



1. Scale model of the Cellular Jail. Cellular Jail Museum, Port Blair. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.

## **The "Cellular Jail" or "Kala Pani" in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.**

*A tribute to the 75th anniversary of India's Independence.*

*Text: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.*

From the distant past many peoples, after first being violently attacked, were conquered by other peoples and enslaved for many years.

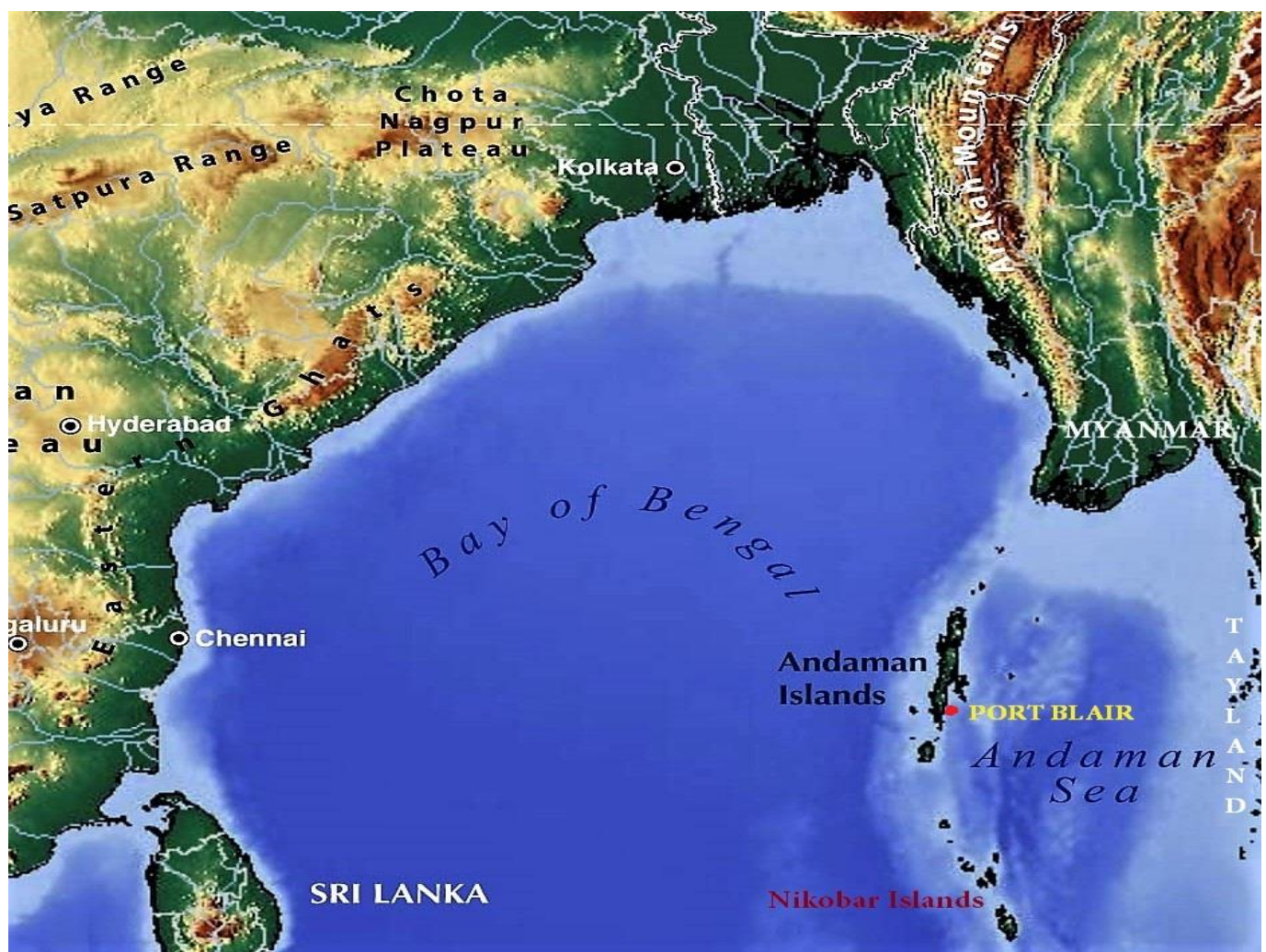
This year (2021) two countries that have many things in common are celebrating their Independence. They are India and Greece. Two countries, that are among the richest in ancient history, philosophy, art and culture.

