

Remembering an act of insurrection

For many years the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) Mutiny, which broke out in full swing on February 18, 1946, and lasted a mere five days before the leaders who acted on behalf of the disaffected soldiers surrendered, remained largely marginal in the narratives of modern Indian history. The temper of the times — shortly after the end of the war, and on the cusp of Independence — seemed, both in popular memory and in Indian historiography, to be better represented by the INA trial that was launched in November 1945 when the British charged three men from the renegade Indian National Army with murder and “waging war against the King-Emperor”.

The site of that trial was the Red Fort, converted into a courtroom: It is here that Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, was adjudged guilty of treason and banished into exile. If the 1858 trial brought India into the orbit of the British empire as a Crown colony, the INA trial became, oddly enough, the swansong of the Raj. Indian nationalists had, over the years, mastered the oracular and spectacular space of the courtroom. For the occasion of the trial, Jawharlal Nehru donned his lawyer’s garb and helped to furnish the drama which catapults an event into history. To cap it all, everyone understood that the INA trial was a verdict on the absent Subhas Bose, by now elevated into the pantheon of Indian deities — in a manner of speaking, he even presided over it.

The war years, in the nationalist imagination, are associated with “Quit India”. But the war had precipitated other kinds of unrest, creating shortages of food and other essential items. The Royal Indian Navy (RIN) and Royal Indian Air Force were raised from a state of infancy to some prominence, and in all three services of the armed forces, the end of the war brought to the fore the question of demobilisation and gainful employment for men released into civilian life. There was resentment at the use of Indian troops to put down revolutionary dissent in Indonesia, and Indian servicemen chafed at the huge gap between themselves and British soldiers, as evidenced by large disparities in salaries, the quality of canteen food, and working conditions.

At the HMIS Talwar, Balai Chand Dutt, who had served in the RIN for five years, found kindred spirits who resented the discrimination and racism they continued to encounter as soldiers of the empire. On December 1, 1945, British officers found the parade ground, where the HMIS Talwar was shortly to be displayed to the public, sprayed with signs, “Kill the British”, “Revolt Now”, “Down with the Imperialists”. Airmen at the Royal Indian Air Force station in Karachi struck a few weeks later: That show of dissent, which would spread to over 50 stations in South Asia, was dealt with gingerly by the British.

Meanwhile, at the HMIS Talwar, little acts of insurrection continued, and Dutt was apprehended for vandalism on February 2, 1946. Arthur King, commanding officer of the ship, abused the sailors with such epithets as, “sons of coolies” and “sons of bloody jungles”. Dutt and his fellow rebels persuaded the ratings to join the revolt on February 18, commencing with a hunger strike. In less than three days, the revolt had spread to nearly 75 other ships and nearly 20,000 sailors, all under the age of 26, had thrown the gauntlet. The Naval Central Strike Committee was formed and issued a series of well-thought out demands. And, yet, on February 23, the Committee capitulated; the organised strike was over.

Historians are generally in agreement that the mutineers floundered since the leadership of neither the Congress nor the Muslim League supported the strike. The Strike Committee called for a city-wide hartal in Bombay — not without some success. By February 22, a good portion of the city had been shut down but violence had also flared up at various places. By the end of the day, 63 people had been killed, mainly in police firings. Sardar Patel had been despatched by the Congress to converse with the strike’s leaders. On his assurances that the rebels would be treated fairly, the Strike Committee caved in.

In the received left narrative, the Congress was always a bourgeois organisation, beholden to Indian capital and, especially at this juncture, mindful of the fact that, in independent India, the support of Indian business and industry leaders would be needed to build the nation. Nor would the elites let the thunder be stolen from them. There was perhaps little sympathy among Congress leaders, who had spent the better part of the war years in jail, for sailors whose patriotism had arrived rather late in the day. Communist support for the mutiny, and the Strike Committee's call for a hartal, had given the communists an opening that Patel was determined to throttle. Negotiations for India's political future had commenced and were still inconclusive, but the way forward seemed unquestionably to be within some constitutional framework.

Some recent assessments of the RIN mutiny as a momentous event and as having hastened the end of British rule in India seem overblown. In India, unlike in most other countries that went through decolonisation, civilian control over the military has remained the one inviolable principle of the Republic. Patel defended himself with the observation that "discipline in the Army cannot be tampered with . . . We will want the Army even in free India". He understood better than most the unrelenting and unforgiving logic of the democratic nation-state. At the same time, in the suppression of the RIN mutiny lie the seeds of the continuing inability of the nation-state to harness the power of the working class and to address it as the motive force in history. The RIN mutiny did not fit into any blueprint for the future; the pity of it is that the blueprint has even less space for such acts of insurrection now.

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