

Andaman's Cellular jail holds lessons for the current Indian polity

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The new game of appropriating national leaders who are long dead and gone as 'Hindu nationalists' is rather interesting. It competes with the pastime, popularised in the early decades after Independence, to absorb all divergent streams of the national movement under one banner of the 'Indian National Congress'. This leads to eulogisation and 'canonisation' and here, one must examine the recent attempt to foist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar as the most noteworthy icon of Andaman's infamous Cellular Jail.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

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Some MPs raised this issue in Parliament recently, alleging that all other freedom fighters were ignored as the chief tourist attraction of the jail; that the sound and light show, focussed only on Savarkar. They called it the "deification of one individual who finally compromised with the British", but we may recall that Savarkar's elevation had already begun in 2003 when the Vajpayee government named the Port Blair airport after him.

Not all may be aware that the most feared leaders of the First War of Independence of 1857, who were not hanged, were actually sent to remote Andaman islands to die. For instance, Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi, who had declared Jihad against the British in 1857, was sent to Kala-Pani in 1858, along with the first batch of 309, in which half were Muslims who at that time were not asked to produce their certificates of patriotism. Khairabadi died there in 1861 and a few years later, 87 prisoners of the 238 who tried to escape, were hanged.

The Cellular Jail came up only in 1906 and its strategy was to isolate prisoners in 'solitary confinement' cells as a means to break their spirits. This hardly ever succeeded, except in remarkable cases like that of Savarkar. Publications Division's 1975 archival volume mentions his plea to the Viceroy in 1913 and several others. "If the government in their manifold beneficence and mercy release me, I for one cannot but be the staunchest advocate of constitutional progress and loyalty to the English government." It may be appropriate to clear the air before the father of Hindutva is valorised further.

Bhagat Singh, on the other hand, wrote to the British in 1931 saying that "we had waged war and were, therefore, war prisoners. And we claim to be treated as such... and shot dead instead of to be hanged."

Savarkar was definitely a luminary in this jail, but so were Batukeshwar Dutt and Yogendra Shukla

who had been Bhagat Singh's close and fearless comrades. Bhai Paramand, the founder of Punjab's Ghadar Party, who was convicted in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case was imprisoned here as were Ananta Singh and Ganesh Ghosh of the Chittagong Armoury Raid fame and Savarkar's own brother, Babarao. With so many heroes around, it puzzles us as to why the hospital constructed in the 1960s near the Cellular Jail was named after Gobind Ballabh Pant, who was never detained there. This 'appropriation' is as bizarre as fringe Hindutva elements lionising Sardar Patel, for it is he who arrested RSS leaders and banned the outfit for some time.

Sharad Pawar raised a storm recently on April 11 when he quoted Savarkar as having said: "cows should not be a burden on farmers, if anyone eats cow meat then I don't hold him guilty". This is startling and we need to know all the facts, so that he is rescued from controversy and the real Savarkar claims his rightful position. History is not just sending WhatsApp messages fabricating half-facts with palpable falsehoods, but it is a corpus that has to be referred to frequently, for total clarity.

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