



ROLE OF COMMUNISTS IN THE ROYAL INDIAN NAVY STRIKE

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ABSTRACT

The Royal Indian Naval Strike, February 1946, marked a new stage in our freedom struggle. It marked the beginning of a period, when Indian service man would join hands more and more with the Indian people for the building of a free and happy India. The Mutiny was the large scale effort of the Indian people for freeing the country of foreign rule, while therefore the foreign rulers could crush it in a comparatively short time, the 1946 uprising was so powerful that could not even dream of such a thing. They therefore had to resort to other maneuvers and stratagems. They could do so because of the basic weakness of the anti-imperialist movement of the period of the Second World War and of the post-war years. Though it had rallied all sections of the people, its dominant leadership remained in the hands of the bourgeoisie and sections of the feudal classes. No political parties have been prepared for the revolt. However the Communist Party gave valuable support and organized the masses. The RIN Strike was the logical culmination of the mass struggle for freedom.

Key words: *bourgeoisie, uprising, communists, culmination.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Royal Indian Navy strike was started by the Indian sailors of the Royal Indian Navy on board ship and shore establishments at Bombay harbour 18 February 1946. It heralded a new period of revolutionary upheaval and marked a new stage in our freedom struggle. The men who led the strike were not merely fighting for the redress of their grievances but were also imbued with a high sense of patriotism.

II. RATIONALE FOR STRIKE

In the early years of the Second World War, 114 members of the 21st Indian cavalry refused to go abroad to fight in a war which they considered an imperialistic War. In 1942, the wakes of the August struggle, many revolts broke out in the armed forces and were ruthlessly suppressed.[1] HMIS Talwar, at Bombay, was the Signal Training Establishment of the Royal Indian Navy, known as the second biggest signal training establishment in the British



Empire. The Talwar had always been commanded by British officers. Life in the Talwar has been far from comfortable. The officers' ill treated the men, and their welfare was generally neglected. They had to wait unnecessarily long for disbursement of their pay.[2] There had been a change in the commander of the unit recently. They recalled Lt.Commander Cole. He had refused to take any action against R.K. Singh who had written "Jai Hind" and "Quit India" on the walls of Talwar. Commander King who followed Cole took move on January 21. Once again anti – British slogans began to appear on the walls of the establishment. Leading Telegraphist B.C.Dutt was arrested on February 2 for chalking up political slogans.[3]

About 600 members including officers, of the Royal Indian Air Force camp situated on Marine Drive went on what is stated to be a hunger strike as a protest against an alleged insult by the camp commander. The camp commander ordered the offender to obey the rules of uniform and not to argue. He is stated to have remarked that Indian officers were not efficient and could not maintain discipline in the camp. This remark was taken as an insult by inmates of the camp who decided to observe a strike. Over 1000 Indian railings and men of the Signal Training Establishment HMIS "Talwar", Bombay was on Hunger strike.[4] The officer immediately made open apologies for his action and it was only then the Indian soldiers gave up the fast.[5] They recalled the names of the white officers who had unjustly punished them, called them "Black Bastards", "Sons of Coolies", "Sons of Bitches", "Junglies" and so on'. So the strike was a sequel to the alleged insulting behaviour of the commanding officer King towards the Royal Indian Navy rating.[6] Our brothers in the Talwar have decided to fight. They refused to tolerate a longer such a insulting behaviour from any officer.

III. EVENTS OF THE STRIKE

The Union Jack was removed from the ships masts, and Congress and Muslim League Flags were hoisted instead. In their demonstrations in Bombay, the naval ratings carried the flag of the Communist party along with the other two flags and raised slogans of Jai Hind, Inquilab Zindabad, Hindus and Muslims Unity. Release the INA and other political prisoners, Down with British Imperialism and accept our demands. The heroic struggle of the Indian Navy was supported by the people in Bombay. The communist party led the support calling for a general strike of workers in solidarity with the naval uprising. [7] The naval raising and popular struggle in the February days in Bombay revealed the alignment of forces in the explosive situation that have been developing India in the beginning of 1946. It showed, on the one hand, the height of the movement, the courage and determination of the people and the over whelming mass support for Hindu – Muslim Unity and Congress – League Unity. In fact the movement had reached to the armed forces and therefore the basis of the British was not to be secure. But on the other hand, disunity of the existing national leadership and their consequent inability to lead the National struggle.[8] With the entry of masses in the movement, the armed forces had united with the civilian population in the common national movement. The real struggle for freedom had started. But the upper class leadership of the congress and Muslim League were



against the mass movement and aligned with British imperialism as the representative of law and order against the people. The naval rebellion was condemned by Sardar Vallabhai Patel who is called for discipline in the navy. Gandhi also condemned the violence of the people in those days.[9]

IV. DEMANDS OF THE TALWAR

By this time the ratings of the other ships too were busy in removing British Flags and hoisting in national flags. A strike leader from Talwar addressed the gathering to carry on hunger strike and not to give up until the demands were met. The following demands are to be placed before the commanding officer of HIMS – ‘Talwar’ by the crew on the strike.

