



WORLD WAR II AND BAY ISLANDS: JAPANESE HOLOCAUST

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Abstract:

The Second World War was considered as the deadliest war that the humanity had ever witnessed. In a state of complete war, all major countries which took part in the war, threw their industrial and scientific capabilities behind the war. Both civil and military resources were extensively used by all the participants.

KEY WORDS:

World War II , Bay Islands , Japanese Holocaust , industrial and scientific capabilities .

INTRODUCTION:

The Empire of Japan, which fought the war along with Axis powers of Germany and Italy, aimed to dominate Asia and the Pacific regions. India as a colony of the British had to take part in the war because its metropolis was a part of Allied powers who claimed themselves as the champions of saving democracy from the arbitrary and autocratic policies of Axis powers. In the beginning of the war, the position of the Allies was critical in Europe. In the east, Japan under General Tojo was preparing extensively for the war. In December 1941, the surprise attack of Japanese planes on the American naval bases at Pearl Harbour brought Japan and USA into the war. In the beginning of the war, Japan, like her allies also gained early success. With the sinking of two British warships, 'Repulse' and 'Prince of Wales' in the far-eastern seas in December 1941 and the conquest of Burma in the early months of 1942, security of British possessions in India was threatened by the Japanese¹.

The war in Europe ended with an invasion of Germany by the Western allies along with Soviet Union culminating in the capture of Berlin by Soviet and Polish troops and the subsequent German unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945. Following the dropping of atom bombs by the USA on Japan, Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945. Though Japan surrendered in August 1945, she evacuated Andaman Islands only on 9 October 1945 after British Indian forces rounded up the islands². Japanese tried to control these islands as much as possible due to its strategic importance.

Use of advanced military technology of the time, large scale death of civilian population and the Holocaust marked the major aspects of the World War II. Prior to and during the war, Nazis under Adolf Hitler, carried out a systematic genocide and were responsible for the Holocaust that killed millions of people in Europe. But, was this Holocaust confined to only Europe? What happened to millions of people in Asia particularly in China and other Southeast Asian countries? There are many neglected and unnoticed genocides and Holocausts that were not given much importance in the history, may be on account of the geographical size of the place. One such was, the Andaman Islands, where Japanese carried out brutal killings.

In fact, there were hardly any official records to explore and explain Japanese tyranny in the Bay Islands. I have mainly relied upon oral records of the people³ and Census reports. The English and the Japanese were fully conscious of the strategic importance of the islands of Andaman and Nicobar. In a

meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 31 January 1942, the British officers discussed the situation. It was feared that besides the strategic position of these islands in the Bay of Bengal, the Japanese would benefit in many other ways. They could use the convicts for propaganda and fifth column activities. In fact, with the Japanese occupation of the islands the Government of India sent a circular to all provinces to be careful in preventing the possibilities of the use of convicts of Andamans for fifth column activities by sending them to India⁴. It means, the British well presumed about the occupation of these islands by the Japanese. It was therefore decided in the above meeting to evacuate convicts to India in the order of Military convicts and other convicts. There were about 180 Military convicts of Sikh Squadron confined in Cellular jail⁵. On the other hand, the Japanese were planning to capture these islands in the month of February 1942. Accordingly, Port Blair and the surrounding areas were raided three times from 14 to 16 February and subsequently, in the next few weeks a number of Japanese planes flew over the islands for the purpose of reconnaissance⁶.

