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Participation of Students during the RIN Mutiny: Fight against Imperialism

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Abstract

Mutiny of The Royal Indian Navy (RIN) was started by B.C. Dutt on 1st December 1945 with the writing of political and anti-imperialist slogan. The British authorities had a fear that it might have affected the other sections of forces, so they did not hype it. They did not want to show that they were threatened by their own navy to free India. But the walls of barracks and establishments could not suppress the news of mutiny. Indian political leaders had shaken their hands with the authorities to suppress the mutiny by the greed of power. But the common man of India had no desire of power but freedom of their mother land. Youth of India, The students had a decisive role to play in the final battle of freedom. So despite of national leaders' disapproval, they participated with the naval ratings against strong despots till India became free from foreign domination.

Keywords: Patriotism, INN, Solidarity, legitimate demands.

1. Introduction

The research paper will highlight the fact that The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny was a political movement for India's Freedom. Indian leaders as well as authorities made it appear as if it was a mere personal agitation of naval ratings for their service demands. The paper will clear that mutiny was an all India movement in which every class of society, especially students, played a major role.

2. The Mutiny

The spirit of nationalism roused by the trial of the INA officers inspired the defence forces as well. Close at heels came the revolt of the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy on 1st December 1945 in Bombay. Till the arrest of its ring leader B.C. Dutt on 2nd February 1946, the mutiny was not publically highlighted. On 18 February 1946, the mutiny erupted by the agitation of 'Talwar' establishment. The mutiny involved the whole navy: 78 ships of various descriptions stationed in Bombay, Karachi, Madras, Calcutta, Vizagapatnam, Mandapam, Jamnagar, Andamans and almost all the naval shore establishments in the country joined in. only 10 ships and 2 establishments remained unaffected.ⁱ Even the RIN ships at Aden and far off Bahrain were affected by ratings observing sympathetic strikes.

3. Patriotism into RIN

Originating from grievances including derogatory racial discrimination, maltreatment, insecurity on shore and dismal service conditions of the ratings,ⁱⁱ the mutiny unlike the earlier orders in the navy had a political complexion.ⁱⁱⁱ It was not only influenced by the trial and court-martial of the INA officers but a loftier step was taken by the militant youth of the RIN: "*we have learnt the art of how to defend freedom- unfortunately, so far of other lands: we know how to organize; life in the navy had taught us to be on the job with perfect discipline. We are now ready to offer our services to the nation and that is why we want our national demand for freedom.*" Such was the flaming revolutionary message coming from a section of our people who so far the British had regarded as their "exclusive preserve".^{iv} The mutiny was significantly marked by the removal of the union Jack from the ships which was replaced by the Tri-colour, League and the Red Flag. Strike committees were constituted. The demand as formulated by the elected naval central strike committee combined service grievances with national political slogans: "Release INA and other political prisoners", "Withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia," acceptance of Indian officers alone as superiors etc.

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The mutineers renamed the RIN as the 'Indian National Navy' (INN) and sought advice and help from the nationalist leaders but got little or nothing in return. Fighting broke out from 21st. The call of the naval mutineers was well expressed through the Urdu song composed by Josh Malihabadi popularly sung by the ratings:

*“Kam hai mera taghayur, naam hai mera shabab,
Mera naara Inquilab, O-Inquilab O-Inquilab”^v*

My job is to change, my name is Youth,
My slogan is Revolution! Revolution! Revolution!
(English translation)

4. Students' Participation

A remarkable development that followed was that civilians including students particularly attracted by the mutineers' grievances exhibited remarkable fraternization and came forward to express their support for the ratings by registering protest through hartals, demonstrations etc., thereby justifying the heroic action of the mutineers. To the youth the "Striker Ships" at Bombay Apollo-Bunder had become symbol of freedom. A younger who was watching intently was asked by an elder to go away as there might be trouble-without removing his narrowed eyes from the ships he slowly and deliberately answered: *"Let the police shoot me down, I shall not move from here. If I die, it will be having seen the most glorious sight in my life- A Navy of our own!"^{vi}* The Bombay Students Union (affiliated to the All India Students Federation) took the lead but were later joined by the Muslim Students Federation to observe a hartal in sympathy with the ratings^{vii} and against the firing on castle barracks. They came out with a leaflet giving facts on the firing on the naval ratings. The General Secretary of the BSU Susheela Madimann appealed to the students to play a leading part in building up the agitation in support of the naval ratings. The message to the students ran thus: "To express out firm solidarity with our brothers in the Indian Navy, Bombay Students Union calls upon all city students to observe complete strike on 22nd February and to hold meetings and demonstrations, let thousands of Bombay students unitedly pledge their full support to naval comrades. The BSU earnestly appeals to the Muslim Students Federation and the Students Congress to join hands, with us on this common issue and help in making the students' hartal and demonstration a grand success. Inside the navy are men of all communities and different political viewpoints. They stand united to win their demands. Let us students' pledge that in case these men are tried, victimized or punished in any way, we shall not fail to make another INA out of the issue and agitation and rouse the entire country till they are released". Even the Congress Socialist Party leader Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali advised the student organizations of Bombay to extend their moral support to their *legitimate demands* of the naval strikers.^{viii} In her view the demand of freedom by the naval ratings was not legitimate. Thereafter students notably of the G.S.N. Medical College, Wilson's College and St. Xaviers College marched in procession to collect money in order to buy food for the RIN ratings. The student demonstrations of South Bombay were not interfered with by the police and there followed no clashes.^{ix} In North Bombay, the students, however encountered police lathis and fought back with bare fists only to be dispersed after a vicious battle with the police. Such a site was the Ruia College in North