- Release of all political prisoners including those of the INA.
- Action against the commanding officer for ill-treatment and insulting language used against the crew.
- Speedy demobilization of the RIN personal with reasonable provisions for resettlement in peace time employment.
- Revision of the scale of pay, allowances and other facilities.
- Family and children’s allowances as in the RIN.
- Best class of Indian food.
- No refund of clothing kit at the time of discharge.
- Better treatment from officers towards subordinates.
- Withdrawal of Indian forces from Indonesia.[10]

The President of the Talwar strike committee said that our struggle is against British imperialism. During the last six years of the war all the British officers have treated us like dogs, not like human beings. We had to fight not only for our demands but also to join the bigger battle for the independence of our country.[11] It was first sparked off at the Bombay Naval base on 18th February 1946. From the beginning, the leaders of the revolt had made contact with the congress and Muslim League leaders but received no response from them. But when Admiral Godfrey threatened to crush the revolt by using overwhelming forces at the disposal of the Government, the Central Naval strike committee which was set up by rebellion ratings, instead of bowing down, appealed to the civilian masses for organizing peaceful strike and hartal in reply to that audacious threat.[12]

Three days, February 21 – 23, 1946, will always be remembered as historic dates in the annuals of our freedom struggle. The real cause was that the people of the city were anxious to encourage and to join in any attempt to strike at British rule in India.[13] But the call of the Central Naval Strike committee received sincere support from the communist party and the trade unions of Bombay. The communist party continued to be of service to the people by inspiring self – confidence and National unity. By 1945, the situation took a radical turn-struggle by kissans and



workers broke out. As many as eight lakhs of workers took part in the strikes. These struggles not only aimed redressing their economic demands but also for national freedom. When the Government wanted to use the ports of Calcutta and Bombay to dispatch arms to suppress the Indonesian freedom struggle workers downed tools. The struggles spread to other areas. Mutiny broke out even in the air and in the navy of the Indian armed forces in the months of January and February 1946. About 1500 airmen at Bombay downed their tools. [14]

On February 22, the working class and other sections of the toiling masses of Bombay universally participated in the strike. They faced indiscriminate police and military firing. In the resistance struggle that raged on for three days from February 21 to February 23, according to conservative official figures, 250 patriots sacrificed their precious lives at the brutal hands of the British regiments.. In Calcutta, Madras, Karachi and other places too popular demonstrations were held in support of the naval ratings struggle.[15]

V. IMPACT OF STRIKE IN TAMILNANU

The major event had been the hartal in the city on 25th February 1946 as a sign of sympathy with the R.I.N. mutineers which was accompanied by an outbreak of hooliganism and violence of a kind, rarely witnessed in Madras. The strike was engineered by a number of local trade union, most of them controlled by the communist party. On 24th February 1946 at the annual Conference of the Madras Press Labour union, A.S.K. Iyyengar, one of the communist leaders, called upon the workers to declare a one day strike the next day, as a mark of protest against the police firing in Bombay. Leaflets were issued immediately under the signature of the leaders of a number of local labour union the next day the Tramway Workers, the Press Workers, Workers of Binny and Co's Beech Engineering Workshops and other unions all controlled by communists, struck work and went round the city in procession calling upon others to follow suit. Most of the shops closed down and public transport was suspended. Workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic mills stopped work in the afternoon and practically all colleges and schools were also closed.[16]

About 2000 students, including a good number of girls' students, took out a procession at about 12.30 p.m. through the main roads of the city and Central station. The students were seen wearing badges which bore inscription "Strike for RIN". They also raised slogans like "Jai Hind", "Strike for the ratings", as they marched through the roads. On the way they stopped a few motor cars and would not allow them to pass without writing such slogans as "Quit India", "Strike for the RIN" .The processionists held a meeting inside the High Court compound when resolutions were passed expressing sympathy with the RIN ratings and condemning the action of the police and military.[17]



