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Naming the empire: The legacy of the revolt of 1857 in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

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Abstract

The place names do not just indicate a location, but can also serve as a memory of political power, history, and evolving notions of identity. In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the colonial naming, the colonial power, and the colonial memory of resistance in South Asia is an important case study. After the Revolt of 1857, the British in 1858 established a penal settlement at Port Blair, the islands became an important place of Colonial punishment, surveillance, labour and exile. In this growing colonial environment, a number of areas were named after British officials and army soldiers. The colonial names of Havelock Island and Neil Island are important since they were linked to military officers involved in suppressing the Revolt of 1857. Concurrently, other names like Ross Island and Port Blair have an earlier history of British surveying and administration and are not only understood within the history of 1857. This article explores how colonial naming practices, imperial spatial control, the post-1857 penal settlement, and the reworking of the past impacted each other. It challenges the colonial naming of Havelock and Neil and Ross islands as well as the postcolonial claims to renaming them after Swaraj, martyrs and Subhas Chandra Bose, and the creation of a new geographical commemoration vocabulary. These names are therefore a testament to the ways in which geographical names can become a place where colonial power, resistance, and historical memory converge.

Keywords: Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Revolt of 1857, Colonialism, Place Names, Havelock Island, Neil Island, Ross Island, Port Blair, Cellular Jail, Historical Memory

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Introduction:

Place names are a significant aspect of colonial history. Names can be used to designate a place and may seem like a straightforward way of doing so, but they carry meaning in terms of political power, cultural perceptions, administrative systems, and historical memory. Geographical spaces were commonly mapped, standardized, classified and named by colonial governments as part of a wider process of territorial administration. The making of geographical knowledge in British India was linked to the building of imperial power. Matthew Edney has demonstrated that mapping was not just a descriptive enterprise in British cartography, but was embedded in the geographical construction and administration of British India (Edney, 1997). Bernard S. Cohn showed, however, that colonial rule required systematic knowledge, defined as the ability to categorize people, territories, resources, and institutions, by the British (Cohn, 1996).

These processes are particularly well suited for study in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, were strategically positioned in the sea. British interest in the area had begun long before the Revolt of 1857, and had flourished both in the form of surveying and in settlement. In the late 18th century, Archibald Blair involved himself in surveying work, which was linked with the growth of the harbour and settlement which then was called Port Blair. So, the process of colonial geographical naming in the Andamans had neither started in 1857.Therefore, 1857 did not mark the beginning of colonial geographical naming in the Andamans but was part of a gradual process of surveying and colonial expansion by the British. The Andaman administration's history books would locate Blair in this earlier period of British intervention.

This significance of the islands was drastically altered following the Revolt of 1857. Following the uprising, the British revived its plans for a penal settlement in the Andamans. The first prisoners arrived in the islands on 10 March 1858 and Port Blair grew into a key location for colonial punishment. According to government reports, the first group were political offenders and rebels sent to the islands following the suppression of the rebellion. This settlement changed the political significance of the landscape of the Andaman. Not only was the islands a distant ocean territory, but it was also a place of captivity, servitude, watchfulness and penal treatment.

Relationship of the name of the colonies with the Revolt of 1857, however, demands historical accuracy. The British military men who were involved in suppression were linked with Havelock Island and Neil Island. Neither Havelock nor Neil is mentioned by the official history of Andaman tourism in relation to the events of 1857. Ross Island, however, was named after a marine surveyor Sir Daniel Ross, and was named in an earlier period of British surveying and harbour administration. This is a critical issue in the islands' colonial geography.

Therefore it is not suggested in this article that all colonial names were established as a direct result of the Revolt of 1857. Rather, it explores the process of the different layers of colonial naming being embedded in the post-1857 penal landscape and the meanings which these names took on in the post-colonial India. Havelock Island, Neil Island, Ross Island, Port Blair and the Cellular Jail are emphasized and the renaming of the three main islands in 2018 is looked into.

The Andaman Islands and the Growing Colonists' Knowledge of Them:

Prior to the advent of the Europeans the Andaman Islands had a long history. Native peoples built their own social and cultural, economic and ecological relationship with the islands. But since the 18th century European interest in the sea became more pronounced and the region became part of systems of imperial surveying and geographical knowledge.

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Surveying by the British played an important role in this. The work of Archibald Blair in the late eighteenth century was related to the choice and development of an appropriate harbour and settlement site. The archives of the Andaman administration link Blair to the earliest exploration of the islands by the British and to the founding of Port Blair.

