

Japanese Occupation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Impact on Common Islanders

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Abstract

The focus of this research is on the effects of Japanese occupation (1942-1945) on the common islanders of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands who suffered due to the oppression, forced labour, violence and terrible conditions of that time. The Japanese occupation led to the diversion of agricultural resources for military deployment resulting in food deficits and famine on the Islands. Repressive measures, forced resettlement and economic oppression were the lot of both the local tribes and settlers. Whole ethnic groups, especially indigenous people, were recruited for labour, broke their way of life and were exiled from their homes. Furthermore, Japanese forces declared martial law and ruled the territory through terror, people's executions, and collective punishments. Even though Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) officially gained control of the islands in 1943, it was the Japanese who continued to exercise the real power and the position of the INA was mostly decorative. The suffering experienced by the islanders was too deep and it affected their lives both physically and mentally, even the reconstruction numb post-war period saw no development in the social status of these people. This paper shall attempt to place the hitherto neglected pain of the islanders within the broader framework of the World War II and its repercussions on Asia.

Keywords: Andaman, Japanese, INA

Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, situated strategically in the Bay of Bengal, held considerable importance throughout World War II. The period when Japanese forces occupied the islands from 1942 to 1945 was a somber chapter in their history, marked by suppression, brutality, economic decline, and immense human pain. Though the period is commonly associated with its strategic and military significance, it is crucial to emphasize the profound effect that this occupation had on the local inhabitants of the island, encompassing both indigenous tribes and settlers from the Indian mainland.

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the economic, social, and cultural challenges experienced by the islanders throughout the occupation. It also sheds light on the political background, specifically focusing on the contribution of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA), and the enduring impact after the war that influenced the region.

Historical Context of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

British Colonial Rule and the Penal Colony

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands were a British colony that served mostly as a prison colony prior to Japanese annexation. In the middle of the 19th century, the British built the notorious Cellular Jail in

Port Blair to hold Indian political prisoners, many of whom were freedom fighters opposing British colonial control. The prison came to represent the cruelty and oppression of the British (Bose, 2017).

The islands had tiny communities of inhabitants who farmed crops, fished, and traded with the mainland in addition to serving as a prison town. The indigenous tribes, such as the Nicobarese, Onge, and Jarwa, who lived in relative isolation from colonial civilization, coexisted with these settlers.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands were strategically important to the British. The islands were useful as a naval station and an outpost for British military forces since they were situated along important water routes between India and Southeast Asia. But because of their strategic significance, the islands were also targeted by the Japanese during World War II as they looked to increase their dominance over the Indian Ocean.

Japanese Invasion and Initial Occupation

In March 1942, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were attacked by the Japanese Imperial Army. The British forces swiftly withdrew because they were ill-prepared for a protracted defense, which made it easy for the Japanese to seize power. This was the start of a three-year occupation during which the islanders were subject to martial law and military control (Ravindran, 2002).

The Japanese immediately began bolstering their position by building airstrips, naval installations, and bunkers after realizing that the islands would be a vital base for their military activities in the Indian Ocean. To help in these efforts, the local populace—both settlers and indigenous people—were coerced into working (Mukherjee, 1999).

Although the Indian National Army (INA), led by Subhas Chandra Bose, officially seized the islands in December 1943, the INA's impact was mostly symbolic. Bose's nationalist goal for a free India was reflected in his renaming of the islands "Shaheed" (Martyr) and "Swaraj" (Self-Rule). Nonetheless, the Japanese military continued to control the occupation and govern the islands, retaining actual power (Habib, 2002).

Economic Impact on the Islanders

Pre-War Economic Conditions

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands' economy was predominantly based on agriculture prior to Japanese rule. Rice, coconut, and betel nut were among the subsistence crops grown by mainland Indian settlers. Forestry and fishing were significant sources of income as well. Although local food production was augmented by commerce with the mainland, the islands were comparatively self-sufficient.

Disruption of Local Economy

The economy of the islands was seriously damaged by the Japanese occupation. The local people was left to fend for itself after the Japanese military took over agricultural resources to feed their troops. Because the Japanese diverted the majority of agricultural production to assist their military efforts, food shortages became widespread. The islanders, who were already having difficulty meeting their basic necessities as a result of the collapse of trade with the Indian mainland, were severely strained by this (Venkatesan, 2005).

The Japanese also imposed forced labour on the local population. Many islanders were conscripted to build airstrips, naval facilities, and fortifications under harsh conditions, receiving little to no compensation for their labour. Due to their forced relocation from their ancestral territories to places under Japanese military authority, indigenous tribes were disproportionately impacted by these practices (Pandit, 2004).

Famine and Starvation

The massive starvation that engulfed the islands was one of the most catastrophic effects of the Japanese rule. The islanders lacked enough food because agricultural output was diverted to satisfy the demands of the Japanese troops. Due to the islands' isolation from trade with the Indian mainland, the crisis was made worse by the collapse of both domestic and international supply lines.

Many islanders thus suffered from severe famine and malnutrition. In rural places, where access to food was even more restricted, the situation was more terrible. Particularly at risk were indigenous populations, whose customary hunting and gathering practices had been disturbed. Due to substandard living circumstances and a shortage of medical resources, thousands of people perished from starvation, while others perished from illnesses like dysentery and malaria that spread quickly (Brown, 2001).

