The Andaman Islands are a chain of 204 islands, of various sizes, situated in the Bay of Bengal at a distance of 590 miles from the mouth of the Hooghly. The native Andamanese were of the Negrito stock, like the Semang of Malaya and the pygmies of the Philippines. They lived by hunting-gathering and fishing, and used harpoons, nets, and bows for the purpose. The tandem of their islandic existence was ruffled when the British decided to establish a colony on the Andamans. In the year 1789, the British, after extensive surveys opened a small settlement in the southwest corner of the Andamans. However, death and disease engulfed the settlement soon after its inauguration. By 1796, the British officials came to the sad realization that it would be prudent, in view of ‘humanity and economy’, to end the settlement. The temporary dwelling places were abandoned, military and police personnel evacuated, free laborers and white officials repatriated to India, and convicts dispatched to Penang. A lone vessel was left behind as a mark of the British claim to the Islands. After 1796, the Islands reverted to their pre-colonial life. Following the eighteenth century debacle, the only contact that the British had with the Andamans, until the 1850s, was during the outbreak of the First Burmese War in 1824, when, in anticipation of hostilities, a fleet was briefly stationed at Port Cornwallis.

The colonial government in the mid-nineteenth century once again coveted the Andamans, which had lain spurned and neglected for nearly half a century. The interest in the Andamans, which had waned since its abandonment in 1796, was revived as a result of the displacements, vicissitudes, and transformations in the mid-nineteenth century Indian Ocean politics and the conclusive push by the British Colonial State to secure the frontiers of its Empire. The British gained in confidence with the disgorging of Bengal revenues, successful campaigns against local and European adversaries, a monopolistic grip over the opium trade, and the dividends that finally began pouring in from the South-east Asian commercial colonies. However, the self-assurance and morale of the Raj were severely jolted with the loss of trading monopoly in China and the instituting of free trade, and, subsequently, by the outbreak of the revolt in the year 1857. These divergent circumstances conjointly put the
Colonial State in a colonizing overdrive, especially in the frontier regions. The protagonist of our story, the Andamans also being one such frontier island group. This time the Andamans were bedecked to serve as a maritime roost, as an imperial patrol officer and also as a penal fortress. In contrast to its first innings as a British colony, the Andamans in the second period of colonization proved its worthiness, although only by fulfilling the last of the functions – as an imperial jailhouse.

The infamous 'Cellular Jail', immortalized in nationalist histories, was not built in Port Blair until the year 1898. In the twentieth century, it became the abode of the political prisoners, sentenced to transportation, who were permanently incarcerated in the Cellular Jail. The Jail, glorified in convict hagiography, became a symbol of the nationalist struggle raging on the Indian subcontinent. There was a brief interlude in the colonial history of the Islands when, during the Second World War, the Japanese forces occupied them for three years. This was one of the most notorious periods in the history of the Andamans when the Japanese perpetrated genocide in the Islands akin to the holocaust. At the end of the War, the Islands were reoccupied by the British in 1945, and handed over to the government of the Indian Republic in 1947. Following independence, there was a political debate about assimilating the Islands into the state of West Bengal or to accord it the status of an independent state. It was settled that it would be administered as a Union Territory headed by a Chief Commissioner, to be nominated by the President of India. In 1982, the office of the Chief Commissioner was upgraded to the post of Lieutenant Governor and now the Andaman Islands, together with the Nicobar Islands, send one elected representative to the Parliament.¹

Revisiting Island Studies

The notion that Islands existed on the peripheries of civilizations, empires, and human culture has been a long-standing one. This popular conception has been reinforced, in the past few centuries, by the phenomenon of colonialism and also historical scholarship, especially, with regard to the tropical islands and island colonies of the various European empires. The environmental studies have generally approached the history of the tropical

islands to trace the origins of Western conservation policies and the role that islands have played, as colonial peripheries, in extension of human knowledge. While this has brought the islands into historical spotlight, it has done little to rescue them from their ‘peripheral’ status. Similarly, oceanic histories have nearly always concentrated on only the much frequented, commercially, and politically significant island spaces, at the cost of marginalizing and peripheralizing the other less-frequented islands. Island colonies have received much attention in works on labour history, but only the ones, which were a significant commercial limb of the Empire.