VI. ACTION OF THE COMMUNISTS

In response to the appeal issued by the Madras Branch of the communist party of India, the Madras provincial trade union congress and the Indian students' congress, there was a general strike and hartal in Madras city on 25th February 1946. The objectives were to display sympathy with the RIN strike at Bombay and Karachi and in order to condemn police and military action in Bombay. Tramway workers, Binny's Beach engineering workers, Press workers Spencer's whose unions were communists-controlled, struck work and formed processions calling upon others to follow suit. Workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills were closed. In the Royapuram area the Assistant Commissioner of police on duty had to fire two rounds with his revolver to disperse a mob of hooligans. [18] Workers returned to work on February 26th 1946 but there was some stone throwing in Wahermanpet area and lathi charges had to be made. There was also a serious incident between Mambalam and Saidapet Railway stations (South of Madras).[19]

The RIN mutiny in Bombay and Karachi and the consequent disturbances have been the main topic of interest. In Madras city about 85 ratings attached to the HMIS "Adyar", struck work on 21st February in sympathy with the Bombay ratings, and went round the city in procession shouting slogans. One of the ratings of the assaulted officer, but they were all finally prevailed upon to return to their barracks and resume work.[20] A similar strike took place the same day in Trichinopoly, also under the direction of communists, but it passed off peacefully. In Madura there was a strike and hartal on the 27th February.[21] On 1st March 1946, there was a hartal and a procession by local High School students in Conjeevaram Town, Chingleput District. It was organized as a sign of sympathy with the strikes in Bombay in Madras.[22]

Another incident was at Cheyyar in North Arcot on 3rd March 1946 and appears to have gained its initiate from the Conjeevaram Riot. A crowd attempted to loot a wholesale rice depot and then attacked the Taluk Supply Officer and the Thasildar. The Sub Divisional Magistrate and the Police, who came to their rescue were heavily stoned and received minor injuries. Eleven rounds had to be fired, as a result of which one of the rioters was shot dead and four other injured. Minor hartals involving mainly school boys have been reported from two or three places all in sympathy with the RIN strikers in Bombay and Madras. Except in Virudhunagar, where there was some stone throwing, there were no outbreaks of violence.[23]

In the South Indian Railway Colony of Golden Rock, Trichinopoly, 5000 workers, 500 clerks and 200 sweepers struck work on the call of communist party. In the morning four gates of the Railway shop were picketed. About thirty worker women stood with Red Flags before each gate and not a single honest worker went in. A mile and half long procession, 5000 people started from the SI Railway workers union grounds of Trichinopoly town, with huge flags of all parties. All shops and hotels were closed in the Golden Rock. Trichinopoly has never seen such a day in

International Conference on Multidisciplinary approaches in Social Sciences, Humanities and Sciences

Sri S.Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur, Tamil Nadu, India

(MASHS-18)



14th December 2018

www.conferenceworld.in

ISBN:978-93-87793-61-3

its history. The entire working class downed tools. No shop was open. Transport in Trichinopoly and Srirangam area, was at a standstill. Streams of workers' processions came from all ends of the town.[24]

The RIN revolt shook the mighty British Empire to its very foundation. No political party had been prepared for the RIN Revolt. In TamilNadu P. Ramamurthy the communist gave valuable support and organized the masses, His call for a general strike received a massive response because it reflected the mood of the Working class at that moment of time.[25] A.S.K.Ayyangar was released from detent in 1945, began taking interest in communist activities and took charge of the press labour union. He took an active part and organized the general strike on February 25th 1946 in support of the RIN Mutiny.[26] The uprising in the Navy was an inseparable part of the glorious struggle which every section of the Indian People were then waging in order to force the British rulers to Quit India.

As a result of the civil and naval turmoil, over 200 persons were killed and more than 1,000 injured. A large number of British officials retired, The British Government was in India placed in a quite untenable position. It was clear that a very early solution had to be found and should do at any cost. The chief problem was to find some kind of bridge between the Hindu and Muslim.[27]The British labour party on the eve of elections in Great Britain had repeatedly assured the Indians that it would take up the case of India's Independence most sympathetically. On the basis of the delegations report, Mr. Attlee announced in the House of Commons on 15th March 1946 that the tide of nationalism was surging very fast in India that it was in the British interest to take a positive action. He further said that the cabinet mission was visiting India with the intention of helping her to attain Independence as speedily as possible. The Indians themselves were to decide what form of Government would suit them. [28]

VII. CONCLUSION

The RIN strike tells about the innumerable men roused to action against the arrogant, oppressive behaviour to their British officers who treated them with the utmost contempt. The uprising in the Navy was an inseparable part of the glorious struggles. The strikes had surrendered not to the threat of the British but to the Indian people and because of their faith in the pledges given to them by the leaders of the congress and the league. The historic days reveals the fact that the ratings were inspired by the mass upheaval in the country, by the heroic struggles of their people for the final liberation from the tyranny of foreign rule. The RIN strike marked the beginning of the period when Indian serviceman would join hands more and more with the Indian people for the building of a free and happy India.



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