



## Savarkar in the cellular jail: A study of political psychology under solitary confinement

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### Abstract

The experience of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who served time in the Andaman Cellular Jail (Kala Pani), is an eloquent example of studying the mutual connection of severe conditions of the carceral environment, psychological survival, and political identity formation. It is the paper about how his long prison term, marked by solitary confinement, forced labour, and severe lack of sensory and social stimulation, impacted both his mental world and his further developmental path as an ideologue. Based on the historical records, as well as the current psychological studies of isolation and trauma, the study places the experience of Savarkar in a larger discussion on the outcomes of forced confinement. The paper begins by reconstructing the conditions of the Cellular Jail as a colonial institution that was aimed at disciplining and disintegrating political dissent. It goes on to examine the probable psychological outcomes of such a setting through contemporary empirical evidence, which links long-term isolation to anxiety, depression, cognitive disturbances and identity disturbances. In this sense, the very fact of Savarkar surviving is understood as not a lack of distress but as a result of active coping mechanisms, i.e. ideological commitment, narrative restructuring, meaning-making practices that turned the sufferings into a political cause. The paper ends with generalized implications to political resiliency understanding. It implies that resilience needs to be examined as not only survival in extreme environments but also as generating political notions and bringing about implications on the inclusion and non-inclusion. Placing the path of Savarkar in a broader comparative context, the study is valuable in achieving a better insight into the way environments such as the Cellular Jail still affect political thought even after their physical dismantling.

**Keywords:** Kala Pani, solitary confinement, forced labour, non-inclusion

### Introduction

The imprisonment of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the Andaman Cellular Jail (Kala Pani) provides a unique and analytically captivating prism on the interplay between extreme conditions of carcerality, the political identity-making, and the mental survival. The decade of his imprisonment, interspersed with solitary confinement, physical labour, and both physical and social deprivation, has caused a climate of prolonged mental tension. These developments occurred concurrently with, and perhaps caused by, major changes in his political thought, and which subsequently coalesced into a better-organised and programme-oriented expression of Hindutva thought. This case is particularly significant to the field of political psychology since it is situated at the crossroads of trauma, making sense, and the building of ideological structures under pressure of coercion and limitation (Amrit Kaal, 2021) [2]. The paper is a reconstruction of the lived experiences of Savarkar in the Cellular Jail which makes his experiences to be placed in the wider context of colonial punishment regimes that were meant to isolate, discipline and break political dissent. Then it studies the probable psychological consequences of those conditions, especially the solitary confinement, in the context of modern empirical studies, which attribute to the duration of isolation cognitive impairments, emotional pain and identity de-stabilisation. Meanwhile, the analysis accounts the ideological path of Savarkar in terms of theoretical paradigms of coping and resilience, and how people subjected to repression become active participants in meaning-making processes that could maintain their sense of purpose and agency. Notably, the role of such coping strategies in the paper has also taken the issue of how they are not only protective but also

transformative (Abraham, 2023) [1]. They can transform political identity in a manner that is more than resistance and in some cases can further harden or exclusionary ideas of community and belonging. In this regard, the Savarkar case is an example of how a complicated process of resistance, adaptation, and ideological consolidation may be used as a means of survival in the most oppressive circumstances (Smith, 2006) [6].

### Historical and Carceral Context

#### 1. Architecture and regime of Cellular Jail

It was a specially designed building, the Cellular Jail in Port Blair of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was designed to keep political prisoners incommunicado through design and routine. It was a panopticon-like radial structure with hundreds of small, uninhabited cells, organized in wings around a central watchtower, so that prisoners could never see each other and were always under observation. The most brutal punishment under this system was a harsh, solitary confinement, under which the prisoners were confined to 23-24 hours a day, with little or no human interaction other than with guards (Pragyata, 2021) [9]. Prisoners were normally subjected to hard labor, including the so-called oil mill (kohlu), where they were forced to push heavy wooden presses for 10 to 12 hours a day to meet extreme daily oil quotas. Failure to meet these quotas would typically result in flogging, shackling, and various forms of corporal punishment. Prisoners were often treated like cattle, hauled in carts, or subjected to beatings with hammers at all hours, all while being compelled to process coconut husks. Accounts and subsequent historical re-creations of disease (dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis), starvation, sleep loss, and humiliation

cause high suicide rates and physical breakdown (Pragyata, 2021)<sup>[9]</sup>.

