

# The Cellular Jail

## Contents

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| BACKGROUND:.....                | 2 |
| THE PLAN .....                  | 3 |
| FEATURES OF THE GOMATI:.....    | 3 |
| FEATURES OF THE YARD:.....      | 4 |
| FEATURES OF THE WINGS: .....    | 5 |
| FEATURES OF THE ENTRANCE: ..... | 5 |
| FEATURES OF THE CELL: .....     | 6 |

# The Cellular Jail

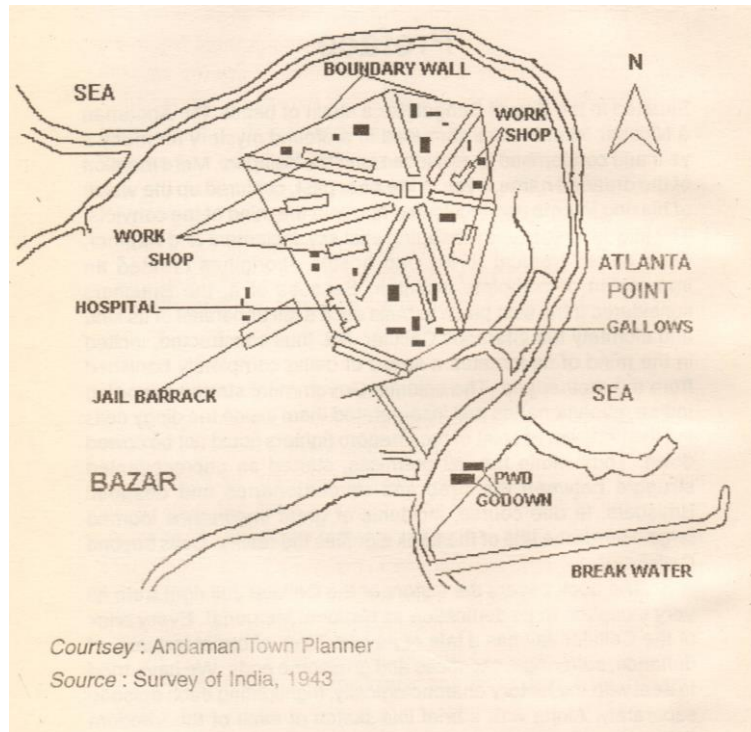
## BACKGROUND:

The end of the First Indian War of Independence, 1857, signaled the end of the East India Company. One of the last acts of their Court of Directors was to confirm the proceedings of the Governor-General in Council for the establishment of a penal settlement in the Andaman Islands. On March 4, 1858, Dr. Walker the first superintendent of this penal settlement, left for Andaman from Calcutta in the *Semiramis* with 200 ‘convicts’ and a guard of 150 men. These ‘convicts’ were none other than the Indian soldiers of the First War of Independence. The islands were developed with their blood and sweat, under grueling, inhuman conditions. In 1871, Lord Mayo drew up a scheme of turning the islands into a self-supporting colony. Soon, the penal colony became a profit making business. The convicts were ground to the bone but still not always easy to discipline. In 1890, a two member committee Sir Charles Lyall, Secretary to the Government of India and Dr. Alfred Swain Lethbridge, Inspector General of Prisons, Bengal—recommended that a jail should be built as a penal preliminary stage of separate confinement to house the more dangerous and hardened criminals for the first six months of their arrival in Andaman. And the Silver jail, aka Cellular Jail for its singular plan, was born. Some sources suggest that the Cellular jail construction was begun sometime during 1892-94, and 400 cells being ready confinement was even commenced by the 1897. But the accepted date of construction is 1896-1906.

The main purpose of the Cellular Jail was the housing of 600 convicts in utter isolation. Humanity and rehabilitation of the convicts not being a concept that the British were familiar with, they came up with a diabolical plan that was successful beyond their wildest dreams. Indeed, just being incarcerated there, day in day out was enough to break the toughest spirit—the beatings, insults and excruciating hard labor crushed their soul.

## THE PLAN<sup>1</sup>

The Cellular Jail was divided into seven wings radiating out from a central core, called *gomati*—just like the spokes of a wheel. The wings were of unequal length and three storey in height.