Social and Cultural Impact

Impact on Indigenous Tribes

For a long time, the native populations of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands continued to live according to their traditional customs, which included subsistence farming, fishing, hunting, and gathering. However, their communities were severely disrupted by the Japanese occupation. The Japanese troops viewed the native population with distrust and animosity since they were ignorant of the intricate social dynamics of the islands. The lands that were acquired for military purposes resulted in the forced relocation of numerous tribes. Some ran farther into the jungles to avoid interaction with the occupiers, while others saw entire communities forced into labour (Mukherjee, 2001).

The indigenous communities suffered long-term effects from this forcible relocation. Many tribes lost access to the lands and resources that had provided them with generations of sustenance, and their social systems were upended. These populations were left vulnerable by the Japanese occupation, and even after the war ended, they were still marginalized (Ravindran, 2002).

Indian Settlers and Political Prisoners

Significant difficulties were also faced by the settler population during the Japanese occupation, which had increased over time as Indian migrants came to the islands to work as labourers or traders. Many of these settlers were the offspring of British prisoners who had been detained in the Cellular Jail for their participation in the Indian independence movement, while others were political prisoners who had been transported to the islands.

These settlers were distrusted by the Japanese, especially due to their connections to the British colonial government. Numerous settlers faced severe penalties, such as incarceration, torture, and execution, after being charged with working with the British. To make matters worse, the Japanese also persecuted political prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned for their anti-colonial actions (Habib, 2002).

Japanese Atrocities and Repression

There was a great deal of violence and repression during the Japanese rule of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Japanese military had a tight grip on the populace, repressing dissent with brutality and terror. Torture and public killings were among the harsh penalties frequently meted out to islanders suspected of resistance or treason (Bose, 2017).

To instil fear in the local populace, collective punishment was frequently employed. Sometimes, in retaliation for alleged acts of sabotage or non-cooperation with the Japanese authority, entire villages were razed. Because they saw indigenous groups as possible challenges to their authority over the

islands, the Japanese soldiers also targeted them. Numerous native people were put to death or compelled to escape into the woods, where they fought for their lives (Brown, 2001).

The occupation had a significant psychological effect. An environment of fear and uncertainty was brought about by the on-going threat of violence as well as the sufferings of forced labour and starvation. The horror of this time left survivors with long-lasting wounds, and many islanders lived in continual fear of retaliation (Venkatesan, 2005).

Political Impact: INA and Azad Hind

The participation of Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army (INA) was one of the most important political events that occurred under the Japanese occupation. Bose, a well-known figure in the Indian independence struggle, aimed to use the Axis powers to topple British authority in India. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which Bose called the "Shaheed" and "Swaraj" Islands to represent the INA's vision of a free India, were nominally given to the INA by the Japanese in late 1943 (Habib, 2002).

But the INA's authority over the islands was mostly figurative. The INA lacked the men and resources necessary to rule successfully, and the Japanese military continued to hold actual control. Although some hailed Bose's arrival to the islands as a symbol of India's imminent independence, the INA failed to address the harsh practices of the Japanese troops or lessen the suffering of the local populace (Mukherjee, 1999).

The involvement of the INA did not significantly improve the lot of the common islanders. Many were stuck between the INA's symbolic leadership, which provided little genuine respite from the day-to-day miseries of occupation, and the repressive Japanese administration (Pandit, 2004).

End of Occupation and Post-War Legacy

After Japan's surrender in World War II, the Japanese occupation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands ended in August 1945. Trials for war crimes committed by Japanese military officers during the occupation were held, and British forces swiftly reoccupied the islands. Mass killings and forced starvation of local populations were among the atrocities for which several Japanese officers were found guilty (Bose, 2017).

Post-War Reconstruction

The British colonial government started the gradual process of restoring the islands' infrastructure and boosting the local economy after the occupation. However, the occupation caused a great deal of damage, and the islands took years to recover. Reclaiming their territories and starting over presented on-going difficulties for many islanders, especially indigenous groups (Ravindran, 2002).

The social fabric of the islands was severely damaged as a result of the Japanese occupation. The collective memory of the islands was influenced by the trauma endured by the survivors of the occupation, both settlers and indigenous people. The psychological and emotional wounds from the brutality, persecution, and famine that they experienced were still felt by many of the islanders who survived this time (Venkatesan, 2005).

Conclusion

For the average islander, the Japanese occupation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands between 1942 and 1945 was a time of trauma and change. They suffered from severe repression and violence, their customary ways of life were upended, and they experienced widespread economic suffering as a result

of the occupation. The forced relocation, labour, and marginalization that these indigenous tribes endured throughout this period had a profound impact on them.

It is important to recognize the significant effects the Japanese occupation had on the islanders themselves, even though it is most frequently remembered for its strategic and geopolitical significance during World War II. Their suffering is a significant aspect of the history of colonialism and conflict in Asia, although frequently being obscured by more expansive historical narratives. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands' identity and memory are still shaped by the Japanese occupation, which serves as a reminder of the islanders' tenacity in the face of extreme hardship.

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