The purpose of surveying did not only extend to mapping. The goal of colonial surveys was to transform geographic space into a shape that could be integrated into administrative, military and economic structures. Edney's research on cartography in Britain has shown the relationship between the representation of geography and the British territoriality of empire (Edney, 1997). Cohn's notion of colonial knowledge is also about classification, documentation, measurement, and representation as key aspects of how British rule works.

Thus, the Andaman Islands entered into a colonial knowledge system prior to 1857. As the British authorities increasingly saw the islands in terms of strategic location, navigational opportunities, settlement, resources, and population. One element of this greater phenomenon was colonial names. These names were institutionalised once they were entered in maps, administrative records, reports and official correspondence.

British constructions and constructions of the islands and its people through the museum, collection, exhibition and colonial knowledge practices are also illustrated by Claire Wintle's study of colonial collecting from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (2013). The naming process, the mapping process, the collecting process, and the classification process were then linked aspects of colonial representation.The naming process, the mapping process, the collecting process, and the classification process were then linked aspects of colonial representation.

The Revolt of 1857 was one of the biggest challenges to the rule of the EIC in India. It started as a military revolt of some members of Bengal Army but grew into a big revolt by other political, social and regional groups. Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, Bareilly and the central and northern regions of the country turned into strongholds of resistance. There were several factors behind the revolt such as economic depression, social and religious fears, political annexation and military grievances (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

Executions, confiscations, imprisonment and transportation followed the British suppression of the revolt. The Andaman Islands then came into a new significance in this context. They were located a long way off so they could be taken prisoner away from the rest of society.

On 10 March 1858, some 200 prisoners arrived at the Port Blair harbour on Chatham Island. These prisoners are officially given as political offenders, related to the uprising and the speed of the settlement building up is documented in 1858. Therefore the settlement was an important institutional impact of the colonial order after 1857.

The Revolt of 1857 and the Penal Settlement:

The penal settlement was far from being an ordinary prison. Satadru Sen's research on colonial punishment reveals the evolution of a unique colonial society in Andaman where punishment, labour, surveillance, settlement and administration are intertwined (2000). The prisoners were employed in diverse labor activities and the colonial authorities tried to control the movements, communication and social life of the prisoners.

The geographical distance of the islands added to the concept of transportation. The sea locked prisoners away from their communities and effected a punishment which was both geographically remote and labor and surveillance oriented. The Andamans then became a significant aspect of the colonial prison system.

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The post-1857 period is particularly significant in the context of the place names for this reason: it reflects the later uses and meanings of colonial place names. Names that had been created in the previous parts of the British surveying and/or administration were now part of a landscape that was becoming synonymous with punishment and imperial control.

The system of place names in the colonies was part of a larger set of practices for the production of imperial geographical knowledge. Maps and geographical surveys enabled the colonial state to categorise land, to set boundaries, to locate strategic points and to standardise geographical terms. Edney (1997) has suggested that mapping was an active part of the geographical work involved in the construction of British India. Cohn (1996) similarly demonstrates that colonial knowledge systems were closely related to the exercise of political power.

Colonial Names and Imperial Geography:

The naming of a location had a double function: 1) to indicate administrative jurisdiction and 2) to commemorate it. Once a name had been confirmed in official documents, maps, gazetteers and administrative reports this can be institutionalized in the geographical vocabulary of the colonial state. Names of places were thus not only geographical markers, but also a part of the language that represented, organised and governed territory by the colonial authorities (Cohn, 1996; Edney, 1997).

In the Andaman Islands, there were several levels of colonial names. Port Blair was connected with the early British settlement and surveying activities of Lieutenant Archibald. The islands were given their names by the British after the survey of the seas by Ross and after British military officers who were a part of the suppression of the Revolt of 1857 (n.d., Andaman & Nicobar Administration; Directorate of Art and Culture, Andaman & Nicobar Administration). (Art Culture)

Historically significant difference between these names. It has shown that naming of the Andamans was not an isolated, coordinated campaign for commemorating the suppression of the Revolt of 1857. Instead, names came from various stages of colonial survey, military campaign, settlement, administration and were then translated into a uniform imperial geographical space (Cohn, 1996; Edney, 1997).

The island of Havelock and the Memory of 1857:

The best link between the place naming of the colonies and the Revolt of 1857 in the Andaman Islands is Havelock Island. The island got its name from Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, a British military officer who had played a role in the British campaigns during the Revolt of 1857. Therefore his name was intertwined with the geographies of the Andamans and the militarized history of its suppression of uprising (Andaman & Nicobar Tourism, n.d.).

Havelock was related to the British military activity in the Kanpur and Lucknow area during the rebellion. His later memorialization by geographical naming is an example of how soldiers of imperial campaigns could become a part of the colonial landscape.

The Government of India renamed Havelock Island as Swaraj Dweep on 30th December 2018. The renaming was part of a series of initiatives to mark the freedom movement and the historic link of the Andaman Islands with Indian nationalism (Press Information Bureau [PIB] 2018). (Press Information Bureau)

It is a historical contrast between the two names. The word "Havelock" conjured up the image of a British military officer who fought in the suppression of the 1857 uprising, while the term "Swaraj" was the political jargon of Indian nationalism and self-rule. The transformation of the commemorative meaning attached to the island, can therefore be seen as a change (Nora, 1989; PIB, 2018).

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The Memory of Repression, Neil Island:

Colonial naming of places in the military history of 1857 becomes yet another connection with Neil Island. The name of the island was given in honour of Brigadier-General James George Smith Neill, a British officer who helped put down the Revolt of 1857 (Andaman & Nicobar Tourism, n.d.). His name thus became a part of the geographical vocabulary of British India.

The name acquired a special military and imperial connotation due to Neill's involvement in the suppression of the uprising. The naming of one of the islands after such a man is a testament to the way in which colonial geography could integrate colonial memory of military service and imperial authority.

Neil Island (with Havelock Island and Ross Island) was renamed Shaheed Dweep on 30 December 2018 (PIB, 2018). The change from “Neil” to “Shaheed” is a shift in the vocabulary of commemorations: with the former name referring to a British military officer, the latter referring to martyrs of the Indian freedom movement.

The exploration, governance and settlement of Ross Island:

The naming of Ross Island is also a testament to the fact that the history of the naming of the Andamans cannot be narrated without referring back to the Revolt of 1857. The island was named after Sir Daniel Ross, a marine surveyor and the island's location was significant for the development of the British settlement and administration around Port Blair (Directorate of Art and Culture, Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.).

History on Ross Island was thus inextricably linked to the surveying of the British and the strategy and administration of the sea. The later use as an administrative centre of this geographical name shows how an earlier name for a geographical location could be assimilated to the post-1857 penal-colonial environment. Ross Island has been renamed Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep on 30 December 2018. The Government of India had made the association of the renaming with the historical importance of Subhas Chandra Bose and his relationship with the Andaman Islands in the year 1943 (PIB, 2018). (Press Information Bureau)

The shift from the language of the colonial survey and administration to that of Indian nationalism and freedom movement that occurred as the transition took place from Ross Island to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep is a change in the language of commemoration.The change in the language of commemorations from the colonial survey and administration to Indian nationalism and freedom movement that occurred in the process of transition from Ross Island to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep is a change in the language of commemoration.

Port Blair provides another important example of the changing historical meaning of colonial geographical names. The settlement is associated with Archibald Blair, whose surveying and settlement activities belonged to the earlier phase of British colonial expansion in the Andamans (Directorate of Art and Culture, Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.).

However, the historical significance of Port Blair changed dramatically after the Revolt of 1857. The British established a new penal settlement in the Andamans in 1858, and the first group of prisoners arrived in March 1858. The islands subsequently became an important centre of colonial transportation and penal administration (Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.; Government of India, 2017).

Thus, a geographical name associated with the earlier period of British surveying acquired new meanings through the history of political imprisonment and colonial penal administration. The name Port Blair consequently came to signify not only an earlier phase of British exploration and settlement but also the

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later history of Kala Pani and colonial incarceration. In September 2024, the Government of India announced the renaming of Port Blair as Sri Vijaya Puram. The Government described the new name as reflecting the contribution of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to India's freedom struggle and its historical significance (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024).

The legacy of 1857 and Cellular Jail:

After 1857, when the penal settlement was launched, they ended up with the Cellular Jail, which became one of the most significant symbols of colonial imprisonment in India. The construction of the Cellular Jail started in late 1890s and was completed in early 20th century, with the period of 1896–1906 as the main period of construction (Director of Art and Culture, Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.; Incredible India, n.d.).

It is essential to know what happened when. The penal settlement was set up in 1858, soon after the Revolt while the Cellular Jail was built several decades later. So, it's not possible to view the two as equivalent historical processes. The first one symbolized the inception of the post-1857 penal system, the latter the Cellular Jail, which marked another stage in the evolution of colonial jailer's regime and the growing export of political prisoners (Government of India, 2017; Directorate of Art and Culture, Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.). (Press Information Bureau)

The Cellular Jail was built with seven wings outfaced from a central tower and was meant to help in the solitary confinement and monitoring of prisoners. It was designed in such a way that it mirrored the colonial government's growing focus on isolation, discipline and surveillance in the prison system (Edney, 1997; Directorate of Art and Culture Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.).

So the tie-in between 1857 and the Cellular Jail was not a direct one but institutional and chronological. The Revolt of 1857 helped the growth of the Andaman Penal settlement and Cellular Jail was built a few decades later in an atmosphere of colonialism that was increasingly influenced by revolutionary nationalism and political incarceration.

The Renaming of the Islands and Historical Memory:

Renaming of Ross, Neil and Havelock Islands in 2018 is an important change in the official commemorative geography of the Andamans. Thus, the Ross Island was renamed as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep, Neil Island as Shaheed Dweep and Havelock Island as Swaraj Dweep (PIB, 2018). (Press Information Bureau)

The three names represent different aspects of the nationalist memory. The words 'Swaraj', 'Shaheed' and 'Subhas Chandra Bose' allude to 'Azad Hind', meaning self-rule, 'martyrdom' or 'Shaheed' and 'Provisional Government of Azad Hind' respectively. The Government of India made a clear link between the renaming and the importance of the freedom movement and Bose's connection with the islands (PIB, 2018, 2023). (Press Information Bureau)

This renaming can thus be interpreted as a change in the official commemorative language of the islands. The earlier names honour British military officers and post colonial surveyors, the latter are more focused on Indian nationalists, ideas and memory.

But this should not be seen as the erasure of colonial history. The older names are also significant historical documents as they reflect the political context in which colonial geographical knowledge was created. Historical names can thus serve historians in their quest to form a picture of the evolution and alteration of the relationship between geography, colonial power and collective memory (Cohn, 1996; Nora, 1989).

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The history of the Andaman Islands serves as a fine example of the need for place names as historical sources. Evidence of political control, administrative practice, memory of the military past and shifting commemorative practices can be derived from a geographical name. Colonial terms were frozen into maps as well as into administrative documents, gazetteers and official reports, and were repeated so many times they became “natural” geographical landmarks (Cohn, 1996; Edney, 1997).

The Andaman case is also an example of the need for chronology. The other two, Havelock and Neil, have direct links with British military men from the Revolt of 1857 while the other two, Port Blair and Ross Island, are from earlier stages of British surveying and settlement. These various historical processes, however, were brought together by the growing penal-colonial environment after 1858 (Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.; Directorate of Art and Culture, Andaman & Nicobar Administration, n.d.). (North and Middle Andaman)

The changes in the names of the islands, which followed, illustrate another aspect of place-name history. Though the geographical characteristics have remained largely the same, the official commemorative vocabulary has changed: Havelock is now Swaraj Dweep, Neil is now Shaheed Dweep, Ross is now Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep and Port Blair is now Sri Vijaya Puram (PIB, 2018; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024). (Press Information Bureau)

A place name is thus a way of remembering the past. They are geographically, administratively, politically and culturally. Their transformation offers historians insights into shifting understandings of history, and a glimpse into the way in which landscapes can become places where conflicting histories of colonialism, repressive rule, nationalism and freedom can be institutionalized (Nora, 1989; Cohn, 1996).

Conclusion:

Colonial place-names in Andaman and Nicobar are a product of geography, imperial control, the Revolt of 1857, prison administration and the legacy of history. The British reaction to the revolt, in the form of the penal settlement at Port Blair set up in 1858, was one of the most important institutional results of the revolt and turned the islands into an important focus of colonial punishment and transportation. In this context, the island names Havelock Island and Neil Island were given by British military personnel to the islands involved in suppressing the 1857 uprising, and the name of Ross Island and Port Blair were derived from the British's earlier history of surveying and administration. With the further history of the Cellular Jail after 1857 that transported rebels, came its further use for jail-keeping later political revolutionaries of the Andamans. The renaming of the 3 islands – Havelock, Neil, and Ross – as "Swaraj Dweep", "Shaheed Dweep" and "Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep", respectively, in 2018, marked a major shift in the official language of the islands' commemorations. Further evidence of this is found in the official geographical memory of the islands that has undergone constant change through the renaming of Port Blair to Sri Vijaya Puram in 2024. The Andaman topography is thus a historical palimpsest, where the histories of the indigenous peoples, the colonial surveyors, the post-1857 convicts, the revolutionary nationalist and the postcolonial memory are all present and interwoven. Place names are therefore not just a description of a map but also an important historical document where the shifts in power and memory can be explored.

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