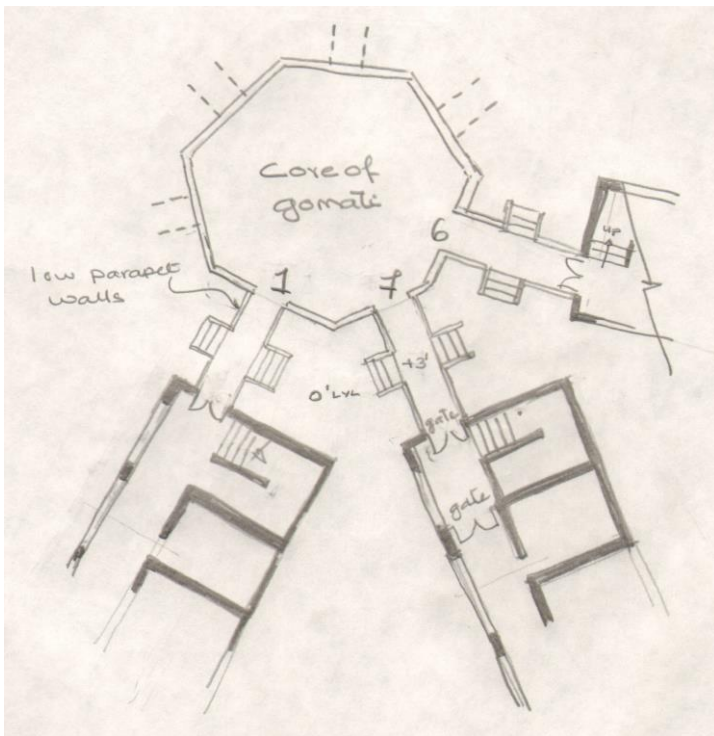
They were numbered from 1 to 7. A fifteen foot boundary wall enclosed the whole jail, touching each wing and creating self-contained units. The only exception was block 1.

### FEATURES OF THE GOMATI:

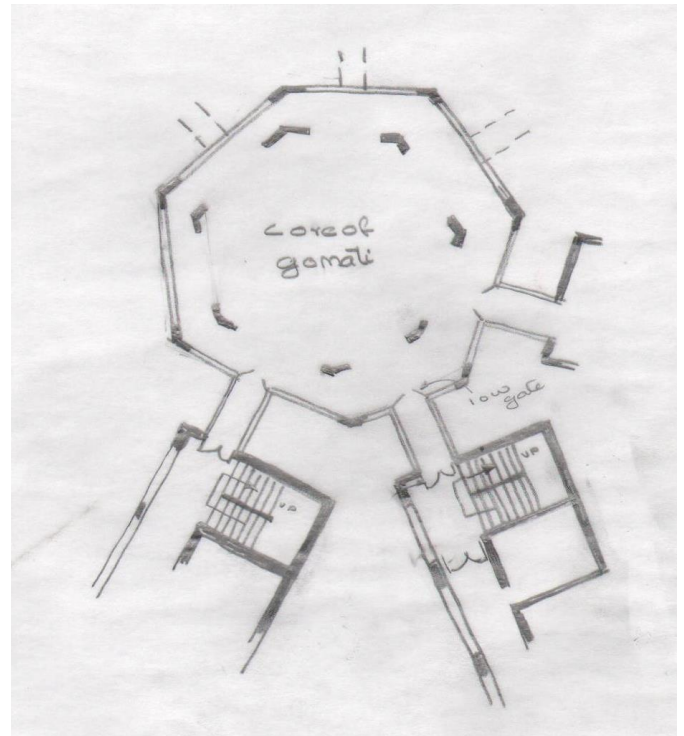
- The gomati, though often given the misnomer tower, is just a center space in which all the wings opened out. It has a center seven-sided core with arched openings. The *gomati* has no staircase of its own.
- The ends of the wings near the gomati end are located so close to each other that from a distance they almost seem to meet. This gap between the two wings is the only way out of the triangular yards (except at the main entrance) that are formed between them.
- At ground level, each wing is accessed by narrow raised walkway @ plinth height (about 3') with steps on either side.
- At upper levels the center core has a passage around it, with connectors leading to the wings. The connectors are accessed by low wooden gates.

<sup>1</sup> All drawings unless otherwise stated are schematic representations, drawn from memory and are not to scale.

- At the end wall of each wing, on each level, is a barred door. This is the *only* exit from each wing at higher levels. At the ground level, block 1 and 7 have a couple of barred gates from the arches (to be mentioned below); possibly the other wings had these too?
- Beyond this gate is the staircase on the left. Block 7 has an additional gate beyond the staircase. The staircases of the wings do not go up to the roof.
- The roof is accessed by a wooden staircase in the center of the gomati from the third storey. The gomati has one more level which has the bell. This is covered by a red-tiled roof held up by columns.