Greece is celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Revolution of 1821 and its Liberation from the Turks and India is celebrating the 75th anniversary of its Liberation and Independence from British rule and occupation.

On the occasion of this anniversary, India is organizing many events to promote its culture throughout the world, without forgetting to honor those who were tortured and lost their lives in the fight for Freedom. The Freedom of a vast country that has never invaded another country!

This article refers to the Port Blair Cellular Jail, to the way it was built, but also to the very difficult and harsh lives of the Revolutionary fighters for the Liberation of India from the British occupiers.

I was in the Port Blair cellular jail a few years ago, having visited the Andaman Islands three times. This was as part of my research into music, musical instruments, dance and Indian culture in general, but also to participate in the annual Island Tourism Festival for two years running, singing Indian songs in different languages of the country.



2. Map showing the position and distance between the Andaman Islands and the mainland.  
Source: <https://rb.gy/hdroai>.

"**The Cellular Jail**" is located in Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

It was to this jail that the British conquerors sent into exile the most dangerous, for them, revolutionaries, who were fighting for the Independence of India. These fighters had given the name "**Kala Pani**" ("Black Water") to the prison, in allusion to the sea water surrounding the prison, but also to the word Kala, associated with death, because it was considered certain that no one could leave this island alive.

The distance between the tropical islands of Andaman & Nicobar and the mainland is about 1,300 kilometers and the duration of the crossing by modern ships is about three days.

At this point it should be noted that there was an ancient Indian belief that one who crossed the ocean, far from his homeland, was in danger of losing his caste and becoming an outcast. So, those who believed in this belief had an additional reason for not wanting to be there.

The construction of the jail was completed by the British occupiers in 1906, after ten years of construction and consisted of seven huge wings with hundreds of solitary confinement cells.

Prisoners from the old island jails built by the British at the outbreak of the Indian Revolution in 1857, were forced to participate in the construction of the cellular jail. Those who were not executed were sent to these prisons for life. When the British realized that the Indian Independence Movement was gaining momentum despite the initial suppression of the rebellion, they decided to build maximum security prisons as the number of rebels increased and so did the number of prisoners.

The design of the building was based on the idea of the Panopticon (Greek word after the giant Argos the Panoptis of ancient Greek mythology, who had many eyes on his body and could see everywhere on the horizon).

The Panopticon was invented by the English philosopher, legal analyst, social reformer and founder of "Modern Utilitarianism", Jeremy Bentham.

Based on this method, the prison building has the shape of a bicycle wheel, with the wings playing the role of rays and the round tower in the middle playing the role of the axis.

In this way, the cells of one wing had no visual contact with the cells of the other wing, so that the exiles could not communicate with each other. The tower had visual contact with all the wings, which contained 693 cells, and made the work of control easier for the guards.

