

THEY say the Lion and the Lizard
keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried
and drank deep:
And Bahram, that great Hunter — the
Wild Ass
Stamps O'er his Head, and he lies fast
asleep.
— Fitzgerald's Omar Khaiyam

A FEW haunted houses I had seen, but never a haunted islet, an islet that was vibrant with life, love and laughter till a few decades ago. Solemn hymns and carols emanating from two churches, one Catholic and the other Protestant, merged with the melody spilling out of the nearby dancing hall, while white children raced with squirrels and flitted about with butterflies in a beautifully laid out park. The broad steps leading to the imposing building atop the hillock was continuously trodden by officials, merchants and citizens seeking favours from the lord of the archipelago, the Chief Commissioner for this part of British India — the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Surrounded by the deep blue sea, the tiny hillock consisting of only 80 acres of land, Ross Island was the paradise from which the commissioner ruled the 293 big and small islands, 8,249 square kilometres in area.

The only permanent residents of the deserted Ross island now were some deer and peacocks. They stamped over many a buried head, of convicts and their executioners, of those who gave orders and those who obeyed them, some good and some evil.

One of the last to die there was indeed a good man, they say, one Mr A G Bird, a senior British administrator who fell into Japanese hands soon after the archipelago was invaded by the latter in 1942. They tied him to a pillar and beat him repeatedly, ju jitsu style.

The septuagenarian Mr Gurumoorthy, one of the survivors of the Japanese atrocities who had kindly guided us to the islet (with the permission of the Navy, for it is under their custody), narrated the last moments of Mr Bird, probably standing on the very spot of the macabre incident.

"Were our blows rather hard? Do you wish to drink a little water?" a grinning Japanese officer asked him.

"Yes, please!" muttered the gasping prisoner.

They brought a bucketful of water and the officer dipped a sword in it. "It's clean now," he observed. And suddenly he thrust it into the prisoner's chest and then chopped off his head.

"Only the other day I guided Mr Bird's daughter and son-in-law here — they came from England to have a glimpse of this site," Mr Gurumoorthy informed us.

Silent trees spread their branches and shoots into the crumbling skeletons of once majestic buildings in a desperate bid to stop them from totally disappearing. A million leaves murmured in the violent gusts of wind trying to dislodge the fragments of the structures from their embrace. Waves pounded

MY LITTLE INDIA

The haunted islet and its last great guest

By MANOJ DAS

the islet from all sides. There was no other sound. Strangely, I never heard any bird twitter.

On the scattered blocks of ruins, the graveyard of the proud, several recent visitors had sought their way to immortality by inscribing their own names.

This isolated islet had been the residence of a great Indian leader for three days during a turbulent period.

On 29 December 1943, suddenly a number of people were ordered to proceed to the aerodrome. By then the Andamanians had resigned themselves to the practice of the new rulers to summon anyone to any place at any time. Only a few of them knew that an illustrious son of India was arriving to celebrate the liberation of that chunk of Indian soil from the British.

Netaji emerged from the plane and walked through the people who had been ordered to stand in two rows "as though he was inspecting a guard of honour". Japanese officers marched before and behind him, often flanking him too. He had no opportunity to talk to the Indians. He must have felt restless, but that could hardly be an occasion for him to question or violate the protocol.

He was led to Ross Island although by then the administration was being conducted from Port Blair. During his sojourn, he was shown the empty wings of the Cellular Jail while a large number of Indians were rotting in the wings shut away from him. "Alas! if he

had seen persons whose skins were missing from thighs, scrotum, abdomen and chest and who could not wear any apparel; a few who had no flesh on their breeches; a few who had no skin on parts of their bodies, the result of burns by petrol; a few who could not walk straight, the result of their constant kneeling on sticks; a few who had deep knife-cuts all over the fleshy part of their bodies in which salt had been sprinkled. Alas! If he had only seen these with his own eyes!" wished Mr Rama Krishna.

The public meeting Netaji addressed was well-attended. 'Masterji' Kesar Das led a team of his students in singing *Vande Mataram*. He sang to us on the upper floor of his log cabin. Almost half a century did not seem to have weakened his melodious voice.

But the office-bearers of the Independence League had to meet Netaji free from any Japanese presence! They managed to communicate their request to Netaji to visit their office. Netaji readily agreed. Indeed, he must have eagerly looked forward to the opportunity.

But his visit was scheduled for the early hours of the very day of his departure!

And to their amazement, his native followers saw that the office of the Independence League and the ground around it had been jam-packed with women and children. At midnight soldiers had hunted them out of their homes and herded them there. Netaji

came and left for the aerodrome, hardly able to talk to anybody and anybody being able to talk to him. Some of the office-bearers could not even reach him through the unmanageable chaos so imaginatively managed by the Japanese.

Hardly had the sound of Netaji's plane faded when 33 elite Andamanians, doctors, teachers and so on, were rounded up, taken to a lonely place and asked to confess their roles as spies for the British. Their inability to confess anything only intensified the perpetration of the torture on them. They reached a condition when they could neither move their limbs nor talk. Their captors promptly solved their problem by shooting them dead.

I was going through the incomplete list of freedom fighters incarcerated in the Cellular Jail, inscribed on tablets. Deportations had begun as an aftermath of the great rebellion of 1857. The rebels must be totally uprooted from the mainland and the Andamans were the most ideally inhospitable ground for them to be dumped. These unwanted men could also be used as shields to make inroads into the dangerous interiors. They could be sacrificed to found a new colony.