Plan of gomati @ ground level with extant towers



Plan of gomati @ upper levels

## FEATURES OF THE YARD:

- Each triangle of yard formed between two wings was provided with a workshop, toilet block, and a reservoir 15' long and 1 1/2' wide for bathing purpose. Water was pumped into it from the sea. Fresh water for drinking was provided by pipes and some yards had wells as well.
- The only way out of the yard was through the gomati (except at the main entrance.)

## **FEATURES OF THE WINGS:**

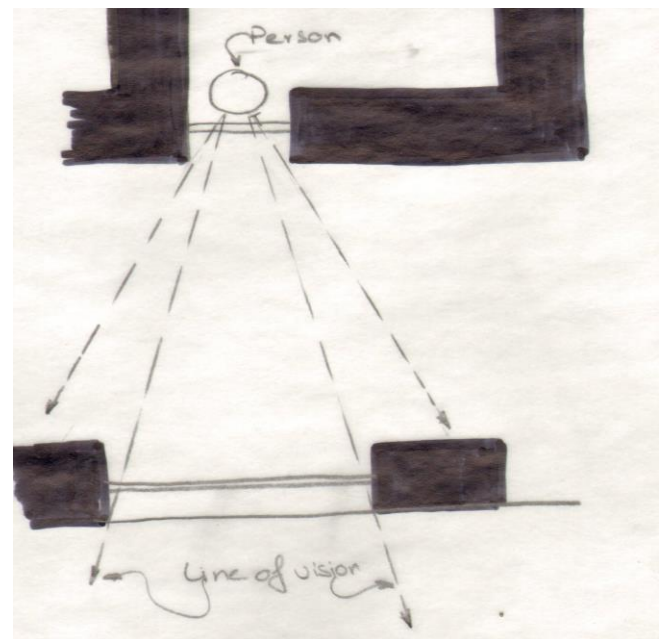
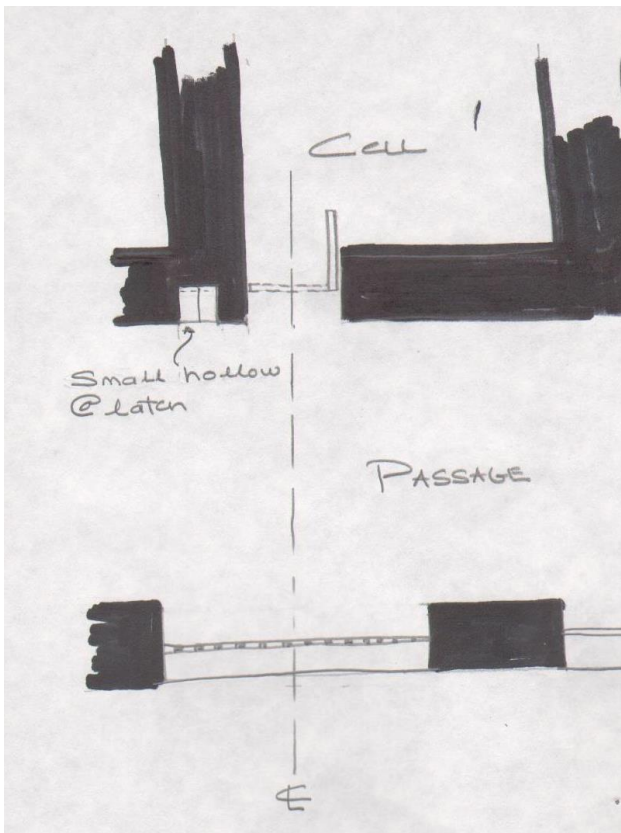
- The exterior is of exposed bricks, except at ground level where it is plastered white.
- The front of each wing looked upon the back of the next—a blank wall with ventilators completely covered by awnings.
- Each wing is made up of rows of cells 13' x 7' in size.
- A wide (7' or 8', perhaps) passage runs in front of the cells.
- The front facade is a barred arched colonnade, enclosing this passage.
- Opening of each cell is centered on the arch of the façade.
- The passage was lit by lamps at both ends of the wing.