Using the case study of the Andamans, the present work seeks to address some of the issues related to the marginality and outcasting of the ‘island spaces’ in historical writing. Hitherto, the encounter with the indigenous inhabitants of the New World and other parts of the

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Empire has been the objects of inquiry.5 While there is a growing historical literature on the manner in which water bodies, forests, ports, and hills were profiled and spatially reorganized by the British, scant attention has been paid to islands.6 The islands were also a particular geographical and environmental zone, which were spatially reordered by the Colonial State. Drawing on geographical studies of landscapes and spaces, the present work examines the geographical specificity of the islands, their role in the larger historical processes, the genesis of the island spatial metaphor, and its impact on the politics of environment and the politics of colonization remains a rarely trodden field.7 By examining the politics of spatialization of the Andaman ‘islands’, the attempt would be to bring out the discursive power of spatial metaphors, demonstrating their causative role in society, and


unravelling their influence on other social-political processes. This is because the power to shape, order, and use space is one of the critical political means of controlling society. These ideas would be explored in the first section with reference to the pre-colonial and colonial travel and survey literature on the Andamans.

*Mapping the Colonial Encounter*

My inquiry into the world of the Andamans began with an exploration of the history of prisons. The Andamans seemed to provide a perfect case study as the entire island had served as a jailhouse. As I delved deeper into archival records, I realized that there was more to the Andamans Islands, and to Island studies, than just the history of the penal settlements. In fact, I had been ensnared till that time by the colonial imagery of the Islands as a penal fortress. Gradually, I acquired a clearer perception regarding the issues involved in such a study. One, that the standard historical categories which had been hitherto employed to study the Andamans specifically, and islands societies generally, were not workable. Questioning and problematizing the inherited perceptions combined with an interdisciplinary approach was the first step towards understanding the manner in which the history of the Andamans unfolded. The penal epithet, I sensed, was one such aspect of the inherited wisdom, which was really a dressing provided by the British colonists to the Islands, to demarcate and inscribe them as a marginal and uncivilized space. Second, in order to understand the political and social dynamics of the Islands’ history I had to retrace my footsteps and begin by examining the actual process of its colonization, to uncover the reasons behind their acquisition as a colony. These insights provided the entry point into the tangled world of the history of the Andamans.

Examining the process of colonization of the Andamans brought with it, its own set of problems. How did it actually take place? What were the British reasons and motivations? What purpose was it to serve for the Empire? What made it difficult to arrive at a clear picture was not only the dense foliage of penal history but also the layering over of the imperial actions with imaginations, fables, and myths, in sum, a *discourse*. It was by examining the ingredients of this discourse, surrounding the colonization of the Islands, that I decided to begin my journey. Chapter One would demonstrate the way this ‘encounter discourse’ helped locate the antecedents for the birth of the penal epithet and the manner in which it
had come to attach itself to the Island. The realm of the British imagination had resonance with other such narratives produced in the moment of the colonial encounter with the peripheries and extremities of the Empire. The Andamans came to be imagined as islands that were inhabited by cannibalistic natives and covered with deadly jungles emitting poisonous gases.

While the analysis of the discourse certified the genesis of the penal epithet it did not necessarily reveal the actual intentions and objectives of the colonizers. This was because the discourse, while crucial in understanding the colonial perceptions, was not always representative of the actual intentions and objectives of the colonizers. This was true for Andamans because the actual issues and events, which led to colonization of the Andamans, were very much different from the ones that went into setting up of the penal settlement.8 Chapter Two examines the way the mounting European rivalry over the Indian Oceanic waters and the British attempts to secure a toehold in the Bay of Bengal, in the late eighteenth century and then again in the mid-nineteenth century, provided the backdrop for the politics of colonization. The Andamans, much like Australia, was a frontier outpost significant from both strategic and political perspective. The silence in the Indian Ocean historiography on the Andamans had unwittingly contributed towards its characterization as a place fit for visitations solely from the anthropologists, archaeologists, and nationalist writers.

Having examined the process of the colonization of the Andamans, the next section would examine the manner in which the Island colony was administered. This section is significant as it attempts to document in the internal fissures, dichotomies, divergences and contradictions in the functioning of the Imperial administration. The character of the Andamans as a colony and its specific location within the Imperial edifice was throughout an