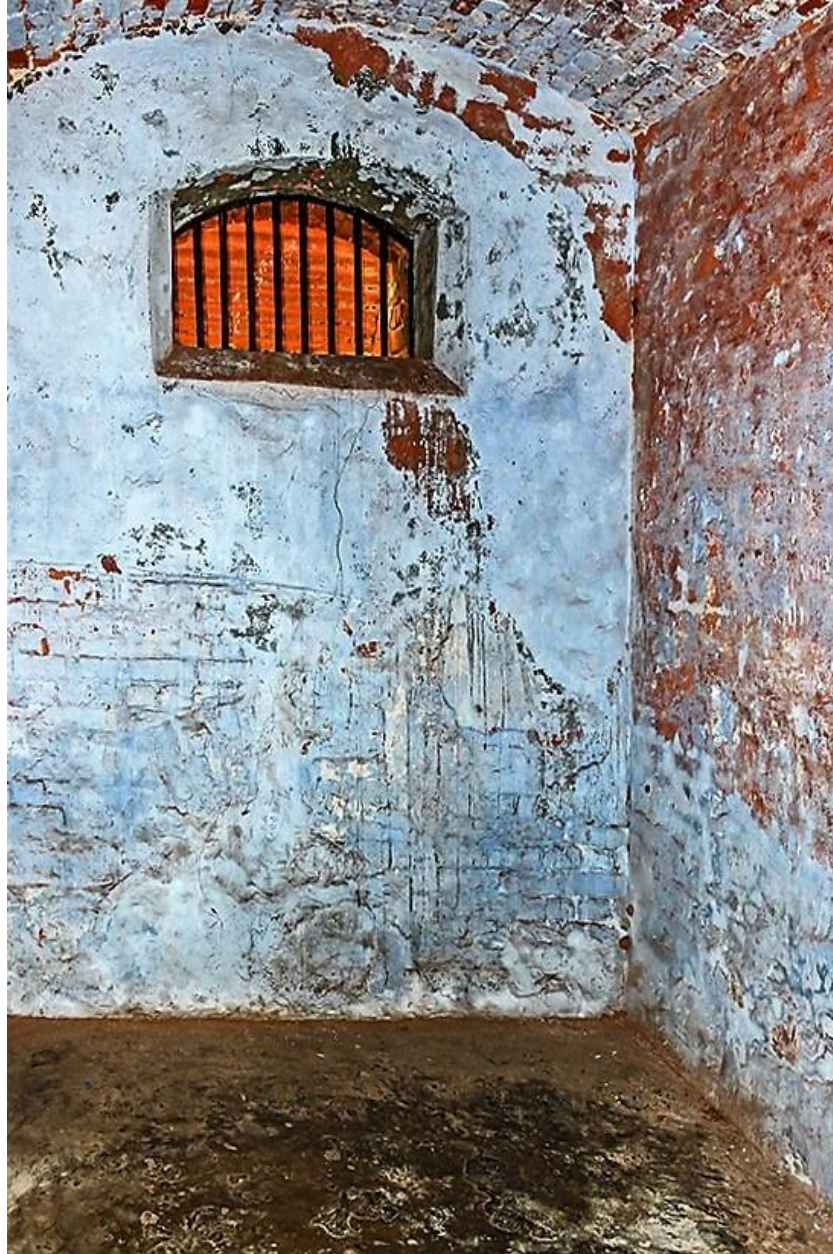


3. *Wooden scale model in the Cellular Jail Museum, showing the design of the jail where the Panopticon method was used. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.*

Life in prison was extremely difficult for the prisoners due to hard work, torture and a very poor diet. Added to these miserable living conditions were loneliness and lack of cleanliness in the isolation cells, which had a small ventilation opening high up on one wall.

Punishments were given if some did not work at the required fast pace, and if there was a physical need, they had to be held until the guards allowed it. As a result, some became mentally ill and others committed suicide.

One of the forced tasks was to beat the coconut shells several times with a wooden hammer until the fibers, used for certain fabrics, remained and became soft. Another grueling job was the manual mill, where the prisoner had to turn a large wheel with his hands to grind coconuts or mustard seeds and produce 30 lbs. of coconut oil or 30 lbs. of mustard oil per day. Those who failed to complete their assigned task were whipped.



4. *The ventilation window in the solitary confinement cell.*  
*Photo: Solo Backpacker.*



5. The beating of the coconut shells to extract the fibers. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



6. The manual mill with which the prisoner had to produce 30 lbs. of coconut or mustard oil per day. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



7. Whipping the prisoner when he did not manage the required daily production.  
Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



