

Notes

The United Struggle of 1946

*Ajeet Javed**

The history of our freedom movement is the saga of innumerable armed-struggles. One after another, these struggles kept on challenging the British rule in India. However, during and after the Second World War, these struggles acquired a new momentum and new strength. The revolutionary spirit of Indian National Army (INA) had greatly affected the British Indian Armed Forces. Between March 1942 and the beginning of 1946 there were nineteen uprisings in the Royal Indian Navy alone. The most important was the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) revolt of 1946 which paved the way for freedom.

The revolt began in Bombay when on 18 February 1946 some ratings at the shore training establishment *Talwar* refused to eat bad food served to them. They went to the duty officer who was a British to complain about rotten food. Instead of paying any heed to their complaint, the duty officer remarked, 'Beggars can not be choosers' and shouted at them 'you sons of coolies, you sons of Indian bitches'. This attitude and arrogance on the part of the duty officer made the ratings angry and agitated. For years they had been treated like dirt; they had suffered humiliations, hardships and discriminations, but now things were different, their outlook had been transformed. They had fought the Germans, the Italians and the Japanese shoulder to shoulder with Allied forces. Their heroism and gallantry had won them praise of the world. It had increased their self-confidence. Beside this, they had seen with their own eyes the freedom struggle of the peoples of the countries they had helped to liberate from the fascists. They had come back to a new India fighting for freedom. Many of them had joined the Navy during the Second World War and had come from all over India. Among them were workers, peasants, students and a sizeable proportion was from the lower-middle class. Their links with the people were closer. They saw how the people rallied behind the INA men who had created a new history by launching an armed struggle against the British imperialism.

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Now it was RIN's turn to make its contribution in the freedom struggle. Thus, it becomes obvious that the RIN revolt was not a sudden outburst. It was the expression of years of sufferings and the newly acquired political consciousness. They refused to take food and went on hunger strike. The ratings called for disciplinary action against their commanding officer, F. W. King, for insulting ratings and for arresting a 17 years old rating B. C. Dutt for writing INA slogans on the walls of *Talwar*. The refusal of the authorities to accept the demands of the ratings led to the spread of the strike. Within 48 hours the strike spread over almost all the ships at anchor and on the sea and establishment ashore in India and abroad. Even the units at far flung Aden and Bahrain did not remain unaffected. In all 74 ships, 4 flotillas and 20 shore establishments including three major naval bases joined the strike. The rating pulled down the Union Jack and raised the tricolour (Congress), crescent (Muslim League) and hammer-sickle (Communist Party) flags on the mastheads of the rebel ships.

The ratings unanimously elected a committee to lead the strike. M.S. Khan, a leading Signaller, and Petty Officer, Telegraphist Madan Singh, both from Punjab were elected President and Vice-President respectively. Hamid Akhtar was elected as Secretary. The other members chosen were Leading Signaler, Bedi Basant Singh, S.C. Sen Gupta, Chief Petty Officer, School Master, Nawaz, Leading Seaman, Ashraf Khan, Able Stoker, Gomez and Mohammad Hussain. The Committee renamed itself as Indian National Navy and formulated a charter of demands which along with the economic demands demanded the release of all the political prisoners including the Indian National Army prisoners and the withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia and Egypt.

The demands and decisions of the committee were announced by M.S. Khan through the mike to the ratings, amidst wild cheers and anti-British slogans. The committee then sent some ratings carrying three flags to make the citizens of Bombay know about their sufferings and to seek their help in their struggle. The news of RIN strike had already spread in the city of Bombay. As the ratings stepped on the shore they were greeted and welcomed by the people with slogans calling for national unity. They were embraced by the crowd. People gave them baskets of food and showered flowers on them. The Hindu, Muslim and Irani shopkeepers took the Navy boys into their procession on all thoroughfares especially in Colaba and Fort areas. The same day, i.e. on 20 February different army units, police-forces, students and workers organizations went on sympathetic strikes. About 1200 Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) men went in a procession in support of their strike. They were joined by the Naval Accounts Civilian Staff which also went on

strike. Indian officers of the RIAF refused to fly out troops, transport units refused to carry British troops to fight the naval ratings and the Indian officers refused to pilot planes to bomb the ships. The struggle became more and more political with economic demands taking back seat. The ratings in their meetings recited Mohammad Iqbal's poem about the poor and the downtrodden. It was a call to them to rise and fight their oppressors.

The British authorities got panicky to see the revolutionary uprising and the whole-hearted support of the people. Besides, the authorities also came to know that the revolt though not initiated by the Communist Party of India (CPI) was inspired by its literature. Some of the ratings in HMIS *Talwar* were reported to have Communist leanings and out of 38 ratings who were arrested in HMIS, New Delhi, 15 were found to be subscribers to the CPI and its literature.¹ The Communist influence on the rebels was likely to provide the revolt extra fury.

