators of surrender alone, but rather, communicative actions (the interpretation, as Sarangi et al. (2023) do) that signify the well-developed bargaining process between the prisoner and the colonial power.

In order to present these main descriptions within a context, the research relies on theoretical concepts of the discipline of carceral studies, namely, Foucault theories of discipline and surveillance. They are applied to the architectural design of the Cellular Jail and the British Raj administrative policies. Other colonial and political prisons are used (Robben Island and the H-Blocks) to compare and identify common patterns of resistance and knowledge production in carceral settings.

The construction of these sources relied on the mapping of the experiences of solitary confinement that had been reported against the intellectual and political outputs of the prisoners. The study effectively develops an argument that solitary confinement is a productive process in developing anti-colonial consciousness by establishing associations between the isolated time and periods and creation of memoirs, poetry, and ideological transformations. The approach guarantees the fact that the results obtained are firmly based on the offered historical and scholarly corpus without any surmises regarding the motivation of the prisoners or their psychological conditions that are not back-up by the evidence.

Solitary Confinement as Psychological Experience

The most notable aspect of the Cellular Jail was that the prisoners there were completely secluded, a fact meant to create a deep sense of mental breakdown and reform via pain. The 698 cells were roughly 13.5 by 7 feet, and there was one high window which did not allow anyone to see the world and the rest of the inmates (Murthy, n.d.). This was an architectural isolation that was aggravated by a culture of silence and the complete deprivation of any form of intellectual stimulation; for the years, the prisoners were deprived of books, newspapers, or writing materials (Sarangi et al., 2023).

Psychological effects of such an environment were high. Table 1 is a summary of the major psychological stressor and its respective coping mechanism in the prisoners.

Table 1: Psychological Stressors and Coping Mechanisms in Cellular Jail

Stressor Category	Specific Conditions	Psychological Effect	Coping/Resistance Mechanism
Sensory Deprivation	Total silence, limited cell view, lack of intellectual material	Breakdown of time perception, hallucinations, chronic rumination	Memorizing poetry, "writing" on walls with thorns, mental prayer

Physical Degradation	Hard labor (oil mill), starvation, floggings	Trauma, depression, sense of worthlessness, physical exhaustion	Hunger strikes (assertion of agency over body), clandestine communication
Identity Erasure	Removal from mainland, loss of caste (Kala Pani), classification as "seditionist"	Identity crisis, alienation, loss of social self	Writing memoirs/letters, maintaining ideological purity, group rituals in infirmary
Total Surveillance	Panopticon design, hidden guards, lack of privacy	Paranoia, chronic anxiety, behavioral modification	"Thump-talk" through walls, development of coded languages

Source: Synthesized from Murthy (n.d.), Sarangi et al. (2023), and Vaidik (2010).

This condition brought about psychological impacts that led to high rates of sickness, insanity and suicide (Qayum, n.d.; Srivastava, 2003). This was a psychological warfare that involved the forced labor in the so-called oil mill. A lot of the political prisoners belonged to the educated and middle-class background and were forced to perform manual labor which was physically strenuous and embarrassing. This failure to meet the day-daily requirements resulted in flogging the people, standing handcuffs, and other isolation in the so-called punishment cells (Sarangi et al., 2023; Srivastava, 2003).

But, the lone imprisonment was a part also that launched an operation of vehement, coercive self-examination. Due to the absence of external social interaction, the cell space was the residence of the sole companion of the self. Arnold (n.d.) scrutinizes this connection that exists between the self and the cell and believes that political prisoners were forcibly isolated and as a result, ended up being perpetually ruminated. Despite this, as per the plans of the colonial authorities should lead to regret and renouncement of the revolutionary action, as it did with some of the words used in mercy petitions, more often than not, it worked back against them (Sarangi et al., 2023). The cell remained to the majority of the people a place where they had to doubt their ideological commitments and the nature of the colonial state who had taken them to prison.

Formation of Anti-Colonial Consciousness

That the subjective pain of individuals is transformed into a collective anti-colonial awareness within the Cellular jail, is testimonial to the power of political thought in the most extreme despair. Despite the architecture and administration efforts to keep the atomization of the prisoners, the circumstances of their imprisonment formed a shared identity due to the struggle against the British imperialism. In table 2, the significance of the intellectual products and the procedures of ideological transformation that occurred in prison have been described as the most significant ones.

Table 2: Ideological Shifts and Key Intellectual Outputs of Inmates

Prisoner/Inmate Group	Primary Intellectual Output	Ideological Evolution	Impact on Freedom Movement
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V. D. Savarkar	<i>My Transportation for Life</i> , poetry on walls	Crystallization of Hindutva and Cultural Nationalism	Provided a foundational text for right-wing nationalist thought
Barindra Kumar Ghosh	<i>The Tale of My Exile</i>	From active militancy to intense spiritual and political reflection	Reframed the "terrorist" as a political martyr/intellectual
HSRA Group (1930s)	Hunger strike manifests, secret newsletters	Radicalization; shift toward Marxist and Socialist revolutionary thought	Internationalized the struggle through reports of brutality
Anonymous Inmates	Wall poetry, oral testimonies	Collective identity as "Kala Pani" survivors	Created a shared mythology of sacrifice in the public mind

Source: Synthesized from Saiwa (n.d.), Hasan (2016), and Srivastava (2003).