8. Different types of shackles. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.

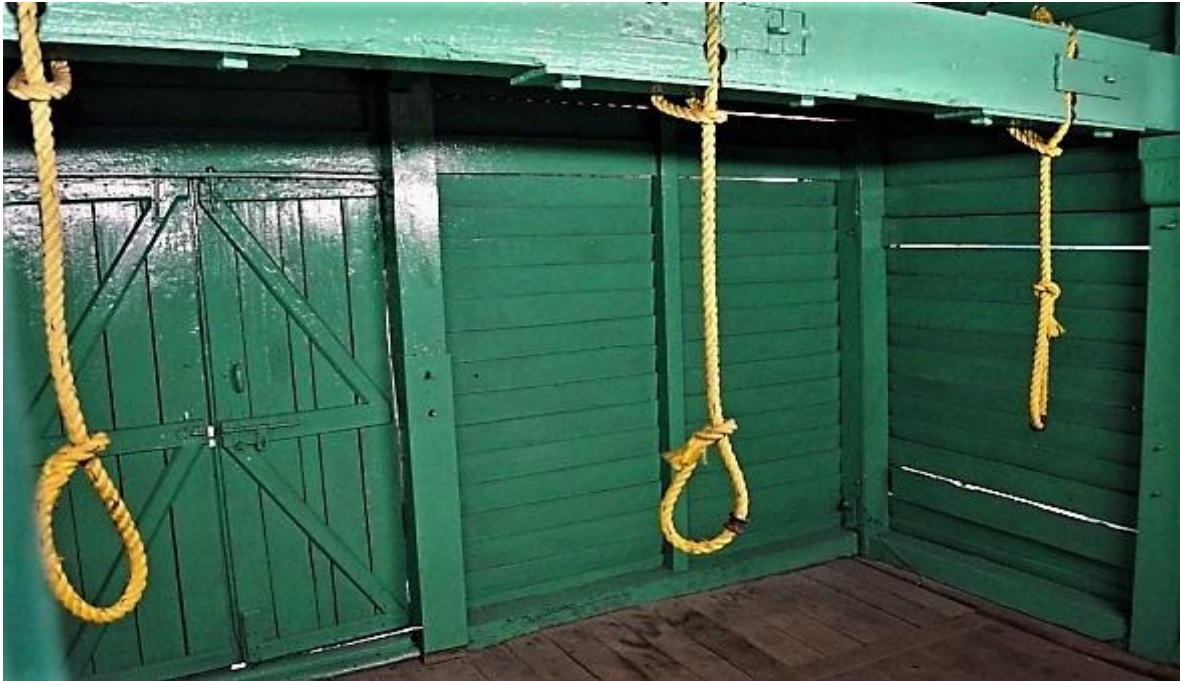
After the day's work they were chained to the floor of the cell and had beside them two earthenware vessels with a narrow opening. One contained water and the other was used as a toilet. The food consisted of very little rice, bread and vegetables that contained pebbles and inedible weeds. At the same time, of course, English officials led privileged lives in the luxurious facilities of Ross Island, near Port Blair.



9. English soldiers' barrack on Ross Island in 1880. Cellular Jail Museum. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



The harsh treatment of the prisoners was aimed at their mental and physical exhaustion. Many of the prisoners attempted to escape, but without success. As a result, many of them were taken to the gallows.



10. *The place where up to three prisoners were hanged at the same time. Photo: B Nomadi.*

The only way to react and protest against the very poor living conditions in the cells, but also against the brutal behavior of the prison guards, were the hunger strikes.