The Commander-in-Chief Godfrey gave an ultimatum to the ratings of dire consequences. Attlee, the Labour Prime Minister of Britain, supported the Commander-in-Chief's attitude and threatened in the Parliament that British vessels were going to Bombay to suppress the revolt. The British Indian Government decided to begin on all-out offensive. All Indian troops were removed. British troops swarmed into the area of Castle Barracks. The Town Hall became their operations headquarter. The troops armed with sophisticated machine-guns started firing upon the ratings who retaliated and fired back. There were casualties on both sides.

RIN revolt in other parts of the country

The clarion call to rise against imperialism by HMIS *Talwar* did not confine to Bombay alone. It spread like wild-fire to all naval establishments and ships of the RIN in different parts of the country. The news of RIN strike at Bombay reached Karachi on February 19th. 'It was received with tremendous excitement and suppressed jubilation' reminisces Anil Roy, one of the leaders of revolt at Chamak in Karachi. There were two RIN ships in the harbour, HMIS Hindustan and HMIS Travancore. The shore establishments, HMIS Bahadur, Himalaya and Chamak were in Manora island. The news agitated the ratings and they decided to revolt.

On 20th ratings of Hindustan had driven away all the officers both British and Indian from their ship and had taken full control of the ship themselves. Thus Hindustan ship heralded the revolt in Karachi. The

¹ Home Poll Reports. File No. 7/1/46.

moment the news of revolt by Hindustan ratings reached other ships, the ratings came out in support of Hindustan. The five hundred ratings of HIMS Bahadur did not salute the British flag, a practice they followed every morning. When they assembled in the dinning hall for breakfast ‘a spirited Punjab-Muslim boy named Anwar Hussain’ writes Sunil Banerjee a revolting Navyman, ‘jumped up on the table and shouted out ‘Don’t you feel ashamed to take this food when you know that your brothers in the city of Bombay are starved by hunger for the last two days. Throw away this food’. Within a moment, five hundred ratings threw in the plates and came out in protest. They dragged down the British flag and burnt it to ashes. They headed towards Hindustan. The English officers showered bullets on them and one of the ratings became a martyr. Instead of Congress or Muslim League flag, the ratings unanimously chose the blood-soaked shirt of their deceased comrade as their flag and by sound of cannons paid their homage to this flag. They wrote slogans on the walls in Hindi and Urdu ‘Hindustan Zindabad’, ‘Down with British Imperialism’, ‘Shed Blood to Get Freedom’, ‘Tyrants, Your Days Are Over’, ‘Not Mutiny But Unity’, etc. The ratings in a procession passed through the streets of Manora, shouting anti-British slogans. They were joined by the inhabitants of Manora. When the ratings moved in boats towards the ship, Hindustan, the general of the army sent two platoons of Baluch soldiers to suppress the revolt. When the Baluch refused to fire upon their brothers, the Punjab Regiment, the Sikh Regiment, the Maratha Regiment and even the Gurkha Regiment which were stationed in Karachi followed the example set by the Baluch. This fearless expression of solidarity with the revolting Navymen frightened the British authorities. Then white troops were summoned and Hindustan was surrounded from all sides. The British troops started the attack. The ratings on Hindustan retaliated. The firing and attacks and the counter attacks continued for four hours. Six of the ratings were killed and about 30 wounded. Their shots were going wide. They had no other alternative but to surrender. A rating, a minor boy, who went up on the bridge with a white flag, was also killed by the British. They occupied Hindustan and arrested all the ratings.

After the surrender of Hindustan, there were disturbances in Karachi. The local branch of the Communist Party gave a call for a general strike on 23 February. It also decided to hold a protest meeting at Idgah Maidan. The next day, Karachi witnessed complete *hartal* (strike). More than 30,000 people—workers, students, lower middle-class people, Hindus and Muslims—gathered at Idgah defying Section 144 which had been imposed by the authorities. To disperse the crowd, police resorted to firing. More than 25 were reported wounded. The British paratroopers

occupied Manora Island and surrounded the establishments. Anil Roy, Hira Lal and Akbar Ali were ordered to be tried by court-martial. Eighteen year old boys, Petty officers Abdul Baqi of Ajmer and Mubark Ahmed of Karachi were considered as ring leaders and were also subjected to court-martial.