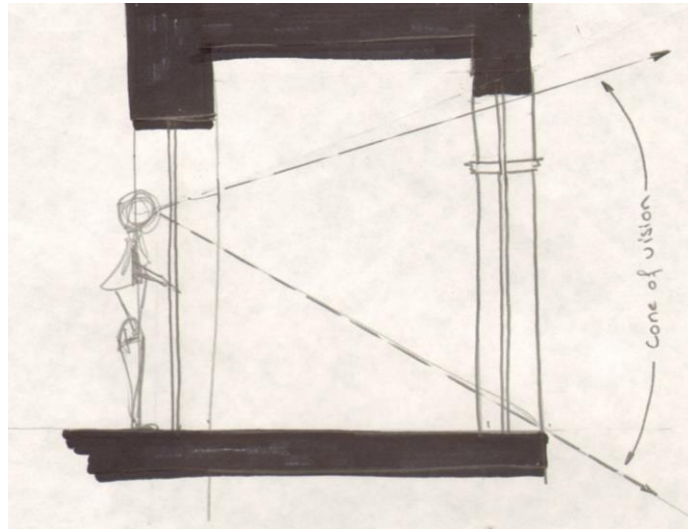
## **FEATURES OF THE ENTRANCE:**

- The main entrance was in the center of wide plastered block painted golden-yellow, leading to an open area @ the ground level.
- Barred metal gates with doorway in the middle enclosed the open area at both ends. Short flights of steps lead to offices on both sides. The upper level of the entrance, which was the residence of the Jailor and Deputy Jailor, continued over this area. Apartments of all other officials connected with the jail were located outside but near the main entrance.
- This entrance hall had walls decorated with all the manacles, fetters, and weaponry to awe the convicts.
- The façade had turrets housing staircases on either side of the entrance.
- The boundary wall coming from block 2 and block 7 connects with the end walls of the entrance, closing the loop.
- Entering the yard, there was a peepal tree immediately in front.
- To the left was the hospital of 15 to 20 beds (now razed to the ground.) The memorial flame is built upon its plinth. Block 1, ending just before the hospital, housed some cells reserved for hospital use. Some of the barred arches of this block open into the yard.
- To the right is the gallows house and kitchen.

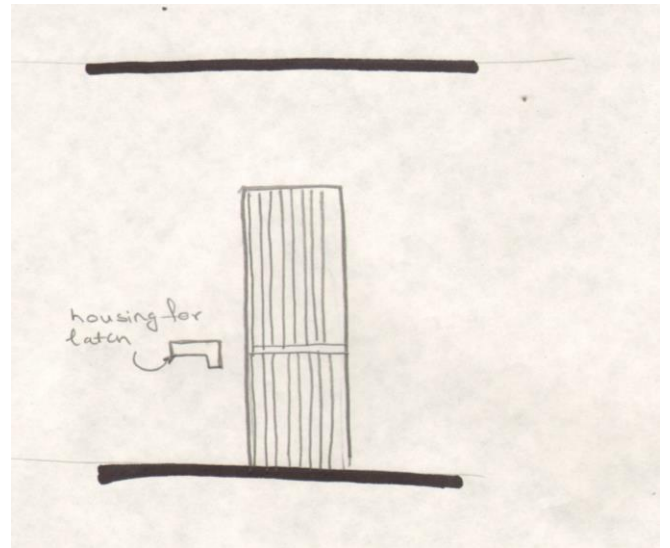
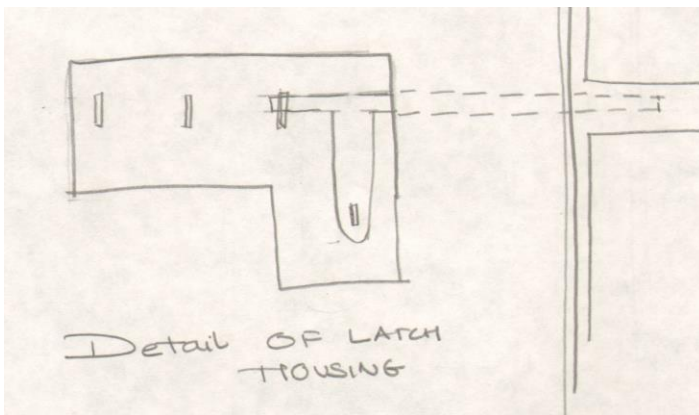
## FEATURES OF THE CELL:

- The front of wall of the cell had a narrow (about 2') opening with a barred door set in the middle of an immensely thick wall. This severely restricted the convicts line of vision, especially with the wide passage before it. From many cells, especially those on the lower levels near the gomati the convict could see nothing except the blank wall.
- The back wall had a 3' x 2' high ventilator with a sill height of 10'. The sloped awning covering it was so deep that only a sliver of light was visible at the bottom.
- There were no lamps provided in the cells, and with these meager openings it was almost perpetually bathed in gloom.
- The latch system was so designed that the convict could not see it, nor ever hope to bend his arm around the thick wall.





**Section showing restricted line of vision**



**Latch system of the cell**



**The darkness within in contrast to bright light without**

All in all, the architecture of the Cellular Jail was entirely successful in its purpose of breaking down the spirit of the convicts!