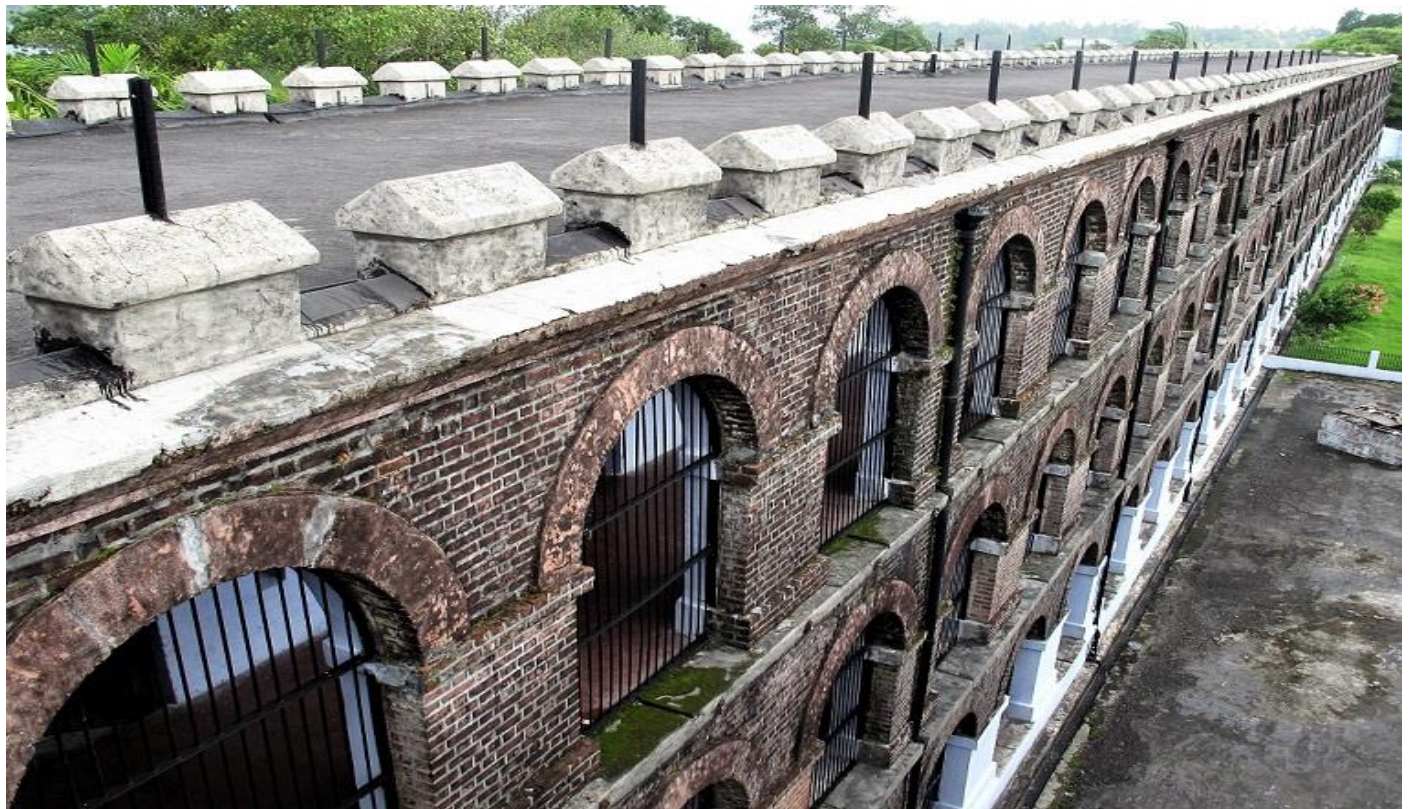
They were started in 1932 by some prisoners, but in May 1933 there was a mass hunger strike that lasted 45 days.

Then some British officials decided to enforce force-feeding. The prisoner was placed on a bed with his head raised while his legs and arms were held down by prison guards so that he would not react. A doctor inserted a tube through the prisoner's nose to reach his larynx, and forced a mixture of milk, sugar and eggs into his stomach. Despite being stopped by guards, some coughed loudly to push the tube away. Some died of pneumonia when the milk entered their lungs.

Among them were Mahavir Singh, Mohan Kishore Namadas and Mohit Moitra. The bodies were thrown into the sea and put in bags with stones to prevent them from floating.



11. View of the back side of the cells from the roof. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



12. View of the front side of the cells from the roof. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



13. *The front side of the solitary confinement cells. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.*

The rebel prisoners were freed from these brutal conditions in 1937, when Mahatma Gandhi, who had made 17 consecutive hunger strikes, as well as the great national poet of India, Rabindranath Tagore, reached an agreement with the leader of the British colonial administration Lord Linlithgow to release the prisoners. Thus, in 1939, the last prisoners were released from the Port Blair prisons, notorious for their cruelty.

Among the best known activists who fought for India's Independence and were imprisoned in these prisons, are Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Sushil Dasgupta, Batukeshwar Dutt, Hare Krishna Konar, Shiv Verma, Yogendra Shukla, Sudhanshu Dasgupta and Barindra Kumar Ghose, the brother of the renowned spiritual teacher and also freedom fighter, Sri Aurobindo.