Isolated imprisonment contributed to this evolution in an ironic manner. Isolation gave time of profound ideological thought by eliminating the immediate tactical issues of active revolutionary work on the mainland. V. The stay of D. Savarkar in the Andamans, in particular, is commonly associated with the refinement of his theories about Hindutva and Indian nationalism, which took place over several years of imposed self-reflection and self-study (Hasan, 2016; Kelley-Swift, 2015). To other inmates, the harshness of the punishment system only served to do away with the few illusions remaining concerning the civilizing role of the British Raj and solidified an anti-colonial position further radicalized (Qayum, n.d.).

Prison as a Space of Knowledge Production

As the Cellular Jail was regarded by the colonial state as the place of repression of the so-called seditious ideas, prisoners turned it into the lively territory of the knowledge production. This was to change by the establishment of memoirs, the tactical application of petitions and the informal way of sharing political education. This became known as the prison turning it into what has been referred to in other environments as a prison university whereby the deficiency of formal resources was filled by intellectual discipline and mass memory.

Perhaps the most lasting product of this knowledge production is the production of memoirs. The writings like *The Tale of My Exile* by Barindra Kumar Ghosh and *My Transportation for Life* by Savarkar gave a detailed account of a rhetoric of resistance that documented the actual physical reality of the jail and intellectual change of the inmates (Saiwa, n.d.; Savarkar, n.d.). These pieces, which were usually published once the captives had been released or returned to their native land, formed the basis of the nationalist movement, and enabled the Andaman experience to take the shape of a heroic sacrifice and a moral triumph (Murthy, n.d.). They gave a reversed story in which the location of imperial punishment became a place of national origin (Sarangi et al., 2023). Even official administrative records, including petitions of mercy and grievances, were mechanisms of producing knowledge. According to Sarangi et al. (2023), with the help of these petitions, prisoners were able to define their political identities and could enjoy a discussion with the

state, even in the name of remorse. In the colonial archives we are finding these documents, which now provide us with a record of the intellectual and political negotiations, which were conducted in the cells. They show how the prisoners were able to use the state administrative mechanisms that it had created to enforce their rights and status.

DISCUSSION

The Cellular Jail provides an interesting case study of the boundaries of carceral discipline within a colonial environment. Comparing it to other examples of political imprisonment worldwide, there is a very noticeable pattern: the effort to employ isolation as a political neutralizing instrument often does not work since it does not take into account productivity of the carceral space. In Table 3, the metrics of the Cellular Jail are compared to other famous political jails.

Table 3: Comparative Carceral Frameworks: Cellular Jail, Robben Island, and H-Blocks

Prison Site	Dominant Disciplinary Logic	Prisoner Resistance Strategy	Intellectual Outcome
Cellular Jail (India)	Absolute solitary isolation, sensory deprivation, grueling manual labor	Hunger strikes, clandestine communication, wall poetry	Formation of refined anti-colonial thought and survival memoirs
Robben Island (S. Africa)	Racialized segregation, removal of leadership, forced manual labor	Informal education programs, "University of Robben Island"	Political pedagogy; training for post-apartheid governance
H-Blocks (Ireland)	Denial of political status, uniform requirements, surveillance	"Blanket" and "Dirty" strikes, hunger strikes (1981)	Global visibility of the struggle; reshaping debate on status

Source: Based on McCann (2021), Buntman (2003), and Sarangi et al. (2023).

The other main aspect that has been discussed concerns the adaptation of the panopticon. Although Foucault model focuses on internalization of the gaze and formation of the so-called docile bodies, the prisoners of the Cellular Jail proved to be incredibly resistant to the internalization. They did not turn docile, but rather they turned into organic intellectuals who found in the very framework of power that enslaved them to examine it (Nagel, 2008). This provincialized Foucault implies that in the context of colonies, the prison was not so much about rehabilitation but a prolonged struggle of independence of the mind and body of the prisoner (Priya, n.d.).

Also, one cannot overestimate the role of the mainland. The anti-colonial ideology that was formed within the Cellular Jail did not come into the world in a vacuum; it was constantly nourished by and in turn nourished by the general movement in India. It can be seen that the jail was an inherent feature of the national political arena due to the campaigns of repatriation, as well as the popular uproar surrounding the hunger strikes of 1933. The Kala Pani acted as a moral cog that was employed by the activists in the mainland to question the legitimacy of the British rule (Across the Black Water, 2022; Srivastava, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The Cellular Jail was to be the ultimate place of colonial silence, a place where the dissidents of the Indian nation would cleanse their revolutionary zeal in the Cellular Jail. Nevertheless, the process of solitary confinement institutionalization did not achieve its most important goal to ruin the spirit of the political prisoners. Rather, the isolation that was offered by the architecture and psychology offered the peculiar conditions of a deep and sophisticated development of anti-colonial thought. The prisoners turned the carceral space into an intellectual and political factory through the mental torture of the oil mill, the deliberate exploitation of hunger strikes and memoirs, and silence.

The Cellular Jail was to be the last refuge of colonial silence, at which the Kala Pani would assist in the suppression of the revolutionary fire of the dissatisfied Indians. However, the institution of solitary confinement failed in its primary mission that is to ruin the spirit of the political prisoner. Instead, the segregation of architecture and psychology provided the conditions of a unique and a superb surge of anti-colonial thought. The prisoners had transformed the carceral space into a production site of intellectual and political production with the physical suffering of the oil mill, the intellectual torture of silence and the use of hunger strikes and memoirs as a tactic.

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