



Freedom Fighters or Criminals? Postcolonial Subjectivities in the Andaman Islands, South-East India

This article looks at how postcolonial subjectivities are related to the Indian freedom struggle and the transportation of criminal convicts to the Andaman Islands. It focuses on articulations of historically produced subject-positions in political negotiations of locality.

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Upon my first arrival in the Andaman Islands in 2001, I had a certain imagination of a tropical island space in my mind. I expected picturesque sandy beaches, clear water and 'wild' jungles and, eventually, 'wild savages', too.¹ But disembarkation in the harbour of Port Blair after a three day journey by ship somehow disappointed my urgent and immediate curiosity to explore 'untouched nature'. Port Blair was just another town, not what I expected to be among a group of islands in the middle of the Bay of Bengal. The journey over more than thousand kilometres by sea from the Indian mainland towards Burma and Thailand had nurtured the sincere and somewhat naïve desire to transcend the frontier of the 'civilised' world towards an unknown destination waiting to be explored by me. I was astonished to find quite a well-maintained and organised townlet spreading over several hills along the rocky coastline of South Andaman. Apparently, a lot of funds from the Indian central government in New Delhi were flowing into these islands, helping to create a comparatively well-off island society. Soon I found out why.

Taking a walk through the representative part of Port Blair, the Marina Park, I came across a lot of monuments that are supposed to reiterate the significance of this place for the Indian motherland – among them not only a statue of the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore, but also tanks and a missile, symbolizing the strength of the Indian Defence forces deployed in this strategically important chain of islands. Overlooking the small valley, in which the Marina Park is located, a giant map on a gentle gradient depicted the

geographical relief of India. The map included not only all the Indian states but also, in considerable distance from the subcontinent, a proportionately oversized version of the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.² Its caption conveys the central message for the islanders and the visitors: "I love my India".

I found some more examples of the nationalist transformation of public space. Right next to the map, there is a sports complex called Netaji Stadium, named after the Bengali nationalist 'Netaji' Subhash Chandra Bose. A huge statue in Marina Park, depicting him in uniform with extended arm and index finger, is reminiscent of similar archaic and martial monuments of 'great' 20th century leaders all over the world. In hegemonic nationalist accounts, the history of the Andamans, which were part of the British Empire, is predominantly memorized as an important location of the Indian freedom struggle, in which Netaji, as an icon of anti-colonial resistance, became inextricably entangled.³ Netaji's political involvement in the island history becomes evident to the outsider by visiting the Cellular Jail, where he once held a speech to hail the Andamans as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. Situated on a hillock above the Marina Park, the

²In this paper, I will not focus on the Nicobar Islands, which, together with the Andamans, form a Union Territory of the Indian nation-state.

³Bose headed the Singapore-based Indian National Army (INA) in anti-British war efforts along with the Axis Powers during WW II. Netaji's special historical relevance to the Andamans derives from his alliance with and support of Japanese forces against the Allied Forces in South-East Asia. Japan occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 1942, until they were reoccupied by the British after the Japanese capitulation in May 1945. Concurrently, in 1943, Japan allowed Bose to come to the Andamans and to install a 'Provisional Government of Free India'. However, executive powers of this 'puppet' government remained very limited due to Japanese aversion against handing over power (Mathur, 1984: 251).

¹Throughout the world, the Andaman Islands are known as being inhabited by some of the last groups of 'Noble Savages'. These indigenous hunter-gatherers have gained popularity in anthropological literature. The most famous of these scholarly works is Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's structure-functionalist classic *The Andaman Islanders* (1922).



Cellular Jail was built by the British in order to incarcerate political and criminal convicts from mainland India. Today, it is represented as the first and foremost national pilgrimage of the Andamans, in which anti-colonial nationalists suffered the hardships of imprisonment, torture and humiliation in *Kala Pani*⁴ in order to attain *swaraj* (independence) and *azadi* (liberation/ freedom).

But a glance at the historiography of the Andamans reveals that it had been a place for the deportation of convicts long before the Cellular Jail became functional in 1906 (Anderson, 2004; Sen, 2000; Vaidik, 2010). In the aftermath of the Mutiny/ Rebellion of 1857,⁵ the British had set up a penal settlement in the Andamans in order to colonize the islands by using convict labour. The majority of prisoners sent to the islands were criminal convicts and not anti-British rebels or revolutionaries (cf. Sen, 2000: VI; Vaidik, 2010: 58-9).

In several periods of ethnographic field work in the Andamans, conducted in the last five years, I was curious to know, if this obvious embedding of the island history within nationalist discourse could serve as a key to understand local forms of belonging. I soon found out that there is a political discourse about the question of locality. In this discourse, nationalism and patriotism are instrumentalized to demand recognition, particular rights and antecedence to claims for funds from the central government. The pre-independence population, the so called 'pre-42',⁶ play a prominent role

in this discourse. Considering their particular subject-positions as old inhabitants of the Andamans, I wondered how they might identify with a nationalist historiography that is centred on the Freedom Fighters in the Cellular Jail while it neglects the pre-42 community and the concomitant history of the penal settlement.