The British Indian Government of course meant to send shock-waves across the country with orders of deportations into the unknown. If tens of thousands of suspected participants in the Mutiny or its sympathisers were hanged or shot down, a few thousand more were despatched beyond the vast sea — where waters were so deep and so unfamiliar that they inspired the spectre of a dark sphere. Thus dark, *kala*, assumed a sinister suggestion, literal as well as figurative. To be hurled across the dark water, *Kalapani*, was to surely meet with death.

And not even one of the 4,000 mutineers deported between 1858 and 1860 ever returned to the mainland. Death at one's native place had its normal reactions, but snatched from his environment, from his own people and sent to *Kalapani*, the victim only left an eerie vacuum in the minds of his kinsmen. They would never know when he died ... No communication between the deported and his kinsmen was possible. And the rulers saw to it that the Andamans remained a forbidden zone.

Among the Mutiny prisoners were feudal lords like Hatt Singh of Ghens (Sambalpur) who used to attack the East India Company's regiments from the hill-tops of Barihadera, and distinguished scholars like Allama Fazali Hag Khairabadi and Maulana Liakat Ali. Recent efforts to trace their burial spots have proved futile.

The British saw to it that the terror of *Kalapani* produced the desired effect. Even a hapless Maharaja of Puri, Divyasimha Dev, who could very well have been punished at home, was sent to the Andamans in 1878 where he died. This was a warning to the other Indian princes. Maharaja Divyasimha was a safe choice, for he had ceased to rule any state and had ceased to command any force that could create any problem for the rulers. ■

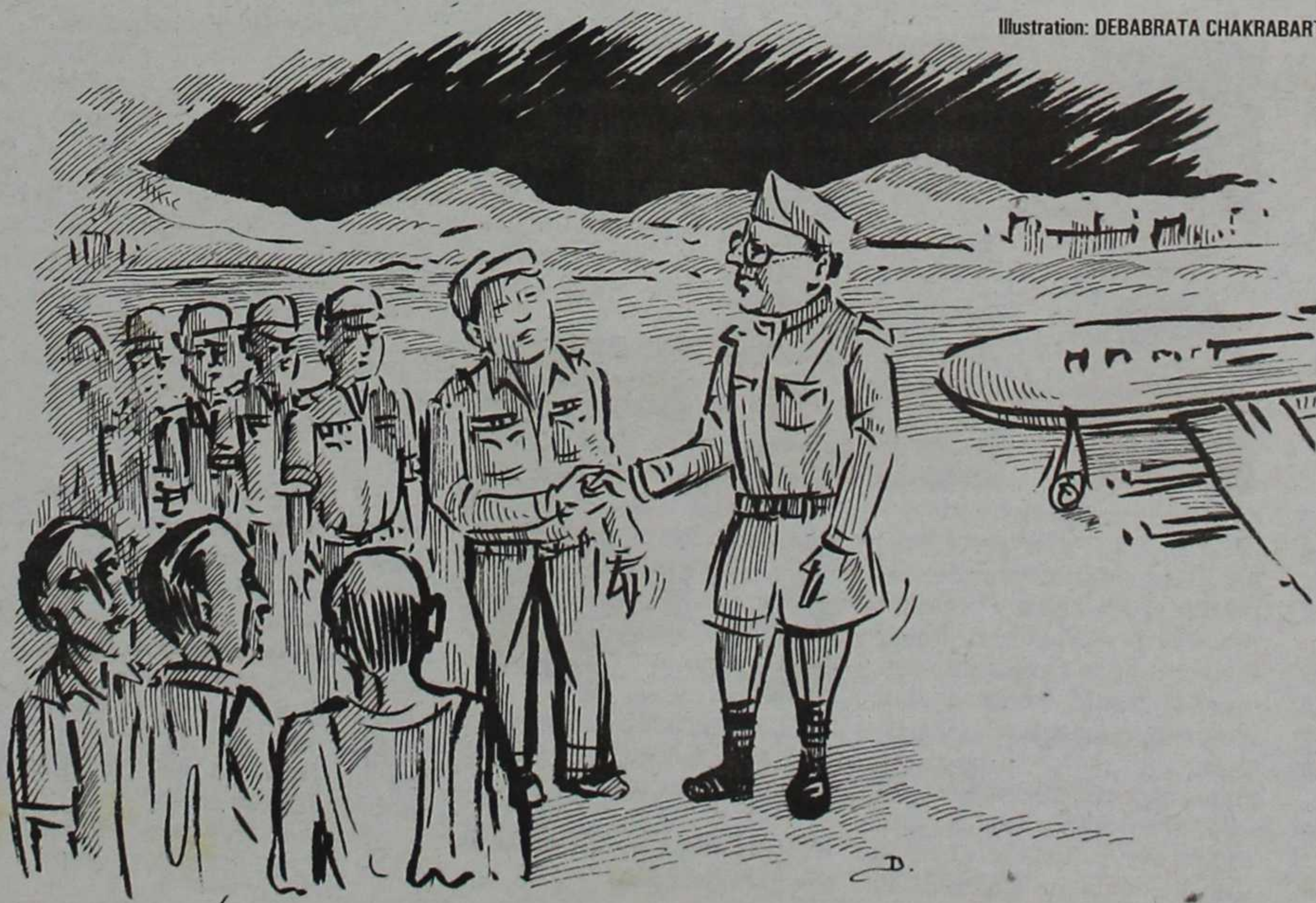


Illustration: DEBABRATA CHAKRABARTI