

India: The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946

Sunday 14 May 2017, by [DESHPANDE Anirudh](#), [SHARMA Manimugdha S](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2017).

It's that time of the year when many countries remember the Allied victory in the Second World War and the fall of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. But on Monday, I met military historian Professor Anirudh Deshpande of Delhi University to talk about the last secular, anti-imperialist uprising in India—the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946.

Manimugdha S Sharma in Parthian Shot

In India, the Second World War is not remembered much, and Indians, by and large, don't care much about who won and who lost. In such a scenario, you, my dear reader, might wonder why we chose to remember an event that's almost never talked about in India.

Well, there are three reasons for that. First, the uprising, also known as the Royal Indian Navy Revolt and Bombay Mutiny, had its roots in the Second World War and the Congress-led freedom movement that ran parallel to it. And the most dominant slogan of the Indian freedom fighters of that time as also of the RIN ratings was 'Inquilab Zindabad' (Hail Revolution), which was inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution. And many of the ratings were directly inspired by the Soviet Union's fight against Nazi Germany.

Second, while everyone debates nationalism in India today, this last spontaneous and secular fight against colonialism has been largely forgotten.

Third, one mustn't leave any chance to meet Professor Deshpande for luncheon and munch on history. So, at a restaurant in Connaught Place, with chicken tikkas and steaks to keep our bellies full, we sat down to talk about his latest book, 'Hope and Despair: Mutiny, Rebellion, and Death in India, 1946' on the anniversary of the total capitulation of Nazi Germany to the Allies led by the Soviet Union in Berlin.

Following are the excerpts:

Q. The India of 1946 was one of hope and despair, you say. Nationalism shaped the national narrative while popular discontent was also rife. Do you see any parallel in the India of today?

Professor Anirudh Deshpande - There can be no direct parallels, but there are similarities in the sense that India today is a demographically young country full of hope and alienation, both at the same time. The nationalism of Indian National Army and Royal Indian Navy was secular; its slogans, symbols and actions were inclusive and resolutely anti-imperialist. Communal political parties were quite active and flourished during the War because they supported the British, but the mass upsurges of 1942, 1945 and 1946 were largely secular. The crowd turned communal during the summer of 1946.

Please remember an important fact: in the RIN Revolt, the naval ratings hoisted the flags of the Congress, Muslim League and Communist Party of India on their ships in deference to the three most important parties of the day. While the League and Congress flags symbolised communal unity, the CPI flag underlined the sympathy the ratings had with the working classes.

Nationalism remains important to Indian people even today, but its historical context and meaning has changed. Most young Indians are intensely nationalist and have great hopes of the establishment. They repose trust in parliamentary democracy, but if their hopes are belied and the establishment fails to curb unemployment and inflation, who knows what might happen in the near future.

Q. To what extent do you think the post-Second World War demobilisation added to the feeling of discontent? Any modern parallels, again?

Post-War demobilisation was a resounding failure. The British recruited millions of Indian volunteers for the armed forces during the war and lured them with a variety of promises. These promises were not kept even as the Indian economy came out of recession because of the wartime demand. While the hoarders and speculators made big money during the war the people faced the brunt of famine, inflation and unemployment in the aftermath of the war. From August 1945, wartime demand declined rapidly and unemployment started rising and this increased the competition in the labour market.

Without enough jobs outside the military, the demobilised men crowded the cities and either became the foot soldiers of revolution or reaction. In these conditions the naval authorities proved incompetent and insensitive to the anxieties of the ratings awaiting demobilisation. The promises made to the young recruits during the war stood betrayed, and the colonial state was rightly seen as a dishonest state by the rebels.

In 1945-46 the colonial state lost whatever little political legitimacy it commanded among the Indians, and that was the reason why the British made haste in departing from India in 1947. Speaking of parallels, see the developments since 2014. The Modi government rode on a media orchestrated anti-UPA wave and numerous promises were made to the electorate in 2014. Then demonetisation was imposed on the people in the name of destroying the shadow economy. Yet, there remains some hope among the votaries of the Prime Minister that things will become better. I suspect the remnant of this hope might turn to despair by 2019. Hope is a risky proposition with which politicians play.

Q. The INA received popular support, even political. But the ratings of RIN didn't. Why?

The INA was appropriated by the Congress and Nehru, usually a supporter of rebel causes, defended the INA undertrials. The naval ratings, inspired by this, expected Congress support. They described themselves as satyagrahis in the Gandhian sense. In doing so, they misjudged the political situation in February 1946. By the end of 1945, it had become clear to the prescient that the Congress leadership was preparing itself for the impending transfer of power and was opposed to a popular movement which would derail the process of electoral politics.

The morale of the rebels was bound to collapse in such conditions. Both Patel and Jinnah promised them help on the condition of surrender. But these promises were forgotten later. In fact, the two-nation theory seemed to have triumphed over secular nationalism in February, and both India and Pakistan were desirous of inheriting apolitical professional militaries from the Raj. The RIN rebels did not fit into this future. Upon its political isolation, the colonial state crushed the revolt by deploying British battalions, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.

Nevertheless, the working poor of Bombay rose in an insurrection, first in support of the ratings and later to turn their world upside down. This civil uprising was drowned in blood by the British Army that shot dead more than 250 people - the largest number of Indians directly murdered by the colonial state since the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of 1919. No one remembers this bloodshed now.

Q. The military was the lifeblood of the colonial state. Yet there was discontent in the ranks at that time also. How do you see the military in the present context?

During peace time, the British usually confined the Indian Army to the barracks, and its expansion and contraction were related to its participation in the two world wars. Both wars produced discontent in sections of the Indian Army but, by and large, the colonial military remained a professional standing force subordinated to civil authority in the time-honoured British tradition.

History shows that the more time an army spends outside the barracks in tending to political conflicts, the less professional and apolitical it becomes. The military is an institution, like other institutions in a political system, and the less ideological it is, the better it is for democracy. The financial and political subordination of the military society to civil society is the sine qua non of democracy and that is how things must be; the success of the Westminster model of governance is based on this premise.

That, in essence, has been the difference between Pakistan and India since the early 1950s. Unfortunately, the Indian politicians, especially since the 1980s, have increasingly deployed the Indian Army to manage the state in conditions which call for political and not military solutions. This does not augur well for Indian democracy.

P.S.

* "Royal Indian Navy Mutiny: Historian remembers last secular uprising of India". Times of India. May 10, 2017, 2:00 PM IST:

<http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/parthian-shot/royal-indian-navy-mutiny-historian-remembers-last-secular-uprising-of-india/>