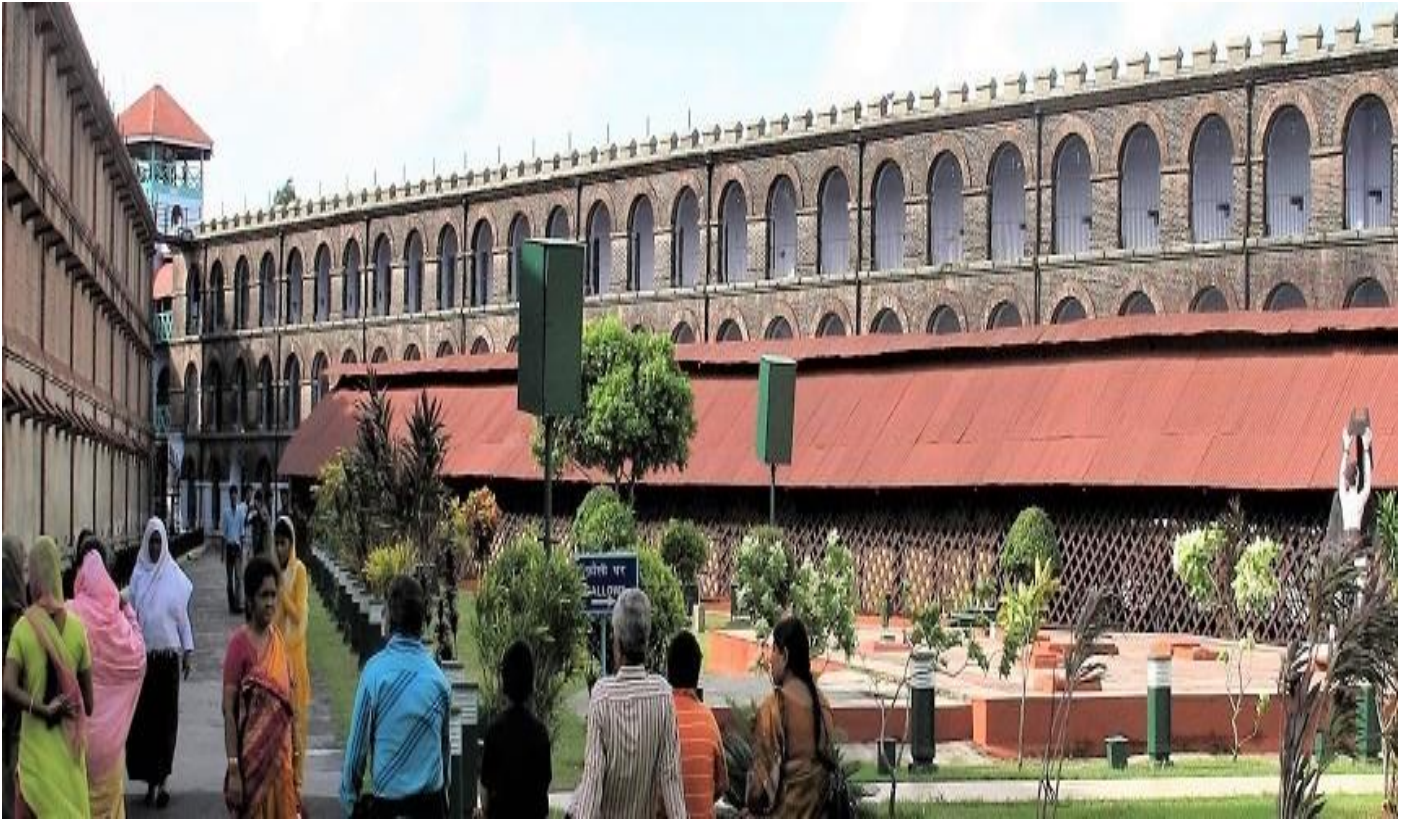
14. *The Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, paying homage to the political prisoner Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, in his solitary confinement cell. Source: <https://cutt.ly/3YWg4EG>*

Today, the "Cellular Jail" or "Kala Pani" is a memorial in honor of the activists who were imprisoned, tortured or died there, while participating in the Revolutionary struggle to liberate India from the British invaders and conquerors. Statues of the freedom heroes who spent difficult years there have been erected to commemorate them. There is also a museum with dolls depicting the harsh life in the prisons, an exhibition of photographs of Revolutionary fighters and a library on the Liberation Movement.

Most evenings during the week, life in the "Cellular Jail" and the History of the Liberation Movement are presented with Light and Sound.



15. *Sound and Light at the "Kala Pani" Jail in Port Blair. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.*



16. Visitors of the Cellular Jail “Kala Pani” in Port Blair. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.



17. View of the vegetation and the sea of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, from the roof of the “Kala Pani” Cellular Jail in Port Blair. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis.