

MY LITTLE INDIA

If there's a land where the past lives perfectly fused in the present, it is India, writes MANOJ DAS. In this new series, he recalls the past not only through history or monuments but also through legends and beliefs and encounters with characters real, strange and bizarre

TWILIGHTS at Port Blair were never pleasant for Dr Diwan Singh, senior medical officer for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. They made him nostalgic; the faint clouds on the horizon, gilded by the unsteady brush of a dropping sun, silhouetted his distant home.

That particular evening in 1941 had disturbed him more than ever — he couldn't make out why. He had, of course, heard some blood-curdling yells from a tribal hamlet while passing by a small island on his way back to his headquarters after inspecting a medical camp. It continued to echo in his memory and sound somewhat ominous. Again he did not know why.

He must do something to cleanse his mind of elusive forebodings. He drew out a scrap of paper and scribbled down his thoughts in Punjabi:

*It is the storm — over there,
lingering with a blind fury,
It will strike, from across the horizon;
It will strike —
And leave in its wake,
Darkness, obliterated sun — the moon
— the stars.*

The storm of destruction, turmoil and change.

*I won't know you, neither you me
The storm will strike —
The storm ...*

His feeling proved premonitive.

World War II broke out soon thereafter. On 23 March 1942 the Japanese struck at Port Blair. By then most of the English officers on the archipelago had escaped to the mainland. The remnants of the administration had their duty cut out.

As a few thousand Japanese marched into the town while more waited on their ships off the coast, the leftover of the colonial administration had to take prompt decisions — whether to retain their allegiance to the beaten British lion or salute the Rising Sun. Among those who decided in favour of the former course of action were the officials of the telegraph department. They blew up the office with the help of mines laid earlier — but were captured.

The uncertain native population managed to show welcome signs to the grinning invaders. The occupation was complete within 12, without a single shot being fired. Many viewed this as a good omen. And when the Japanese threw the doors of the Cellular Jail open and signalled the prisoners out, there was a bit of euphoria among the educated.

A few exciting hours were to pass

Sinister twilights



Illustration: DEBABRATA CHAKRABARTI

before the people realised why the invaders had held their fire so long. Soon, the Japanese were seen moving about in the bazars, picking up anything they liked, from any shop. Hard as they tried, the merchants found it difficult to maintain their welcome smiles. Nor could they cry, for some of them were slapped for even pulling long faces. They must look grateful. The plundering spree continued on the second day — until the unexpected happened.

"Look," Mr Kesar Das, a legend of sorts in Port Blair, popularly known as Masterji, told us, pointing to a row of houses across his balcony. "Beyond this was the residence of my friend, Zulfiquar, called Sonny by us. A Jap entered his house and picked up two eggs. 'Please leave one, for we have a child who needs it,' Sonny had the cheek to say, trying to be polite. The officer gave him a menacing look, his gestures daring Sonny to check him. Sonny suddenly drew his gun and fired."

The picture of the aftermath that emerges from what Masterji told us and from an invaluable document prepared by Rama Krishna, a *tahsildar* whom the Japanese had appointed deputy commissioner of the territory and who was also the chairman of the Andaman Branch of Netaji's Indian Independence League, is like this: The shot only grazed past the Jap's head, but he soon returned with a thousand soldiers firing their rifles in every direction. They set fire to house after house and finally caught hold of Sonny.

It was evening. Practically all the residents of Port Blair were driven to the marketplace. They included Sonny's parents and brothers. They saw their Sonny, dear to all for his courage and kind-heartedness, kicked and dragged to a corner of the ground.

And here is how Bijay Bahadur, an eye-witness, narrated the event over All India Radio, Port Blair: "A burly Jap soldier approached and caught Sonny by his hands and started beating him methodically. I had never known anything so cruel in my life. Then Sonny was made to stand; six soldiers took

positions with their rifles; the Commander stood with a white kerchief. He dropped the kerchief and Sonny was shot dead."

As the deadly sound died down, the stunned crowd was ordered to disperse. While the Japanese were plundering and burning Port Blair, some of the convicts let loose by them attacked the suburban villages. There were clashes. Both plunderers and innocent villagers, scores of them, fell dead.

Some of the Indians were eager to befriend the Japanese, throwing parties in their honour or heaping gifts on them. Through these contacts the Japanese realised that most of the people who mattered had fled the Andamans or were absconding. The population present could easily be cowed down.

And they acted promptly. They must have the best available accommodation. Without the least apology they entered any bungalow, private or official, and literally threw out its occupants. Atul Chandra Chatterjee, an officer who stuck to his position as the head of the treasury and financial advisor to the chief commissioner, was evicted from his house. As he emerged on the lawn, hapless and perplexed, the Japs observed that people had gathered in the streets, curious at his plight. It was a good opportunity to give them a taste of Japanese sword power.

The leader of the gang came running to him. Grinning, he unsheathed his sword. And his grin grew wider. The next moment Atul Babu's head rolled on the grass.

Once comfortably lodged, the Japs needed pleasure. They mobilised a gang of ex-convicts who scoured the villages for women.

A few weeks passed smoothly for the new rulers. They had set up a civilian government with Narayan Rao as chief commissioner. Rao, partly in good faith and partly under the spell of his unexpectedly gained status, liberally used the only car at the disposal of any Indian.

But perhaps he used the blessed vehicle a bit too liberally, particularly at

night. Meanwhile, the Japanese ships had been bombed by the British air force. There must be a spy-ring transmitting information to the Allies and Narayan Rao could be its leader. The "chief commissioner" was unceremoniously dragged from his car and thrown into the Cellular Jail. Suspicion grew into a phobia. Hundreds were herded into the jail. Let us listen to Rama Krishna: "Between the tortures, interrogation by the Japanese continued, accompanied by constant blows with a thick stick. When continuous interrogations alternated with beating yielded no desired result, new steps were taken. Sprinkling a part of the body with petrol and setting fire to it until the entire skin brunt deep was one step. Another step was to incise daily some part of a man's body and to sprinkle the cut with salt or powdered chillies.

"When all these tortures failed, wives and children from the homes of the victims were brought to the jail. In the torture chamber, the woman was beaten in front of her husband and the husband was beaten in front of his wife. Or the wife is asked to beat her husband and the husband the wife. Children are beaten in front of their parents... Sometimes the son is asked to beat the mother or father. Confession? But what confession — having done nothing? Seven were shot dead. Many died in the torture chamber and it is not known what happened to their bodies. The entire population was panic-stricken."

It was a relatively lonely forenoon when I was walking across the Cellular Jail courtyard. Early in April though it was, the heat was unbearable, particularly for a group of three foreigners passing by me. They wiped their faces frequently and cursed the weather, hardly paying any attention to their guide's commentary: "This is the famous Cellular Jail, the Bastille of India..."

"The best jail of India?"
"No, madam," the guide corrected the stooping old lady. "The Bastille."

"What is that?"

"The Bastille, you see..."

The lady shrugged.

I understood. Every Westerner was not bound to know the Bastille. Her eyes had fallen on me. No reason why I should not help her. "The Bastille was the fortress used as a jail which the rebels stormed, marking the beginning of the French Revolution."

She thanked me and hurried to catch-up with her companions. The guide eyed me with suspicion.

"Look, my friend," I told him in Hindi. "Your analogy does justice neither to the Bastille nor to the Cellular Jail. The Bastille had been stormed by the French themselves and not by any foreign invader. Therein lies the Bastille's glory. The Cellular Jail had a more glorious past than the Bastille and far more tragic..."

He did not seem to appreciate this. ■