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object of debate: was it a penal settlement or simply a settlement. This official dialectics, at all times, impaired the effective administration of the colony. The differing viewpoints regarding the character of the colony hinged on two central issues – the social profile of the convict being received in Andamans; and the view that an official took of the character of punishment. The other two undefined variables hampering the daily administrative work were the geography and ecology of the colony and the native resistance to British control. Although their colonization had made them an inseparable adjunct of the Indian Empire, the geography of the Islands imposed a degree of isolation and also raised the financial costs involved in developing the colony. The resistance that the convicts and free Indians posted on police and naval duty, in the Andamans, proffered, further encumbered the administration. Convicts escaping into the jungle, murderous attacks on British officials, insubordination and quarrelling amongst Indian policemen, illegal trading of opium and tobacco, embezzlement, fudging of account books besides malingering were the everyday forms of resistance. The other questions that this section explores are – what were the factors that circumscribed the functioning of the colonial administration? How did the British administer an Island colony, which was yet to benefit from the development of steam shipping, communication networks and telegraph lines? What was the central focus of British administration on a colony that was covered with tropical jungles and required decades of hard work before it could begin to pay back dividends? Further, notwithstanding the problems faced by the British in administering the colony, instituting a labour regime was the only security that the British had in ensuring that the Andamans became a revenue-rich colony. Moreover, since the Settlement had been established as a penal station, the convicts formed the main workforce. How did then the administrators straddle these two mutually exclusive aims? What were the various forms adopted by the British to classify and work the labour force?

Exploring Penal History

While the larger attempt of this work is to disengage the history of the Andamans from the imperious presence of penal history, nevertheless, any study of the Andamans would remain incomplete without an examination of its convict system. And, after all, the Andamans were positioned as a penal colony in the colonial pantheon. The need for distancing the history of the Andamans from its penal history, thus, has the danger of the historian overlooking the
significance of the penal settlement. Therefore, in order to do justice to the history of the penal settlement this thesis locates itself in the time frame of 1858 to 1921. From the perspective of the social history of the Settlement the period in between these two dates displays continuities and cohesion. The Andamans was colonized for the second time in 1858, and with time, there developed a system of administration specific to the Island colony, which came to be denoted as the 'Andaman System'. This system had its own logic, tensions and limitations, which eventually contributed to the drive towards its abolition in the early decades of the twentieth century. The political atmosphere of the period also further catalyzed the process. The British were, however, forced in 1921, due to the circumstances specific to that period, to revoke the abolition of the penal settlement. Nevertheless, the year 1921, marked a significant break in the history of the Andamans as the character of the colony undeniably changed thereafter. The Settlement was opened up for voluntary migration of all sorts of convicts and communities who were willing to make the Andamans their home.

The politics of colonization of the Andamans comes to full circle with the attempts to abolish the penal settlement. The present work also examines the official debates and circumstances under which the abolition of the Settlement was contemplated. The central question which it addresses is - why did the British wish to abolish a system, which had taken years to build, and the one on which millions of rupees had been invested? What did the British hope to achieve by abolition? Was the abolition a product of internal dynamics of the colony or produced by the wider currents of Imperial politics? The chapter on abolition politics begins answering these questions by first examining the discourse surrounding the abolition. The moral pitch of the arguments of the abolitionists, which painted the Andamans as a virtual 'hell on earth', the British fears of prevalence of prostitution and homosexuality, the notions of 'fallen character' of the convict progeny, failure of the self-supporter system and the loss of deterrent and reformatory value of the sentence of transportation were some of the indices of the discourse.

9 This has been taken up in Chapter Seven.
With regard to the working of the penal settlement in the Andamans, historians have studied the strategic intervention of labor, surveillance, segregation, and medicine. While these categories provide for a sophisticated analysis, they nevertheless remain a simplistic inversion of Foucauldian categories. These categories leave various questions unanswered, such as, given the geographical distance between the island and the subcontinent and the fact that the convict officers supervised the Settlement, what would be the real nature of surveillance? Did the everyday penal strategies employed on the mainland really work in the Andamans? How was the assistance of the convict officer secured? The above categories also fail to explain the relative absence of convict rebellion. They tell little about the way the British managed to control nearly 10,000 convicts with a few hundred officials and policemen, on an Island where the penal strategies of surveillance and segregation could rarely be enforced. Chapter Five would explore the various methods employed by the British for convict management and attempts to posit an alternative framework for studying penal settlements established on islands. It also attempts to locate the Andamans in the British penal history and in other island histories that served as penal colonies at different moments in history.

The present thesis also seeks to move away from using the Cellular Jail as the focus of penal history. Historical attention and popular mythology have invariably been focussed on the Cellular Jail. A recent book by Satadru Sen attempts to correct the balance of history by concentrating on the social history of the penal colony from the period 1857 to 1898, the year when the building of the Cellular Jail commences. While the book does a commendable job of documenting the early history of the penal settlement, Cellular Jail continues to serve as its reference point. Sen inadvertently resurrects the ghost of the Jail even while claiming to demolish its overbearing presence in the history of the penal settlement. For him, the Jail is a significant landmark in the history of the Andamans. To be fair, the Cellular Jail is a definite milestone from the perspective of the history of political prisoners and the history of the national movement. However, to say that the rest of the penal settlement paled in comparison to the Jail, once the transportation of political prisoners began, would be a

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complete misrepresentation. A close study of the twentieth-century social history of the Andamans belies Sen's claim.