One of my pre-42 interlocutors once named the Andaman Islands "South-East India". This hitherto unused term points first and foremost to the geographical location of the archipelago in the middle of the Bay of Bengal.⁷ Moreover, locating the Andamans in South-East India carries an implicit message with it, closely intertwined in local self-perceptions of the Andamans as a place with a specific history. That history goes back till 1858, way before the incarceration of political prisoners in the Cellular Jail. It led to the emergence of a specific population, which is now distinctively Indian, but of mixed parentage from different parts of the Indian subcontinent and Burma. Furthermore, South-East India can also be interpreted as manifestation of a parochial desire: the old islanders want to get recognition by the Indian government for historical contributions of their ancestors to the anti-colonial struggle and the subsequent incorporation of the Andamans into the Indian nation-state. But in local political discourse, the pre-42 are also facing a lot of opposition from post-independence settler and migrant communities, who generally regard and depict them as 'criminals' due to their convict ancestors.

In this paper, I am going to analyse processes of subjectivation in the Andamans, which led to the discursive production of 'Freedom Fighters' and/or 'criminals' in the context of the welfare state. I want to highlight, which kind of new subjectivities emerged in the island context and why these historically produced subjectivities continue to haunt present politicisations of community. Therefore, it is worthwhile to ask: In what way and how are nationalism and local patriotism appropriated for group identifications in the Andamans? One answer to this questions, I argue, can be found in

⁴*Kala Pani*, or the Black Waters, is a wide-spread allegory for colonial transportation to overseas destinations, that implied, among others, the loss of caste and belonging to a homeland (cf. Sen, 2000: 5; Vaidik, 2010: 89). According to Satadru Sen, *Kala Pani* became a synonym for the horror of being transported to the Andamans due to depictions of Freedom Fighters, who reported about their incarceration in the Cellular Jail (Sen, 2000: V). As a result, many people in the Andamans believe that *Kala Pani* means transportation to the Andamans.

⁵I am referring here to Clare Anderson's (2007) notion of Mutiny/ Rebellion that hints at the diverging connotations attached to the 1857 Mutiny (repressive state perspective) or Rebellion (anti-colonial resistance perspective). Both the counter-insurgent and the nationalist interpretations of this significant historical event in the colonial history of British India, point to the political ambivalence with which historiography has to deal.

⁶The category 'pre-42' denominates the population present in the islands before the Japanese occupation in 1942 (Mukhopadhyay, K., 2002: 18). It denotes the offspring of pre-colonial inhabitants, whose ancestors were, to a large extent, transported as convicts to the penal settlement in the Andamans. As an official category of settlement, it includes the 'local-born' community, the Bhantu, Moplah and Karen. In this paper, however, I focus on discourses about criminality and the freedom struggle. Therefore, I am going to use the term

'pre-42' to speak mostly about the former three communities – especially the 'local-born', who are the most numerous and influential of these groups. The history of the Karen settlement in the Andamans is somewhat different, because they were not brought to the Andamans as convicts, but as labourers.

⁷Despite their territorial and spatial marginality from Indian the subcontinent and 'motherland', the Andamans share an extensive history of interaction with the British Empire and the Indian nation state. Developments in the centre crucially affected the genesis of the marginal colony, and to a certain extent, vice-versa. People in the Andamans lived and continue to live their every-day life while bearing their relation to the centre in mind.



historicizations of popular discourse, i.e. in the appropriations of historical 'facts' to render present political claims valid.

By juxtaposing literature and empirical data from nine months of ethnographic fieldwork, I intend to embed the politicization of belonging in the Andaman Islands in a broader theoretical framework that identifies (post)colonial productions and negotiations of subjectivity. Subjectivation demarcates not only the social evolution of how certain subjects come into being. It is about processes by which specific ideas about subjectivity or 'the subject' are produced in a social field – often through classifications of collective groups and appropriations of these classifications in self-definitions of subjects. Therefore, I look at classification processes of collective groups and their impact on negotiations of community identifications. Structuring my paper by highlighting discursive links between colonial and postcolonial productions of subjectivity, I aim to render contemporary dynamics comprehensible in their historical trajectory.⁸

In the first part of the paper, I am going to focus on the production of specific Andaman subjectivities. This more descriptive part will depict the specific history of the Andaman society that led to the production of its subjects. The second part of the paper will outline how specific subjectivities shape local politics in the context of the postcolonial welfare state.

Andaman subjectivities in a historical perspective

From the times of the penal settlement till nowadays, state ideologies and technologies of rule shaped the historical production of the island society. In this chapter, I am going to summarise the interplay of social engineering processes as a part of colonial governance.

Punishment, reform and rehabilitation of the 'criminal'

In the British universe of Indian criminality, essentialist ascriptions of race, caste, class, language, religion and gender, were linked up to 'criminal' group identities.⁹

⁸This is neither to claim that by knowing colonial history we could automatically identify each and every postcolonial process of subjectivation, determined by its colonial antecedents. Nor is it to deny the agency of the subaltern at any time to subvert or resist dominant forms of power and knowledge. Rather, it is to establish an analysis of a clearly pervasive but nonetheless continuous discursive field.

⁹In order to explain the specific local situation in the Andamans, the concept of 'criminality' has to be clarified, as crucial processes of subjectivation evolved under its umbrella. A definition, according to which "*crime is not an essential, but an existential category. Behaviours and acts achieve the status of crime, and individuals the status of the criminal, as social conceptions of deviance are given to them*" (Nye, 1978: 493) can also be applied

An important factor differentiating colonial views on Indian criminality from British criminality was the belief that most criminal behaviour was determined either by 'nature or nurture' and therefore had a collective root.

Penalty for criminal or insubordinate behaviour provided the overall background for measures of reform and rehabilitation in the Andaman penal settlement after 1858. Delinquent subjects from very different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of India and Burma were transported overseas to be punished, reformed and rehabilitated – and thus subjectivated.¹⁰ Somehow, all of them had to work and live together, either within the penal settlement or at its expanding fringes. Due to the frontier situation, death rates were high; exhausting works in tropical climate caused mortal infections and diseases. Labour in the rainforests, 'infested with ferocious savages',¹¹ often led to violent encounters. This overall situation possibly enforced equality among them, detached to a certain extent from preoccupations with prestige and status in their homelands.

But there was a specific treatment of different categories of convicts, too: Ex- sepoys, who were part of the Mutiny/Rebellion were seen as 'political' offenders. They were differentiated from 'ordinary' offenders who were mostly murderers, dacoits (armed robbers), thieves, etc. (Anderson, 2007: 153-170; Vaidik, 2010: 59). Further categories of inherited and nurtured criminality were also identified in the 'mosaic' of castes and tribes that peopled the British Raj.¹²

Knowledge Production in the Penal Settlement

Ascriptions of Andaman subjectivities were first produced by colonial administrators with the intention to classify, know and rule the convict and settler population of the Andaman penal settlement, localized

to the Andamans. Following these basic assumptions, it can be concluded that crime is not a social fact, but always dependent on the perspective of the beholder (Yang, 1985: 2).

¹⁰According to Satadru Sen, the penal system in India and the Andamans can be seen as one of several colonial institutions, where an experiment to create new classes and categories, new forms of labour and housing as well as new models of political and economic collaboration, was put into practice (Sen, 2000: 2).

¹¹For a historical overview of the relations with the indigenous Andaman islanders, see Pandya (2009) and Sen (2010).

¹²Such as 'habitual' offenders and their urban 'cousins', the 'hereditary' offenders that were both seen as incorrigible criminals. In turn, 'individual criminals' or 'decent killers' were people from the well-ordered agricultural society the British envisioned. For an elaborate account of these categories, see Sen (2000: 48-66).



in Port Blair on South Andaman Island. Thus, the production of written accounts about the 'criminal' population, influenced by colonial criminology, contributed to the emergence of specific Andaman subjectivities. The criminalized population had to appropriate these ascriptions in their every-day life in the penal colony.

Subjectivities in the Andamans, applied in the context of criminalization, were, therefore, products of significations of the Other through 'imperial eyes' (Pratt, 1997). These significations were results of an interplay of power and knowledge. The criminalized populations were not simply 'victims' of colonial power/ knowledge. In turn, by performing, repeating and subverting existing stereotypes and thereby contributing to their continuous flow, the subalterns were able to manipulate the production of stereotypes, too. They actively took part in the production of knowledge about themselves through particular forms of self-representation, which were documented in gazetteers, manuals, surveys, and other official documents, that aimed to shine a light on the obscure and shifty space of the penal settlement. Certain literate convicts, who were employed in the local bureaucracy as *Munchis* (writers), even contributed directly to the production of administrative knowledge.¹³

Colonial subject-positions

The colonial regime of the Andamans rested not only on its reformatory project. The intention to develop a penal settlement coincided with the larger aim of strategic colonization (cf. Vaidik, 2010). Thus, the regime also depended on a sizeable free population to increase agricultural production. In the following decades after 1858, the policy to settle prisoners at the end of their term as self-supporting colonists (Mukhopadhyay, C., 2002: 27), turned into a significant social engineering project, crucial for the crystallization of 'Andaman' subjectivities.

After penal transportation of women had been introduced in the year 1862, convict women were allowed to marry male self-supporters (Sen, 2000: 1). These convict marriages regularly transcended language, ethnic, caste and class barriers, which would have been more likely to be observed in the Indian mainland (Temple, 1909: 67). The offspring of these mixed unions were termed as 'local-born' population. 'Local-born' became the officially used administrative category for this invented ethnicity. Free local-born

people were mostly employed with the government and therefore able to raise their social status. Already in colonial times, a cosmopolitan and secular middle-class society emerged.¹⁴ Due to the diversity of cultural, religious and social backgrounds that were mingled by inter-group marriage,¹⁵ the local-born community can be characterized as culturally creolized population. Incorporation of difference into their community, defined by its heterogeneity, became a norm in the process of place-making.

In addition to those convicts, who served their term within the penal colony, two other groups were deported to the Andamans in the 20th century: The Bhantu and the Moplah. Due to their separate settlement in spatial isolation from the penal colony and the local-born, both groups were defined as separate communities.

The Bhantu from North India had been classified as 'criminal tribe' because of their nomadic life-style that implied active resistance to sedentariness and wage labour. All transported Bhantus should be disciplined through their settlement as farmers and thereby learn to give up their 'criminal activities' (Coomar, 1997: 23). Under aegis of the Salvation Army, reform also included baptising and schooling in order to educate them to give up their 'barbarous' customs, habits and dispositions. This included a different style of dress and a break with the habit to adorn the body with ornaments (Anderson, 2004: 138). Learning order, diligence and discipline should enable their transformation into productive and subjective bodies.

The Moplah were a group of 1885 Muslims from Kerala, who had fought in the Malabar rebellion against the colonial regime and Hindu landlords (Dhingra, 2005: 161). They were brought to the Andamans for rehabilitation between 1921-6 and settled on agricultural land (Mukhopadhyay, C., 2002: 29). Under the circumstances of their settlement, they were given the possibility to practise their religion and to reconstruct a certain part of cultural traits from their homelands. They still speak a dialect of Malayalam, which, according to some interlocutors, is clearly reminiscent of their region in the 1920s. The Moplah are today the biggest Muslim community in the islands.

Apart from the convicts, several other groups of free people like soldiers, convict overseers, traders and labourers came to the Andamans, too. Some

¹³An outstanding example was the Wahhabi Muslim Maulana Mohammed Jafar Thanasari, who was Chief Clerk in the Port Blair office of the deputy commissioner Protheroe and his private language instructor (Sen, 2009: 148).

¹⁴A not uncontested self-representation made by of some of my contemporary local-born interlocutors is the claim that the community developed a 'traditionally' casteless society over several generations.

¹⁵According to the Census, in the year 1901 there were 45 regional linguistic groups (Temple, 1909: 64).



intermarried with the local-born community, and were categorized as pre-42 after independence. Another separate community, which exists till nowadays, are the Karen, Christians from Burma, who came as labourers in the 1920s and settled in Middle Andaman Island.

The Cellular Jail as a symbol of the freedom struggle

The Cellular Jail as the most celebrated aspect in the nationalist memory of the Andamans has to be contextualized in a dominant mainland conceptualization of the island space “as a *muktitirth*, a site of pilgrimage, where the sons of *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India, sacrificed their lives in the service of the nation.” (Vaidik, 2010: 1). Contrary to nationalist representations of the Cellular Jail that focus primarily on the incarceration of political prisoners, the jail housed newly arrived convicts and convicts convicted of crimes in the penal settlement, too (Vaidik, 2010: 96). The Cellular Jail marked just a qualitative dimension of punishment within this settlement, but it never dominated its affairs. This perception was a product of the Indian mainland discourse about the islands, fuelled by the nationalist press and by anti-British politics (Vaidik, 2010: 102).

This jail with a central watchtower and double-story wings on seven radiating arms reminding of Bentham's Panopticon (Vaidik, 2010: 96), gained dubious popularity in the urban colonial society of the Indian mainland; mainly due to prison narratives and memoirs, written by its revolutionary middle-class inmates. According to David Arnold “[i]t became as much a nationalist convention for political prisoners to write their prison memoirs as it was a patriotic duty for newspaper editors and book publishers to put them into print” (Arnold, 2004: 30). As a consequence, their reports about ‘systematic abuse’, torture and other injustices in the Cellular Jail contributed to the subcontinent's anti-colonial politicisation (Arnold, 2004: 32; Sen, 2000; Srivastava, 2003; Tamta, 1991).¹⁶ Before independence, all political prisoners were transferred to the mainland due to public pressure and anti-colonial resistance (Tamta, 1991: 37).

That the nationalist struggle targeted a jail as symbol of colonial governance – termed for example by an ex-inmate in his autobiography as “Indian Bastille” (Sinha, 1988) – is not a unitary event in the history of anti-colonial resistance. According to the historian Clare

Anderson, in the 1920s, the jail and the penal colony had become central tropes of political struggles (Anderson, 2007: 19-20). At that time, it was common among nationalists to refer to colonial India as a vast prison (Arnold, 2004: 39). Linked to that view were assumptions that going jail-going and hunger-striking represented central techniques of resistance in the Indian freedom movement (Anderson, 2007: 178-9). Furthermore, because jail chains symbolized colonial subjection, imprisonment itself became a metaphor for resistance (ibid: 178-9).

As a result of this labelling process, “the islands have been transformed both imaginatively and figuratively into a site of valiant anti-colonial struggle and martyrdom” (ibid: 17) after Independence. This hegemonic memory of Indian nationalism trickled into the nationalist historiography of the Andamans (cf. Anderson, 2007: 180; Sen, 2000: V). Certain postcolonial Indian writers such as S.N. Aggarwal (2006), N. Iqbal Singh (1978), R.C. Majumdar (1975), L.P. Mathur (1984) situated the Andamans firmly within the freedom struggle (ibid: 17, Footnote 47). They confirmed the elevated status of the Cellular Jail by, for example, calling it the “university” of the liberation movement (Tamta, 1991: 38; Roychowdhury, 2002: 118), or, in continuation of earlier accounts, an “Indian Bastille”. One author even hinted at contemporary global debates about anti-imperial resistance and counterinsurgency by comparing it to Abu Ghraib in Bagdad (Aggarwal, 2006: XIII).

The Japanese occupation: The creation of ‘martyr’ subject-positions

When Japanese forces occupied the Andaman Islands in 1942, some of the population fled with the British (Mathur, 1984: 246). Those people, who were later declared as pre-42, the local-born community, the Bhandu, the Moplah, the Karen, and a certain amount of Burmese people, stayed back. Mainly because, due to their contemporary descendants, “they had no other place to go”. They were for the most part “born and brought up in these islands” and many had lost their family links to the mainland. Having stayed back turns into an important argument for their contemporary articulation of belonging. They claim to be “real islanders”.

In the beginning, the Japanese occupation was presented to the Andaman population as “liberation of Asian brothers” from the yoke of foreign colonialism (Tamta, 1991: 42). This strategic war propaganda functioned to support the fight of Bose's INA against the British Empire. When Bose came to Port Blair in 1943, he went to the Cellular Jail and raised the tricoloured national flag for the first time on ‘liberated

¹⁶Another result of this literary activity is that the middle-class revolutionaries turned their prison narratives into sites of observation and representation of the subaltern minority, the ‘common criminals’. Because of that, there is today at least a collection of life stories that would otherwise have been left unconsidered (Arnold, 2004: 31).