## **2. Sentencing and transportation of Savarkar**

In 1911, Savarkar received a two-life imprisonment sentence (50 years) in British courts for his involvement in revolutionary activities and the supposed involvement in the Nasik conspiracy, and was moved to the Andamans. During about ten years, he lived in the Cellular Jail atmosphere, and had undergone a series of overlapping periods of punishment: regular hard labor, periods of solitary confinement, and other disciplinary measures like handcuffing and fetters. According to some accounts, he was punished, at least six months in intense solitary confinement, among other things, by being handcuffed to the wall and being made to stand long hours (Haney, 2003)<sup>[6]</sup>. Along with physical pain, Savarkar had to endure strict communication limitations: no more than one letter was supposed to be written annually, depending on his good behavior, and he hardly ever saw his family. During this time, he was separated from his wife over a span of eight years, which he would later portray as the sacrifice he made personally, as well as that of the colonial cruelty. A combination of architectural seclusion, labor that was made exhausting, degrading, and forced separation of families, all of which resulted in a complete atmosphere of control that would be described by future scholarship as a laboratory of psychological disintegration (Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, n.d.) (Grassian, 2006, and Palo Alto University, 2026)<sup>[5, 8]</sup>.

### **Psychological Implication of Solitary Confinement**

#### **1. Extreme social deprivation as solitary confinement**

In 1911, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was sentenced by British colonial courts to two life terms of imprisonment, totaling fifty years, for his involvement in revolutionary activities and his role in the Nasik conspiracy, after which he was transported to the Andaman Islands. During about ten years, he lived in the Cellular Jail atmosphere, and had undergone a series of overlapping periods of punishment: regular hard labor, periods of solitary confinement, and other disciplinary measures like handcuffing and fetters. According to some accounts, he was punished, at least six months in intense solitary confinement, among other things, by being handcuffed to the wall and being made to stand long hours (Haney, 2003)<sup>[6]</sup>. Along with physical pain, Savarkar had to endure strict communication limitations: no more than one letter was supposed to be written annually, depending on his good behavior, and he hardly ever saw his family. During this time, he was separated from his wife over a span of eight years, which he would later portray as the sacrifice he made personally, as well as that of the colonial cruelty. A combination of architectural seclusion, labor that was made exhausting, degrading, and forced separation of families, all of which resulted in a complete atmosphere of control that would be described by future scholarship as a laboratory of psychological disintegration (Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, n.d.; Grassian, 2006, and Palo Alto University, 2026)<sup>[5, 8]</sup>.

#### **2. Practicability of conditions of Savarkar**

Although we do not have detailed clinical histories of the mental state of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the circumstances in which he had to work in the Cellular Jail are closer to conditions known today to cause severe

psychological damage. It would have been extreme sensory and social withdrawal due to a long period of spatial isolation in a small, dark cell, with highly limited interaction with humans. This was reinforced by the prevailing environment of intimidation and violence, such as corporal punishment, shackling, and disciplinary whims. Modern psychology is well aware that uncertainty is a major contributor to chronic stress and anxiety. In addition, depressive symptoms would have been increased due to the impact of physical illness and physical wear and tear caused by forced labor. Coercive to disrupt communication with family, depending on good behavior, is a typical coercive process of control, which increases emotional suffering and dependency (Savarkar, c. 1912)<sup>[11]</sup>. Recent studies using carceral regimes as a similarity propose that people who encounter these circumstances have a high likelihood of intrusive thoughts, hopelessness, and even suicidal thoughts. Other accounts in later parts of history state that Savarkar was nearly driven to suicide. However, occasionally, influenced by political rhetoric, align with the existing empirical research on the psychological impact of extreme isolation. More to the point, his survival cannot be viewed as the manifestation of strength in the absence of suffering. Instead, it means that active coping mechanisms and meaning-making processes were indeed present and allowed him to live in such a state without self-destructive behavior. In most cases, political criminals have certain psychological structures that distinguish them from other inmates. They are more likely to view imprisonment not as a penalty for the individual who has committed a personal evil but as a cost of a bigger project. This way of reframing can become a potent psychological buffer as suffering is reshaped into martyrdom or sacrifice. In this case, deprivation is not simply experienced but also has moral and ideological meaning (Penal Reform International, 2021; McLemore, 2024)<sup>[3, 7]</sup>.

Resistance movements and studies on long-term incarceration identify several protective factors, such as a firm ideological belief, the possibility of engaging in even the smallest collective or symbolic resistance, and cognitive processes that view coercion as confirmation of personal ideology. Maintaining a perceived link to larger communities, e.g., the nation, religion, or a political movement, is also useful for retaining identity and purpose even in the most extreme isolation. Nevertheless, the same coping mechanisms are potentially dangerous. Interpretation of trauma collectively or ideologically could result in the hardening of world views and less willingness to accept other points of view. In other instances, it can also serve to heighten the chances of rationalizing the exclusion or violence against perceived enemies, especially when suffering is construed as a testament of shared victimization. Therefore, ideological meaning-making would provide psychological resilience in extreme repression, but also play a part in causing short-term inflexibility in thinking and group-based hatred (Palo Alto University, 2026)<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **3. Savarkar's actions and routines**

To the extent that there are various such coping strategies which Savarkar is seen to have engaged in within Cellular Jail, ideologically, the accounts are varied in explaining the role of Savarkar. Narratives about him are sympathetic and depict him as an educator and organizer, the father of Andaman unrest, secretly spurring prisoners to rebel and

taking any chance to talk about politics and history. Documents in jail mentioned by other authors reveal that he was disciplined because of being involved in prison strikes, such as being forced to stand handcuffed for several days and cross-fettered (McLemore, 2024)<sup>[3]</sup>.