Bombay, where a procession of 500 students were lathi-charged but they regrouped themselves on the Tilak Bridge and half a furlong away, they were attacked near Hind Mata Cinema. The Students' Congress despite opposition from their leaders came out in masse; the League and communist students fought desperately with sticks and bare fists to protest against the firing at Bombay and Karachi but were finally dispersed after a heavy lathi-charge by the police.^x In Calcutta on February 22nd and 23rd over a lakh of students abstained from classes and were out in the streets talking about the heroism of the Bombay navy boys and resenting the insulting declaration of the Flag Officer in Command.^{xi} Later, they staged a demonstration in connection with the naval strike and paraded in small processions. Students congregated on Ashutosh Mukherjee Road houting slogans "Accept, the demands of the ratings, "end police zoolum", Congress, League, Communists Unite, etc. the police arrived and there followed a clash between the students and the police at Jogubazar.^{xii} Students primarily belonging to the Bengal Provincial Federation organized a protest meeting at Sraddhananda Park where they were enthusiastically supported by students and workers of other political affiliations.^{xiii} Thereafter, students carrying Congress, league and Red Flags and shouting anti-British slogans assembled at the park where they adopted a resolution congratulating the naval ratings of Bombay and Karachi and calling all the anti-imperialist forces to put an organized and united front against imperialism. Similar protest meetings were summoned by the Calcutta Students Federation at Willington Square which was addressed by the eminent Bengal Congress Leader, K.P. Chattopadhyay and other Communist leaders.^{xiv} The students of Calcutta condemned the action of the naval authorities on the naval ratings in Bombay and held that all the demands of the ratings should be conceded. They further expressed that this incident served to show that the feeling of intense nationalism had permeated into all sections of the Indian people including students as well. It was indeed a duty for the anti-imperialist forces to guide this new consciousness among the students along a proper channel. The students also demanded full compensation for loss of lives in connection with the mutiny.^{xv}

5. Expressions of solidarity

In Madras, the students' organization affiliated to the AISF called for a peaceful strike supported by the Madras Students Congress in sympathy with the naval ratings. Thereafter, students from most institutions including girls abstained from classes and marched with Congress, League and Communist banner along the Mount Road where they passed protest resolutions against the police and military firing at Bombay and supported the demands of the naval ratings. They wore badges with 'Strike for the RIN' inscribed on them and raised slogans like 'Jai Hind' 'Strike for the Ratings', etc. as expressions of solidarity for the naval mutineers.^{xvi} Mr. Venkataraman, secretary of Tamil Nadu Committee of CPI observed that the students had demonstrated their anger against the imperialist rule of terror in Bombay and their sympathy with the Indian naval ratings fighting for their demands.

6. Disapproval of Leaders

However, strong disapproval of hartals by students was expressed by the Congress leader Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. He condemned students' action and held CPI responsible for

all that.^{xvii} Patel further held that the closing of schools and colleges was not likely to help the unfortunate naval ratings in their efforts to redress their *legitimate grievances* on difficulties in which they find themselves.^{xviii} Pandit Nehru sharply reprimanded the student fraternity. “*They seemed to behave as if India was waiting for them to take over leadership. In all freedom movements, students were the backbone. They also provide a reservoir from which future leaders would arise. But Indian students had already usurped leadership*”.^{xix}

7. Conclusion

Though nationalist leaders did not seem to encourage the students agitation in support of the naval mutineers, we have to admit that the student community irrespective of their political or communal affiliation had magnificently responded to the call of the RIN ratings exhibiting acts of selfless devotion, marvels of resourcefulness and resistance along with their countrymen in their mission for combating the imperialist forces. The students had realized that they had a decisive role to play in the final battle for India’s freedom. They had indeed shaken the roots of imperialism during the INA release campaign (November 1945- February 1946). Now they upheld a distinct sense of awareness that was seeping in the minds of the RIN ratings, that the Indian defense forces were truly national and that they should not be utilized for suppressing the freedom movement inside or abroad.

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