Indian soil'. During this significant performance for the nation-to-be, he emphasised that "[t]hese islands have symbolic importance for the Indians because generations of Indian revolutionaries had served long prison sentences in the Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands." (Bose, 2006: 181). Later on, he proposed that, according to their importance for the freedom struggle, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands should be renamed into *Shaheed* (martyr), and *Swaraj* (independence) (Iqbal Singh, 1978: 302).

Even if local self-government remained very limited, many locals actively cooperated with the Japanese. But, due to an increase of British sabotage and secret service activities, many locals, who were suspected to collaborate with the enemy, were imprisoned, tortured and executed (Mathur, 1984: 251). References to these atrocities provided the basis for a pending compensation claim against the Japanese government, which was submitted by a collective of civil society actors some years ago. Furthermore, the memory of these atrocities serves the old inhabitants to proof their patriotism, too. They claim that without their sacrifices, some called it even "martyrdom", the Andamans would have never become part of the Indian nation-state after independence.¹⁷

Postcolonial politicizations of subjectivity

In Port Blair, the administrative seat and only town of the Andamans, where I conducted most of my fieldwork on the nexus of local politics and statehood in a migratory context, I observed the political interplay of certain kinds of racial, linguistic, ethnic, religious identifications with colonial subject-positions. Due to colonial history, a South Asian population came into being that can be characterized as having incorporated different socio-cultural elements from diverse geographical and ideological contexts. Thus, contemporary identifications as 'local' in the Andamans cannot be understood as an outcome of a singular, linear process of subjectivation. Processes of subjectivation in the penal settlement, such as

rehabilitation and reform, but also outside of it, in an island space at a frontier of 'civilization', had led to the production of a wide range of subjectivities. These subjectivities were and are in a constant process of redefinition, as they are appropriated in negotiations of locality and patriotism. In local political discourse, genealogically transmitted colonial subject-positions such as 'Freedom Fighters' and 'criminals' are displayed, performed and adapted for the negotiation of otherness and sameness.

Postcolonial migration and nationhood

As a result of postcolonial settlement policies and unplanned, autonomous migration after Independence, the population increased around twelve times between 1951 and 2001.¹⁸ Some communities were settled by the government under colonization and rehabilitation schemes: refugees from East Bengal, Burmese and Sri Lankan repatriates, and landless people from Kerala and the Chota-Nagpur region. In addition, many people came independently as migrants from all over India in search for a variety of things such as employment, land, escape or adventure. The migration process contributed to the formation of a multi-ethnic society. Due to the diversity of communities, it had been termed 'Mini-India'.¹⁹ Within nationalist discourse, 'Mini-India' has been transformed into an allegory for the Andaman society. Various authors state that the 'Indian-ness' of settlers and migrant communities serves as a link for the otherwise diverse population (Das, 1982: 74-5; Dhingra, 2005: 155; Naidu, 1998: 246). As a response to nationalist representations of their society as secular and cosmopolitan, many interlocutors represent themselves to live according to the propagated ideals of the secular nation-state. They emphasize that their society depicts the "unity in diversity" of India.

I argue that there is indeed a certain degree of harmonic cooperation and an absence of communal or caste

¹⁷The negotiations between British and Indian elites about the future status of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after independence had been unclear for a long time. The British wanted to keep the strategically important islands as a 'dominion' (Tamta, 1991: 69). There also existed plans to settle all Anglo-Indians in the Andamans and to declare an independent state within the Commonwealth (Port Blair Archive Judicial/ Revenue File 9 and File 3, 1946). In the end, the islands became part of the independent nation-state. According to B.R. Tamta's opinion, which seems to be biased by his nationalism, that decision of the British was based on the insight that the islands were a symbol of the Indian freedom struggle (Tamta, 1991: 69).

¹⁸ 1951: 30.971; 1971: 115.133; 1991: 280.661; 2001: 356.265 (Dhingra, 2005: 168). Now, ten years later, the release of provisional data of the Census 2011 gives a total population of 379.944 people. This number seems to be incorrect in view of incessant migration to the islands. Many of my local interlocutors estimate numbers between 500.000 and 600.000 or even more.

¹⁹The numerically largest groups of migrants came from West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. (Dhingra, 2005: 168). Another relatively large group are the Ranchis. These Adivasis were recruited as coolies by church missionaries in the city of Ranchi. That's why they – in spite of representing various ethnic and linguistic tribal groups of the middle Indian hills like Oraon, Munda, Kharia etc. – have been generalized and called Ranchis or 'Ranchiwallahs'.



violence in the society, an Andaman 'island mentality'. This is an outcome of subjectivation processes produced by the nation-state in order to create a national identification. But there is also a need to distinguish the every-day interaction between people, based on cosmopolitan 'Andaman' values, from political discourses. In South Asian politics, antagonistic conflicts between different groups are often played out in the political arena, especially when they are competing for funds and status (Spencer, 2007). In these conflicts, community identifications are expressed on the basis of norms and values that build on their difference to 'Others'.

Politicization of community

As a result of the migration process, the pre-42 have become a minority. The rising numbers of people, who migrated to the islands mostly through networks of chain migration, tended to identify with 'their' language, regional, religious or caste groups. The most obvious phenomenon is the 'ethnic' clustering of people in language groups from respective states, e.g. in Bengalis, Tamils, Telugus, and Malayalis, etc. Increasing awareness of community identifications among the migrants, and the concurrent emphasis on their difference to other reconstructed or invented communities in the Andamans, led to specific forms of labelling the Self and the Other. In this process, the pre-42, and, especially, the local-born as the biggest and most influential group among them, have been 'othered' as criminals by postcolonial settlers and migrants.