*The Mottled Convict Voices*

Further, the social history of the convicts is an area of study, which has, hitherto, remained an uncharted territory. The muted convict voice makes an ephemeral appearance in most colonial histories as 'convict resistance', which is seen as the sum total of the convict's life experience. On the other hand, colonial records, and monographs oscillate between two extremes in the categorization of the convict's social life. There is either a romanticization of the idyllic islands where the convicts have the appearance of reformed savages, peacefully going about their daily chores, no different from the Indian peasants; or the convicts are seen as conniving brutes obsessed with the idea of 'escape', where the state of unfreedom that they are subjected to is seen as the most defining characteristic of their life in the Settlement. Breaking out of these moulds, this thesis has used the theme of the domestication of the convict as an entry point, into the social life of the convict. The convict when he arrived in the Andamans was akin to a shipwrecked vessel, severed from all ties and floating without an anchor. The doors of the social world he had inhabited before he set foot on the Andamans were supposed to be closed to him forever. Chapter Six examines the attempt of the State to rebuild the life of such a dispossessed and beleaguered social being. The main denominators of the domestication of the convict were matrimony, setting up a household and the acquisition of some property. The reasons for which the State wished to rehabilitate the convict were mixed, varied and ever changing. The attitude of the convict was also quite ambivalent with regard to marriage. While it held a promise of a new life for a convict thrown into an unknown world, it did not have the social sanctity and purity for him that a marriage contracted at home did. The day of the release of the convict was the moment of reckoning for him when his real disposition with regard to his life in the Andamans came to fore. This chapter draws upon government records, colonial monographs, interviews with convict descendants, and leaflets out of the lives of the convicts to narrate a social history of the Settlement.

The thesis attempts to bring out the chequered, multi-layered, and mottled character of the convict's social life in the Settlement and, demonstrates the divergence in the views and
attitudes of the State and the subalterns. Perhaps the hitherto monochrome reading of the convict experience by the historians was the result of a paucity of convict memoirs, letters or records. However, there is a plethora of material in the government records, which, if read against the grain, does reveal significant details about the convict’s social life. But besides these, letters and monographs do exist, which the convicts have left behind. One such previously untouched historical record is a memoir written by a returnee Wahabi convict, Maulavi Mohammad Jafar Thanesari. He was transported to the Andamans in the 1860s and after twenty years of glorious stay in exile he wrote his memoirs, titled ‘Kalapani – Tarikh-iAjeeb’. This memoir is situated within the contemporary Urdu literary style and is full of the Maulavi’s reminiscences and his gratitude to Allah for having given him a good life in the Andamans. This text provides a crucial point of entry into documenting convict experience in the Andamans, which was varied and defies categorization – either as repressive or liberating.

*Traces of the Past*

The writing of this thesis has involved sifting through a plethora of archival records of various government departments from the 1780s to around the 1940s. The compilation of the thesis was plagued not by a want of records but because of plenitude. The government records written by and for the British administrators have their own narrative, chronology and a linearity of movement. Thus, the departures, disjunctures, shifts, and continuities in the history of the Settlement were not always adequately reflected or represented in the archival records. An extensive fieldwork in the Andamans helped overcome the limitations of the written sources. I travelled the entire length and the breadth of the North, Middle, South, and the Little Andamans. I met, lived with, and interviewed a number of descendants of the convicts, and the surviving aboriginal population living in the tribal reserves. The oral data collected during the fieldwork has not been used much in the thesis but was extremely significant in understanding the social history of the Andamans. Visiting different places and meeting the people domiciled on the Islands brought alive and helped question the mental images created by books. Travelling in the Andamans, till today is not very convenient and some of the villages in the North Andamans are yet to receive the benefits of

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11 I have not translated the text but tried to follow it as closely as possible.
telecommunications and electricity. This drew my attention to the significance of geography in moulding the history of the Andamans. The present study also makes use of historical methods and a range of travel literature, geographical writings, archaeological data, anthropological monographs and writings, besides the government reports and publications. The conceptual framework of this research work is derived primarily from five fields of social science – Island studies, interdisciplinary and comparative studies, convict studies, labour history and the environmental studies.