Finally on the night of 23 March 1942, the Japanese ships attacked the islands of Ross and Chatham. The British did not retaliate; however, telegraph office and the wireless station of Port Blair were blown up by the British. In the morning, the Japanese troops under Colonel Bucho landed in Port Blair and Bucho was appointed as civil governor of the islands. The British Chief Commissioner and other Europeans were made prisoners and convicts in Cellular jail were released⁷. Meanwhile, the British authorities shifted all offices, officers and their families from Ross Island to Aberdeen. Arrangements were made to evacuate all Europeans and other civilians who desired to leave the islands. C.E. Waterfall, the Chief Commissioner and Dr. Diwan Singh Kalepani, a doctor decided to stay on. The ship carrying people left Port Blair on 13 March 1942 for Madras. But unfortunately, on its return voyage to carry back remaining people, the ship was sunk by a Japanese U-boat⁸. As a result, many British officials, Indian subordinate officials and local born people had to stay back and were captured by the Japanese forces. On the third day of the arrival, the Japanese addressed a general meeting in which Col Bucho and Dr Diwan Singh spoke. In his speech, Dr Diwan Singh retained the promise to help the Indians in their fight against the British for freedom and at the same time warned the gathering that freedom with others' help was meaningless and, therefore, they should be ready to sacrifice all for the freedom of their country⁹. This speech perhaps made the Japanese suspect Dr Diwan Singh and obviously they could not have appreciated it. But at the same time, the Japanese realized that Diwan Singh was a man of substance and commanded the respect of the citizens of Port Blair; so he was promoted to the rank of chief medical officer and also appointed as chairman of the Peace Committee with ten members¹⁰.

For a short period the Japanese were quite friendly to the islanders and were busy in occupying places of strategic importance and consolidating fortifications left behind by the British¹¹. But soon the Japanese started showing their original colours. The following infamous incident that took place near a mosque in Aberdeen Bazar was clear evidence of the beginning of the Japanese brutality. A few Japanese soldiers, in a state of inebriation, started stamping on the ground near the mosque in Aberdeen thus raising dust and frightening chickens which scampered into the houses nearby. The Japanese soldiers followed them inside the houses and started taking liberties with the women, to which the latter objected. A youngster named Mohammed Nasim, incensed at this insult, took out an air-gun and fired at them. The soldiers fled, but returned soon after with many more and shot Mohammed Nasim dead. Thus, Nasim became the first victim of the Japanese brutality¹². It created a stir in the town and the incident was followed by several other acts of misbehaviour on the part of the Japanese soldiers. As chairman of Peace committee, Dr Diwan Singh protested against this incident. Subsequently another incident took place in which, the ex deputy-Commissioner, Maj AJ Bird was falsely charged with espionage at the behest of an ex-convict officer Bagchi who was imprisoned for six months by Bird once, for accepting a bribe. Bird was brought handcuffed to Aberdeen Maidan¹³, where he was mercilessly tortured before his head was severed with one stroke by a Japanese officer¹⁴. In fact, some Indians contributed in polluting the minds of the Japanese for their vested interests. For example Dr Rama Nand, a junior colleague of Dr Diwan Singh who aspired to be a Chief Medical Officer tried to poison the minds of the Japanese. Similarly, Bagchi, the above mentioned ex-convict officer, even went to the extent of supplying 'comfort girls' to the Japanese forces in order to win their favour¹⁵. The Japanese, with each day that passed, were establishing their hold ever more firmly over the islands. In May 1942, Gunseisho, Military administration was established and major administrative aspects like jail, police, Supply office, School and Hospitals were brought under Gunseisho¹⁶. As the civil officers of this new organization did not arrive till February 1943, the Japanese continued to pay lip service to the work of the Peace Committee. At the same time the Japanese administration was making itself unpopular with activities like raping young girls with help of opportunists like Bagchi. And on the other hand, they still wanted to impress the Indians overseas in Southeast Asia by posing as champions in the cause of Indian freedom. So they started establishing the Indian Independence League in various countries

in Southeast Asia, all of which were by now, under Japanese occupation. One such was established in Andamans also¹⁷.

In the meantime, the situation was getting worse for the Japanese as well as people of the Island. This was on account of shortage of food supplies and other essential commodities. Prices had gone up; for example, the cost of an egg went upto Rs.3. Thus one can imagine the plight of common people. The fact of the matter was that the Allied blockade was becoming so stringent that the Japanese were finding it almost impossible to bring any consumer goods into the islands. What made the situation worse was the fact that the Allied bombing of the islands by air and sea was becoming quite frequent¹⁸. The Japanese suspected espionage and many people were arrested indiscriminately on charges of spying and put in Cellular Jail, which was protested by Dr Diwan Singh. He also refused to vacate the Gurudwara building to accommodate imported 'comfort girls' for the Japanese. Eventually, Dr Diwan Singh, with help of those who wanted to replace him, was also implicated on the charges of spying and was subjected to third degree torture and he subsequently died in the Cellular jail¹⁹.

Another brutal act that the Japanese carried out was, 'the Humphreyganj incident'. In November 1943, about 90 people who were arrested and placed in Cellular jail on the charges of espionage were taken to a place called Humphreyganj which is about 12 km from Port Blair. These 'accused' were lined up and shot by the Japanese firing squad²⁰. This unfortunate incident happened just a month prior to the arrival of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose to the islands to 'formally' take over the islands. The graves of the people killed in Humphreyganj stand today as a silent witness to that horrible act of the Japanese. The Japanese atrocities continued even after the islands were 'handed over' to Netaji. The Japanese holocaust was twin aimed; if one was on account of espionage, then the other was to get rid of old and infirm people who were not able to work²¹. The second objective was carried out due to the high scarcity of essential commodities in the islands, as a result of allied blockade. In July 1944, about 600-700 prisoners were brought out of the Cellular jail, about 300 were asked to board a ship and rest were loaded in two boats. The people who were on the boats were taken near the Havelock island (about 28 kms from Port Blair), where they were drowned in the sea. Only two could survive to tell the story. It was presumed that the people who were taken on a ship were also drowned at some other place²². Similarly, just two days before the surrender of the Japanese to the allied forces, they carried out an operation called 'Round Up'. About 300, men, women and children were kept in huts under strict watch without any amenities. Subsequently, they were taken to an island called 'Tarmugli', where they were all lined up and shot. Nobody could survive²³.

On 7 October 1945, under Brigadier A J Salmon, the islands were re occupied by the British²⁴. These are a very few atrocities that the Japanese carried. Perhaps many more such might have gone out of memories of the people or no witnesses survived to tell what happened. This holocaust was no lesser than what Nazis carried out in Germany. Despite such a holocaust, only naval commander and chief of the police were hanged for mass killing of the people²⁵. This was the saddest period for the people of Andaman. Though it was a penal settlement under the British, the settlers experienced large scale atrocities and killings only during the Japanese occupation of these islands.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1.Mathur, L.P, History of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Sterling Publications, New Delhi, 1968. P.245.
- 2.Mathur, L.P, op.cit, p.255.
- 3.These people, though very young during Japanese occupation, were contemporary witness for the atrocities that Japanese forces carried out in these tiny Islands. I was told Japanese destroyed all records while leaving the Islands during the process of the British reoccupation.
- 4.Home Department File.No.144/42.
- 5.Kirby S. Woodburn, History of the Second World War, In the War against Japan, Vol.IV,p.86.
- 6.ibid.
- 7.Chak, B.L, Green Island in the Sea, Delhi, 1967, p.37.
- 8.Singh, Iqbal N, The Andaman Story, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1979. p.236.
- 9.Singh, Iqbal N, op.cit, p.238.
- 10.ibid.
- 11.Japanese made as many as two hundred bunkers during their stay in the islands. One such is maintained by Indian Navy on the Ross Island. Similarly many could be seen in the city of Port Blair.
- 12.Interviewed Shri Gauri Shankar Pandey of Port Blair on 10 March 2013.
- 13.Aberdeen Maidan is now known as Netaji Stadium, where Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose hoisted Tri colour Flag for the first time in the Islands.
- 14.Singh, Iqbal N, op.cit, p.241.

15. Recorded from an eye witness of that time.
16. Mathur, L.P, op.cit, p.248.
17. ibid.
18. Singh, Iqbal N, op.cit, p.244.
19. ibid.pp.246-247.
20. Mathur, L.P, op.cit, p.251.
21. Census Report, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, 1951, p.10.
22. Gauri Shankar Pandey, op.cit.
23. ibid.
24. Administration Report of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, 1945-46, pp.1-31.
25. Ibid.