This stereotyped ascription has to be contextualized within local politics. Due to perceptions of overpopulation and scarcity of natural resources, civil society actors and associations, among them the Local Born Association, put pressure on the administration to stop further migration. In this discourse, the older inhabitants depict the newcomers to have migrated for the sole purpose of earning money. They accuse them to exploit resources without taking care of the fragile island ecology. Further, the civil society actors undertake specific differentiations of local selves. They distinguish between locals, who have "a heart for the islands", and their antagonistic opponents, the so called "opportunistic migrants". Those are apparently outsiders with established 'roots' in the mainland and not in the islands. In order to proof their 'local-ness', in turn, the pre-42 represent themselves by referring to the hardships of prior generations; especially, when the government is addressed to provide welfare schemes

such as OBC quotas.²⁰ As I will elaborate below, these subject-positions are crucially entangled with interpretations and appropriations of the history of the freedom struggle in the islands.

Evoking freedom fighter subjectivities

Political insubordination against the British oppressors has been broadly positively valued in the anti-colonial foundation of the postcolonial nation state. As a result, the Government of India had set up a "Freedom Fighters' Pension Scheme" in 1972, in which, until November 2008, 170,474 Freedom Fighters were officially included.²¹ The eligibility to receive these pensions is 'inherited' by widows and descendants of Freedom Fighters. A precursor of this all-India scheme was the 'Ex-Andaman Political Prisoners Pension Scheme', introduced in 1969 to honour and to provide compensation to 285 Freedom Fighters, who were among the 500 political prisoners incarcerated in the Cellular Jail. This scheme was sanctioned due to initiatives of the 'Ex-Andaman Political Prisoners Fraternity Circle', who had approached the Government of India to recognize them as Freedom Fighters. In the same year, the association had also successfully stopped the planned demolition of the Cellular Jail, which was concurrently declared as a national memorial.²²

Today, the residues of the Cellular Jail play an important role in the urban public space of Port Blair. Currently, the memorial accommodates a museum, a library and a Sound-and-Light-Show. Twice every evening, this show demonstrates its spectators the terrors of delinquent life. Performed in the original prison yard, a setting with a strong inclination to communicate national history, the show is part of the

²⁰ In 2006, 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC), a government scheme of quota reservation was introduced in the Andamans. This scheme of 'positive discrimination' provides reservation of seats in higher educational institutions and in government jobs for two communities, the 'pre-42' and the 'Bengali settlers' on the basis of historical and educational backwardness. The 'pre-42' were able to maintain that they are qualified to receive governmental support as form of 'compensation' for the suffering of their ancestors. The 'Bengali settlers', who have the necessary political support at their disposal, got the OBC-status for being historically and educationally backward. This reservation policy led various other communities to claim their 'backwardness and to demand reservation' from the government on the basis of equal treatment.

²¹ See http://mha.nic.in/uniquepage.asp?Id_Pk=234

²² Personal conversation with Prakash Mathur, son of the late Vishwanath Mathur, Ex-President of the Ex-Andaman Political Prisoners Fraternity Circle. For a web presentation of the association, see <http://www.andamancellularjail.org/Default.htm>



almost mandatory sightseeing package booked by the majority of domestic tourists – among them a big proportion of government servants, who visit the Andamans under a scheme of state-subsidized holidays called Leave Travel Concession (LTC). For many of those, whom I talked to after visiting this national pilgrimage, the violently disciplined bodies of the convicts signify their martyrdom for the whole body of the liberated Indian nation. Here, a community of “shared suffering” (Svasek, 2005: 208), of affection and emotional commitment with the prisoners is created by appealing to the national psyche.

The image of the Andamans as a symbol of the freedom movement is further reified through visiting VIPs and VVIPs, mainly high-ranking authorities from the Indian Government in ‘national mission’. In rituals of statehood, they usually display their patriotism by honouring and celebrating the ‘martyrs’ and ‘heroes’ of the freedom struggle in the Cellular Jail. Simultaneously, they stress the territorial and national integrity of this strategically important chain of islands.

Impacts of the Freedom Fighter discourse

In March 2006, I attended the Centenary Celebrations in the Cellular Jail. In order to honour the first batch of transported Freedom Fighters from 1906, three Freedom Fighters and about fifty widows from Freedom Fighter families were brought to Port Blair. Public speeches in presence of all important representatives of the local administration were delivered to emphasize the importance of the Freedom Fighters for the Indian nation and vice versa. In one speech, the Cellular Jail as a visual marker of the former colonial power assumed a special role in the flattering display of patriotism: “Today, the Andamans are a pilgrimage of freedom, and the Cellular Jail is its temple.”



I remember asking myself while watching the ritual, why apparently no crowd of local people had gathered to watch the spectacle as usual on many other occasions. Shortly after the speech, I went to the neighbouring hospital. I asked there why no one was watching what was happening outside. I got the answer: “We are no foreigners. We are not interested.” A friend living nearby, whom I asked that question later, confirmed that the local population, for certain reasons, does not comply with such a form of nationalist performance:

This is a huge propaganda machine. The only people who go there are babus [PZ: clerks, government servants]. If people go there, then they have to. For example, the school children are forced there by their teachers to sing and dance.

As I found out later, there are various pre-42 people that clearly disapprove such celebrations of Freedom Fighters, who all belong to the Indian mainland.²³ They apparently feel neglected by the hegemonic memory of Indian nationalism. Many local interlocutors claim that their convict ancestors colonized the Andamans at a great cost of lives and manpower due to adverse climatic conditions, ‘wild jungles’ and ‘ferocious savages’. Without this contribution, the islands would neither have been transformed into a liveable place to settle nor would they have become part of the independent Indian nation-state. In their view, their forefathers were the “real colonizers” of the islands, while the designated Freedom Fighters went back to their homelands after finishing their sentences. Many feel that those literate, well-connected, middle-class revolutionaries, who contributed nothing to the development of the colony, were linked up to the Andaman history in a quite exaggerated way. There is a class dimension to this identification, too. Some pre-42 differentiate their ancestors on the basis of their subalternity from the inmates of the Cellular Jail, who came to a large extent from the upper strata of Bengal. Further, they complain that the urban space in the capital Port Blair is dominated by monuments, statues and buildings, which, to a large extent, remember leaders from the Indian national movement or political

²³This view was also expressed in the *Light of Andaman*, a local newspaper: There is systematic and deliberate distortion of the history of Andaman, that too under the patronage of Andaman Administration. An impression is being created that all the patriots made great sacrifice during their incarceration only. But the history of Andaman in its relation to Freedom Struggle did not begin after the construction of the Cellular Jail in 1906. The greatest and bravest part of it began in 1858.(...) they turned this British penal colony into a Model India by supplanting themselves there. (Salim 2006: 3)



leaders of independent India. Various streets and places are named after those 'big shots' from the far distant Indian mainland. To sum up, local contributions to the anti-colonial struggle and the development of the islands, which ensured that the Andamans became part of the Indian nation-state after independence, were hardly recognized.



Representations of the pre-42 as descendants of freedom fighters

The desired representation and self-perception of the old inhabitants as a 'community of sentiment' links up to another meaningful representation in nationalist memory: they declare the Andamans as an important destination in the 'map' of the Indian freedom struggle by referring to the mutineers/rebels of 1857 as Freedom Fighters. They argue that many rebellions of 1857 were transported to the Andamans, especially in the years after the Mutiny/Rebellion. The British had classified criminal acts of both straightforward mutineers and offenders, who committed plunder or dacoity during the Mutiny/Rebellion as political insubordination (Anderson, 2007: 129). Their alignment with the Mutiny/Rebellion indicates a significant gap between official representations of the Andaman history in nation-centred narratives, and local desires for self-representation.

By delineating their ancestry to the Mutineers of 1857, whom they also declare as Freedom Fighters, the pre-42

oppose the hegemonic memory dedicated to the Cellular Jail. Local civil society actors wonder, why only the Cellular Jail is celebrated as a significant place for the freedom struggle. Political prisoners were kept already much earlier, right after the Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857, in jails on Chatham and Viper Island (Anderson, 2004: 170). They often refer in their argumentation to the nationalist Freedom Fighter Veer Savarkar, who was himself incarcerated in the Cellular Jail. In retrospective, he was the first to name the Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857 "the first war of Independence" (cf. Dirks, 2001: 127). But the pre-42 do not only long for recognition of their history by the government and the society. As a means to acquire collective status, they also counter biologist and racist accusations of other, later settled communities that devalue them as having 'criminal blood'.

Criminality as post-penal subjectivity

After independence, many stereotypes of criminality have been enduring in a genealogical sense. In 1965, the Dean of the Faculty of Law at Lucknow University wrote in a book about the principles of criminal law and the Indian Penal code, that "[i]n India there are many castes of professional criminals the members of which follow thieving as a hereditary calling." (Nigam, 1965: 257). The stereotypes were further reified through statements such as:

They can jump incredibly high and scale over walls with nothing more than a dhoti to support them. The professional criminal thinks in terms of crime. They are enemies of the society upon which they prey... (ibid. 257)

These forms of stereotyping owe a great deal to colonial processes of subjectivation in connecting crime either to 'nature or nurture' of the 'criminal', i.e. her or his race or socialization. I found similar conceptualizations among my interlocutors from different groups in the Andamans. Many people, educated and uneducated, do believe that common characteristic traits like virtue, shrewdness or deviousness are collectively inherited. They simultaneously believe that propensities for crime were transmitted genetically from the 'criminal' convict forefathers to their descendants. Some admitted that the social aspects of criminality might have been reduced through the successful reform and rehabilitation programmes.²⁴ The menace of inherited criminality

²⁴There is even a whole ethnography of the 'pre-42' Bhanu community that can be read as a source document of this belief. Without questioning the social construction of the 'criminal', the author Palash Chandra Coomar (1997) testifies the suc-



implicitly and explicitly resonated in conversations of non-pre-42 Andamanis about the pre-42. A large majority depicts the pre-42 as “criminals by their blood” because of being convict descendants. The characterization of a local-born by one of his non-pre-42 friends demonstrates the functioning of this stereotype:

They are all the sons of murders, thugs and thieves. For example, (...)’s grandfather killed six or seven people, before he was brought to the Andamans. He has this criminal blood. Besides working for the (...) Department, he is a pimp who even prostitutes his own sister.

Many of my interlocutors believe that the character of a person is intimately connected to his/her biological determination or ‘blood’. One non-local-born informant opined that in public, the local-born would try to conceal the crimes of their ancestors, which, for him would indicate their pathological character. But in cases of severe conflict between them, they would start to refer to the crimes committed by their forefathers and and thereby threaten their opponents. Two other interlocutors stated that they would marry into all groups apart from the pre-42, because they were drunkards, had no respect for old people, no discipline and no good ‘culture’. As descendants of *quaidis* (prisoner, captive), they were *goonda log* (gangsters) and killers.