A heroic venture: The revolutionary spirit had caught up the armed forces every where. They revolted too, not for their economic grievances but in support of their brothers in Bombay and Karachi. A mail ship called the Kathiawar in the Morvi state of Gujarat demonstrated unique gallantry. The ratings decided to revolt as soon as the ship sailed for the port of Bombay. On 21 February the ship moved and a little later it received a message from Hindustan in Karachi that she was in trouble. The ratings numbering 120 led by ordinary seaman Abdul Karim, locked the captain, acquired control of the ship, armed themselves and diverted its route and proceeded towards Karachi to help their brothers on Hindustan ship. Before they reached Karachi, they learnt that Hindustan had surrendered. S.S. Kathiawar was again diverted to Bombay. The ratings then decided to join their revolting brothers there. But by the time they reached, the Bombay ratings too had surrendered. Thus ended the first historic trip of Indian ship commanded by Indian rating in a mission of aid to distressed comrades.

Country-wide agitation in support of RIN revolt

In Calcutta, the ratings of the shore establishment, HMIS Hooghly, went on strike on 22 February. Their strike continued even after the surrender at Bombay and Karachi on 23rd. They condemned the British for suppressing the RIN ratings. One lakh workers at Calcutta on the call of CPI too joined the strike. It continued till 25th when the British with their full might surrounded the ratings and imprisoned them. The strike came to end on 26th.

In Madras, the ratings of HMIS Adyar and in Vizagapatam the ratings of Sonavati and Ahmedabad marched in procession to the city carrying Indian flags and shouting slogans *Inquilab-Zindabad*. On 25 February there was a complete strike in Madras city. There were strikes by the ratings in Jabalpur, Assam and Delhi also. The naval strikes spread even to establishments in the state. At Jamnagar in Kathiawar, the ratings of torpedo training school Valsura of the RIN were agitated to hear Godfrey's threatening broadcast over the wireless. The tone of the speech and the threat of the destruction of the navy angered them. What annoyed them most, however, was the direct reference of HMIS Valsura as having remained loyal.

The ratings belonging to different communities and owing allegiance to Congress or League immediately decided to go on strike. They pulled down the white ensign and hoisted the Congress, League and red flags. Shortly came the news of Sardar Patel's intervention. The ratings were enraged. Unanimously, they decided formally to withdraw their allegiance to the Congress and the League, who had not come to support their struggle. The Congress and the League flags were pulled down and only the red flag was kept flying.

In Punjab, the news of RIN revolt led to a demonstration by 600 non-commissioned airmen of the Royal Indian Air Force at Ambala. On 22 February the entire personnel of the RIAF went on a strike in protest against the firings in Bombay and Karachi. Later they marched in a procession through the *bazars* shouting anti-British slogans. They warned the government to refrain from firing upon Indians. They also demanded the release of Captain Abdul Rashid and other INA soldiers. They held a meeting, after conclusion of their march, in a ground at which they emphasized the need for Hindu-Muslim unity for the attainment of India's freedom.

Attitude of the Indian political parties towards RIN revolt

The Congress leadership not only dissociated itself from RIN uprising but also opposed it on the ground of indiscipline. They refused to support the revolt and advised the ratings to surrender. Same advice was rendered by the Muslim League. This attitude on the part of the national leaders disheartened the ratings. To them, their revolt was an extension of freedom struggle. They were determined to end the country's enslavement. People were supporting them but the leaders were not prepared to come forward. Patel and Nehru opposed the revolt on the ground of violation of army discipline and for resorting to violent means. Gandhiji too condemned the ratings for setting 'a bad and unbecoming example for India' and advised them to peacefully resign from their jobs if they had any grievances. The ratings according to Gandhi should learn 'constructive activities, such as spinning wheel and thereby keep the love of freedom burning in their mind. Besides, he decried the unity that Hindus and Muslims forged in a heroic resistance against the British military and stated that 'a combination between Hindus and Muslims and others for the purpose of violent action is unholy...'. The unity through militant anti-imperialist struggle from below was dreaded as much by the British as by the Indian political leaders. Gandhi wished to perish in flames than to live to witness its achievement thus. Jinnah too advised the ratings to adopt lawful and peaceful methods. While appealing to the ratings to call off the strike he particularly asked the 'Muslims to stop'.

The British wanted to safeguard their economic investment in independent India and the Indian leaders wanted to have power in their own hands. The two got united to compel the ratings to lay-down arms. Both Sardar Patel and Jinnah sent messages and appealed to the naval central strike committee to surrender un-conditionally. Both the leaders gave assurance to the ratings that there would be no discrimination and victimization and the legitimate demands of the ratings would be taken up with the authorities.

