



Student's Participation during the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny

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Abstract

The article explores the pivotal role of students during the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946, a significant event in India's struggle for independence. The mutiny, sparked by grievances of the naval ratings, witnessed widespread student participation, reflecting their commitment to anti-colonial ideals. Students engaged in mass protests, strikes, awareness campaigns, and fundraising, amplifying the impact of the mutiny. Their involvement not only drew attention to sailors' grievances but also intensified the demand for India's complete independence. The legacy of student participation in this historic event continues to inspire future generations, emphasizing the enduring principles of unity, nonviolent resistance, and the pursuit of human dignity.

Introduction

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946, one of the most significant events in India's struggle for independence, was not limited to the sailors of the Royal Indian Navy but garnered substantial support and active participation from students across the country. This student involvement was a testament to their unwavering commitment to the fight against imperialism and their determination to contribute to India's freedom struggle. This article, with a comprehensive focus, aims to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of student participation during the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, analyzing the motivations, actions, and the far-reaching impact they had on the broader struggle for Indian independence.

Background

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny emerged as a reaction to a multitude of grievances faced by the ratings (sailors) of the Royal Indian Navy. These grievances included derogatory racial discrimination, maltreatment, insecurity onshore, and dismal service conditions. The issues had been festering over the years, and the immediate trigger for the mutiny was the trial of the Indian National Army (INA) officers by the British authorities. This trial served as a

catalyst, igniting a spirit of nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment among the sailors and, significantly, among the students. 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.¹

The Spirit of Nationalism

By the mid-1940s, the spirit of nationalism had been steadily growing in India. The struggles and sacrifices of freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and many others had already established a strong foundation for the broader movement. Originating from grievances including derogatory racial discrimination, maltreatment, insecurity on shore and dismal service conditions of the ratings,² the mutiny unlike the earlier orders in the navy had a political complexion.³ The INA trials, where Indian soldiers who had fought alongside the Japanese against the British were put on trial, resonated deeply with the Indian populace and ignited a renewed fervor for independence. "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".⁴

The Students' Perspective

Students in India, at the time, played a significant role in the country's social and political landscape. They were not just the future of the nation; they were also actively engaged in the present. Many students were deeply involved in the nationalist movement, and their participation in the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny was a natural extension of their commitment to the cause of Indian independence. Their collective involvement demonstrated their recognition of the mutineers' grievances as part of the broader issues faced by all Indians under British colonial rule.

Student Participation

The involvement of students during the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny was multifaceted and dynamic. Their participation took various forms, all aimed at supporting the sailors and drawing attention to the injustices and oppression of colonial rule. 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!"⁵

Mass Protests

Students organized and participated in mass protests in numerous cities across India. These protests were marked by massive rallies and marches, where students, along with other sections of society, raised their voices against the injustices faced by the ratings and called for an end to racial discrimination and colonial oppression. The participation of students added significant numbers to these demonstrations, making them more impactful and influential. 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 and against the firing on castle barracks.⁶ 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.⁷

Strikes

Student strikes were a common sight during this period. Many educational institutions, including colleges and universities, saw students refusing to attend classes and examinations as a mark of their protest against British policies and in solidarity with the mutiny. These strikes disrupted the normal functioning of these institutions and attracted attention to the mutineers' cause.

Pamphleteering and Awareness Campaigns

Students played a crucial role in spreading information about the mutiny and its underlying causes. They distributed pamphlets, newspapers, and leaflets, effectively educating the public and garnering support. These campaigns helped bridge the gap in information and ensured that the mutineers' message reached a wider audience. 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

Fundraising

To aid the families of the mutineers and support the cause, students actively collected funds. Financial support played a vital role in sustaining the movement and ensuring that the families of the ratings were not left in dire straits due to their involvement in the mutiny.

Solidarity with Freedom Fighters

Many students aligned themselves with prominent freedom fighters and joined the broader struggle for a free India. Their involvement was not limited to supporting the mutiny; it extended to becoming active participants in the larger independence movement. In Madras 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³ 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".¹⁴

Impact

The involvement of students in the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny had a profound impact on the Indian freedom movement. It not only drew attention to the sailors' grievances but also intensified the demand for India's complete independence. The collective efforts of the ratings, students, and other sections of society contributed to the mutiny's success in forcing the British authorities to address the issues raised.

Government's Response

The British government, realizing the gravity of the situation, responded by conducting investigations into the grievances of the ratings and eventually agreeing to several of their demands. This marked a significant victory for the mutineers and their supporters, including students.

Broadening of the Struggle

The student involvement in the mutiny marked a significant expansion of the struggle for independence. It underscored that the fight against imperialism was not limited to one section of society but was a collective endeavor that transcended age, occupation, and background.

Strengthened Unity

The unity and solidarity displayed by students, ratings, and other sections of society during the mutiny created a sense of cohesion and purpose within the broader independence

movement. It served as a unifying force, bringing various groups and individuals under the common banner of fighting for a free India.

Impact on British Authorities

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny and the widespread support from students and others left a lasting impression on the British authorities. It made them increasingly aware of the rising anti-colonial sentiment and the need to address Indian grievances more seriously.

Legacy and Reflections

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny and the active participation of students continue to hold a special place in India's history of resistance against colonialism. The lessons learned from this significant event serve as a source of inspiration and reflection for future generations.

Unity and Solidarity

The mutiny exemplified the strength of unity and solidarity in the fight for independence. The collaboration of diverse groups, including ratings, students, and other sections of society, underscored the importance of coming together to achieve a common goal. This sense of unity remains a timeless lesson in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality.

Youth as Catalysts for Change

The role of students in the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny highlighted the pivotal role that young people can play in shaping the course of history. Students were not merely passive observers; they were active participants who harnessed their energy, passion, and ideals to drive change. Their involvement underscores the potential of youth as catalysts for social and political transformation.

Nonviolent Resistance

The mutiny was predominantly a nonviolent protest. It demonstrated that change could be brought about through nonviolent means, challenging the notion that violent resistance was the only path to freedom. This aspect of the mutiny resonated with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience, which had been a cornerstone of the Indian freedom movement.

A Struggle for Dignity

The grievances of the ratings, which served as a catalyst for the mutiny, were rooted in a quest for dignity and equal treatment. The movement's resonance with the broader Indian society emphasized the universal nature of the struggle for human dignity and respect. This legacy endures as a reminder of the importance of upholding human rights and dignity in any social and political struggle.

Historical Perspective

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, with student involvement at its core, offers valuable historical insights into the dynamics of colonial oppression and resistance. It serves as a reminder of the sacrifices and contributions of countless individuals in the fight for India's independence.

Conclusion

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946, marked by the active participation of students, was a defining moment in India's struggle for independence. The mutiny demonstrated the power of collective action and the significance of unity in the face of colonial oppression. The involvement of students highlighted their commitment to the cause of freedom, their role as active agents of change, and the enduring importance of nonviolent resistance.

This historical event serves as an enduring source of inspiration and reflection for the ongoing fight for justice, equality, and human dignity. It stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Indian people and their unwavering determination to achieve independence. The legacy of the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, with its resonating message of unity and the pivotal role of students, remains a timeless chapter in India's history of resistance against imperialism, and a beacon for the pursuit of a just and equitable society.

References

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