

Colonial Space and Convict Lives: Studying Jafar Thanesari's life in the Andaman Penal Settlement during the 19th Century

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Abstract

There are various sources of studying penal institutions of confinement in Colonial India. The penal settlement of Andamans acts as a vantage point of looking into the world of a convict in the nineteenth century. This paper seeks to understand this by delving deep into the account of his stay in the penal settlement. A close scrutiny has unraveled a great deal of information about prison dynamics and belief system. It has been argued in the article that such convict narratives not only disclose valuable information about the working of colonial administration but they also help us in reconstructing the milieu in which various identities were shaped and re-shaped.

Keywords: *penal settlement, convict, colonial administration, confinement, convict narratives*

There is a dearth of enough convict accounts to understand the life of convicts in the nineteenth century. This article tries to explore the ways in which the convict accounts can be used to understand their life and world-view. Such an attempt will be selective and subjective but in doing so one can try to fathom the various identities of a convict in the penal space of Andamans and other identities like that of a self-supporter that he might aspire to. We have used the account of Jafar Thanesari for the pre-cellular phase. His account, written in Urdu, is called *Kala Paani: Tawarikh-i-Azeeb*. We have used the English translation rendered by Jaweed Ashraf for the purpose of this study. The accounts of the Cellular Jail era reflect a distinct picture. It is very difficult to understand the life of convicts with the official records only and the account discussed below sheds new light on the making of the 'lived space' of the colony in this period.

Jafar Thanesari, a Wahhabi rebel was arrested in 1863 for plotting against the British in Afghanistan. He was convicted and a death