In order to counter these essentialist and discriminating stereotypes, many pre-42 try to align their family history with the anti-colonial movement. Especially among the local-borns, references to the genealogical link of one’s family with the mutineer/ rebels from 1857-8 are common. Many Moplah emphasised to be descendants of Rebels or Freedom Fighters, too. These representations of personal legacies of political subversion refer, in my view, to their knowledge about the colonial distinction between “morally degraded criminals” and “grievous political offenders”.²⁵ To be designated to have ancestors, who were ‘political offenders’ acquires special meaning in the Andaman context: it implies that – within the dichotomous framework of nature or nurture – the individual would have the ‘blood’ of a Freedom Fighter. That marks a decisive status distinction. It raises the status of the

cessful rehabilitation and reform of a ‘criminal tribe’ which gave up its ‘criminal activities’.

²⁵Clare Anderson elaborated the significance of this distinction: [T]he government of India argued that mutineer-rebel convicts were not desperate characters (the worst offenders had after all been executed) but men led into crimes against the state by others. They were not ‘morally degraded criminals’, but ‘grievous political offenders’. (Anderson, 2007: 132)

family and the individual, who is explicitly identified with the larger lineage group.

Broader consequences of the politics of memory for the Andaman society

The writing of popular social history with political content – outside the professionalized ‘scientific’ history – has a long trajectory in India (Chatterjee, 2006: 13). In the Andamans, the production of amateur historiography, especially among the pre-42, has also gained significance in recent decades. Different actors started to do historical research and to write and to speak in public about the Andaman history of migration, place-making and settlement in order to create awareness and consciousness in the population and among administrators. For many of these community actors, referring to history has become a medium of self-expression. It is an important means of recognition vis-à-vis the Indian state and its hegemonic memory. But the hegemonic memory of the ‘freedom fighters’ has not only had a tremendous impact on the pre-42 community. It has backfired into the whole society. Living in a place, which is influenced and directed by a variety of colonial and postcolonial discourses, local community actors try to situate their own agendas within these historical frameworks.

One result of that has been a process, which I might call ‘Freedom-Fighterization’. Many communities started to relate their group identifications to certain Freedom Fighters from their region in the mainland. The Ranchi community, for example, has not only set-up several statues of Birsa Munda, an anti-colonial Freedom-Fighter from the Chota Nagpur Region. After the Ranchi village Kumraketti was resettled by the government, the villagers named their resettled village Birsanagar. Similarly, the Maharashtra Mandal, an association of the Marathi community in Port Blair, is officially named after the famous Marathi nationalist ‘Veer Savarkar Bandhu Smriti’.

People now often represent their ‘ethnic’ history of migration, place-making and settlement as part of a historical process in which oneself, in lieu of a group, is presented as having been personally affected by British colonialism and its penal regime, by Japanese terror, atrocities and tortures (pre-42), by displacement (Bengali Refugees, Sri Lankan and Burmese Repatriates), or backwardness through absence of communication and schooling.

I argue that these varying tropes became embodied through their public articulations of suffering and sacrifice – even if it was not the person itself that suffered under historical circumstances, but her or his parents or ancestors. Through the process of narration and public sharing of similar experiences, ‘communities



of sentiment', like the Freedom Fighters of the Cellular Jail, formatted. Understanding and feeling the suffering of his parents, relatives or friends as part of a 'common experience', that shaped a generation of people, enables individuals to declare that suffering as part of their own collective identity. But, while the bodies marked by that experience are not necessarily congruent with their own, these can be imagined and therefore embodied through the master narrative of a 'collective trauma'.

Conclusion

In this paper, I focussed on the shifty field of multiple subject-positions in the Andaman islands. From the first days of the penal settlement until nowadays, the islands have witnessed a continuous influx of people from many regions, languages, castes, religions, and classes from the Indian subcontinent and Burma. In order to negotiate their difference, these groups are appropriating subjectivities that are linked up to the history of the freedom struggle and to processes of migration and place-making.

Here, the past is appropriated into the present to make a sense of the present. Subject-positions such as 'freedom fighters' or 'criminals' should therefore not only be regarded as remnants or left-overs of colonial modes of classification. They have to be looked upon much more as a contemporary phenomenon of postcolonial politics of identity. Actors of different migrated communities articulate these subjectivities in a field of political competition for status and the eligibility for welfare. Nationalism and patriotism are two important elements of identification to which all communities adhere to in order to get recognition by the nation-state. The symbolic capital attached to individual contributions of Freedom-Fighters can be linked to the discursive, performative perpetration of the Andaman society with hegemonic nationalist ideas about the freedom struggle.

But within this discourse, recognized Freedom-Fighters are looked upon as 'true nationalists', while the pre-42 people are labelled as 'criminals' because of their convict ancestry and enduring beliefs about the genetic transmission of criminality. Their histories as mutineers or rebels, as the first settlers, who transformed the islands into a liveable place, as an early cosmopolitan society, as people who endured hardships of British colonialism and Japanese military rule, are to a great extent undermined by this hegemonic memory. This specific mode of national recognition effected certain strategies. Many Pre-42 term themselves as Freedom-Fighters, because of their (often imagined) genealogical links to the mutineers/rebels of 1857. As a 'community of sentiment' they emphasise the hardships that their ancestors endured. Without these contributions, they

argue, the Andamans would not be part of India. Therefore, they demand that their history should be equally appreciated by the nation, the local administration and the other communities in the multi-ethnic society. If this will ever be the case, the Andamans could indeed once gain the geographical and cultural recognition as South-East India.

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