It was Communist Party which supported the revolt and gave a call for a general strike and organized anti-government demonstrations. On the contrary, Sardar Patel and the provincial head of the Muslim League, Chundrigar, issued a counter call for 'no-strike' and 'no-demonstrations' and offered the authorities the services of volunteers to help the police in the maintenance of law and order. Despite Congress and League opposition 300,000 downed tools in Bombay on 22 February, closing down almost all mills, and violent street-fighting between people and police force military took place. They pulled down and burnt Union Jack where ever they found it and hoisted Indian flag. The entire administration came to a stand still. The city was handed over to the army. A formation of nineteen aircraft flew over Bombay city and the harbour. In the meantime the fighting had broken out between the people and the British troops who patrolled the city with the machine guns supported by the tanks. In the discriminate firing 400 citizens were killed and thousands were wounded.

RIN surrender

Seeing no support coming from the leaders and to prevent the bloodbath, the NCSC called off the strike and the ratings with anguish and anger surrendered. They, however, stated 'we surrendered to India and not to the British'. In its last message to the people the committee thanked them for their support and said: 'Our strike has been a historic event in the life of our nation. For the first time the blood of men in the services and in the street flowed together in a common cause'. 'Long live our great people! Jai Hind!' Last words of the NCSC President, M. S. Khan, were: 'I do not know where they are taking us. We shall never give in. Good bye and goodluck'.

On 23 February nearly 400 ratings were arrested in and around Bombay. In Karachi some 500 ratings were placed under arrest. No official figures of arrest were released. While the masses supported the RIN revolt and stood for the release of the ratings both the Congress and the League leaders forgot to honour the assurances they had given to the ratings. The arrested ratings including M.S. Khan and Madan Singh,

President and Vice-President of NCSC were lodged in Mulund Camp and quite a large number in Malir camp in Karachi. There they were treated as criminals, served bad and insufficient food and were abused and received kicks from the British guards. The ratings at Mulund went on a hunger strike in protest and demanded to see Gandhi and Patel who had promised 'no victimization' after laying arms. But the leaders never turned up. They were busy negotiating with the Cabinet Mission, which was appointed by the British Prime Minister Attlee, on 19 February the very next day of the RIN revolt.

The ratings of the camp held a meeting in which they decided to resume their struggle. They drafted an appeal to all soldiers in Navy, Army, Air Force, calling upon them to join the struggle. This draft was to be sent outside secretly. But the authorities came to know about it and promptly raided the barracks of the ratings. They tried to remove M.S. Khan. When he refused to go, the military officer at bayonet point, dragged and bundled him into a lorry. Aslam, a boy rating from the Narbada got so infuriated by the sight of the military dragging away the President of their strike committee that he rushed towards Capt. Knott, tore off his apparel and beat him on his face with his shoes. Capt. Knott ordered the Marathas to open the fire but they downed their rifles and refused to fire upon their brothers. The Mulund Camp, thereafter, was completely sealed off and the strike was crushed.

The ratings in detention at the Malir camp in Karachi too did not take the atrocities lying down. The resistance they offered was as stiff as at Mulund.

RIN Enquiry Commission report

Meanwhile the RIN Enquiry Commission had completed its report. The commission was appointed by the Viceroy. The report was submitted on 19 July 1946. In the words of Biswanath Bose, one of the ratings, 'No worse betrayal of the heroic struggle of the ratings can be imagined'. The Commission produced a 600-page report, which has not been made public even today. Only a short summary prepared by the Defence Department was published in January 1947 which exonerated the British officers who were responsible for the revolt. Ironically, the report was accepted by the Indian leaders. The commission did not say a word about hundreds who had been dismissed. In fact the Nehru government held fast to the British military policy that a service personnel, once removed on account of his 'mutinous' act should not be taken back. The national leaders including 'socialists', favoured the summary trial for technical offences to satisfy regulation-formalities. They advised the government to desist from the venture to try any man publically as the people might

explode in anger and jeopardize the negotiation for the transfer of power. Some of the leaders literally feasted on their defeat. A cocktail party hoisted by the authorities to celebrate the occasion on the evening of 1 March was joined by K.M. Munshi and his wife, Mirchandani, municipal commissioner and Chundrigar President of the Bombay Muslim League Committee. The government let the ratings to rot in the prisons and jobless ex-ratings to wander the streets in search of jobs. The brave freedom fighters led a life of misery for choosing the path of armed-struggle for the liberation of India. However, Jinnah kept his words. In Pakistan, the revolting navymen were not only taken in Pakistan Navy but were also given high offices.

The Indian leaders thus failed the revolt, which was unitedly fought by the navy and the masses for the united India. For grabbing power, they preferred to negotiate than fight and agreed to the settlement even at the cost of partition.