Other contemporary historians, based on the memoirs of other inmates, including Trailokyanath Chakravarti, and on archival research, claim that Savarkar frequently advised prudence and urged avoiding strikes when they could risk the few avenues of petition or letters. He later said that he would have compromised his right to only write an annual letter to India, which he saw as an important step in lobbying for the release of political prisoners, by taking part in some of the protests. This implies a long-term, maneuvering coping style: maintaining few instruments of power and communication, even at the expense of not being viewed as so aggressive in the prison micro-society. These two are not necessarily mutually exclusive; these two strands, the subversive agitation on the one hand, the strategic restraint on the other. Psychologically, both are trying to maintain agency and a sense of effectiveness in an environment designed to foster helplessness. Educating other inmates, writing poems or letters when allowed, and developing a political position to take on once released are ways to convert passive pain into active pain, thus helping reduce the dehumanization of the self that comes with solitary confinement (Reiter, 2018; Amrit Kaal, 2021)<sup>[2, 10]</sup>.

#### **4. Religion, nationalism, and moral universe**

Even before going to prison, Savarkar was already vocal about his nationalist feelings, criticism of caste, and praise for armed resistance to British rule. At Cellular Jail, religious and communal issues seem to have taken on a more prominent role in his interpretation system. According to some sources, he saw specific cruelty and prejudice in some Muslim warders, and he saw larger world events like pan-Islamic politics and the Khilafat movement as a sign of a Muslim political menace. The tendency to perceive personal misery as perpetrated by a morally objectively different out-group is a familiar response to an asymmetrically-powerful, traumatizing situation: it reduces a complex world to friend/enemy dichotomies. It enables its victim to retain a sense of dignity by seeing his/her misery as a contribution to the larger historical struggle. In the long run, it may condition ideological solidification and the formation of an in-group, in the sense not only of political concepts but also of cultural or religious attributes, as in the future formulation of the Hindu nation by Savarkar (Reiter, 2018)<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **Political Resilience and Mental Health in Oppressive Environments**

#### **1. Rethinking “resilience”**

Savarkar is being elevated as a straight-line hero who underwent inhuman torture and bore it without compromise. In contrast, others portray him as a warning figure of political accommodation. The two frames are inclined to simplify the psychological reality. Recent studies emphasize that resilience to extreme stress is seldom an either/or characteristic; rather, it is a dynamic process involving adaptation, trade-offs, and even morally ambivalent strategies. According to contemporary standards, Savarkar's survival and post-release activism point to great durability: the author managed to preserve his identity, reintegrate into

the political world, and exercise political agency for many decades. Meanwhile, his career path has been characterized by indications of what might be called trauma-infused politics: ideological rigidification, increased in-group sense, and readiness to justify exclusion or oppression of perceived out-groups in the name of collective security. These aspects are echoed by militants and political leaders who undergo bitter prison experiences that further strengthen other antagonistic mindsets, despite their ability to devise elaborate organizational tactics (Counterinterview, 2021)<sup>[4]</sup>.

#### **2. Isolation, collective memory, and majoritarianism**

The psychological sessions on solitary incarceration underline the withdrawal of social skills and trust that results in withdrawal or suspicion on release. Among political prisoners, such effects can be directed not at apathy, but an increase in in-group unity; mistrust of outsiders (even former allies) can help reinforce the attractiveness of tightly knit, internally disciplined communities. The subsequent political enterprise of Savarkar, that of forging Hindu unity, discipline, and militarisation, as well as being skeptical of the multi-religious nationalism of the Congress, is to be explained in part in this vein. This interpretation does not reduce his ideology to an isolated or pathological phenomenon. Rather, it situates it within a broader pattern observed in other contexts, where traumatic state violence gives rise to majoritarian or supremacist political formations grounded in narratives of historical victimization. This dynamic is central to contemporary debates on solitary confinement and political imprisonment, as measures intended to suppress dissent may instead contribute to the emergence of more radical and exclusionary political movements (Achin Vanaik, 2026)<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus, the case of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the Cellular Jail shows that solitary confinement can only be perceived as a disciplinary method, but more in-depth, this should be considered as a deep attack on psychological integrity and social identity. Current studies are quite emphatic that under those circumstances, a person experiences acute mental distress, and the seeming resilience of a figure such as Savarkar can be attributed more to the strong emphasis on meaning-making, ideological adherence, and adaptive, sometimes morally ambiguous, coping mechanisms than to the lack of suffering. Politically speaking, this case shows that resilience is not a non-partisan or entirely good thing. Although it allows survival in extreme oppression, it has the potential of molding the character of ideological formation, and at times of strengthening inflexible or exclusionary images of community. Meanwhile, carceral logics, such as prolonged isolation, can produce unwanted long-term effects, including the generation of lasting histories of collective victimhood that can shape future political strategies and rationalize new authoritative practices.

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