

Role of Naval Central Strike Committee during RIN Mutiny 1946

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Introduction:-

The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny (RIN) is a very important episode in the freedom struggle of India. If we term the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny as the “First War of Independence”, then we could say that the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny was the ‘Last War of Independence’. After the RIN mutiny British rule in India came to an end. So this mutiny has been described as the ‘Last War of Independence’. Once during Indian visit former British Prime Minister Atlee stated that, “INA activities and RIN mutiny made the British realise that the Indian armed forces could no longer be trusted”. This statement underscores the contribution of RIN mutiny towards Indian independence. The RIN mutiny shook the very foundation of the British rule.

The actual duration of Royal Indian Navy Mutiny was from 18th to 23rd of February 1946. This period can be named as the first phase of RIN Mutiny in which the mutiny was earlier limited to the naval mutineers only. The mutiny started at HMIS *Talwar*, located at Bombay on the issue of bad quality of food and was aggravated by the arrogant behavior of Arthur Frederick King, the Commanding Officer of HMIS *Talwar*.

Spread of Mutiny and Requirement of Co-ordination:

Mutiny started by hunger strike of naval ratings at HMIS *Talwar* on 18th February 1946, they were later joined by naval ratings on the other shore establishments and ships at Bombay. The nature of mutiny was apolitical in the initial stages but later on it took a political turns. The foundations of the British rule in India were shaken by the RIN mutiny.

The mutiny was started in the Bombay city and it spread like fire within the establishments. The RIN mutiny after the 21st February 1946 was not only limited only to the navy; it also spread to the civil area of the Bombay city. The mutiny acquired the character of ‘mutiny of the masses’ due to the participation of the people of Bombay city. The working class of the city supported the mutineers and organized *hartal* to support their cause. Every street of Bombay city became the battleground for the city people and they fearlessly attacked the police and army vehicles. The spread of mutiny from different shore establishments to anchoring and sailing ships and even to the Naval Head Quarter created the requirement of organization or Committee for better co-ordination among the different participating agencies and mutineers. The spread of mutiny was mainly due to the common grievances faced by the Indian ratings. Therefore the special committee of representatives was required to put forward the mutineers demands and play a role of mediator between mutineers and British. To keep mutiny apolitical and to announce their agendas officially, a committee was required at that hours of crisis. So the mutineers came together and formed a one inside committee named as the ‘Naval Central Strike Committee’.

Formation of Naval Central Strike Committee (NCSC):

The flashpoints of mutiny was at the HMIS *Talwar* and Castle Barracks. This two places become the official headquarters of the mutineers. The role of Naval Central Strike Committee was important in coordinating the activities of the establishments, ships, and mutineers during the mutiny. The British government under the retaliatory offensive action deployed the *Maratha* battalion and British troops to handle law and order situation within the Fort area. The situation was so serious that some newspapers portrayed a situation where it was assumed that the mutineers would fire and destroy Bombay city.

Hence by the dusk on February 19th, the Naval Central Strike Committee was formed to coordinate and direct the activities of the various units outside the *Talwar*. New members were co-opted as units sent in their elected representatives. The committee's strength varied from twelve on the first day to thirty six on the last. The increased number of NCSC Committee also shows the more participants from different shore establishments and ships. Ratings at HMIS *Talwar* provided the leadership to the Naval Mutiny. The Indian Educated Class of ratings from HMIS *Talwar* provided the leadership to the mutiny. So the ratings from HMIS *Talwar* occupied the main key posts on Central Naval Strike Committee.

On the 20th February, while members of the Strike Committee met the senior officers of the Navy and Indian political leaders to gauge the mood outside the naval establishments, all the ratings roaming free in the Bombay were picked up and placed under arrest in the Castle and Fort Barracks by the police. This caused great resentment among these young men who had till then remained peaceful in obedience to their officers and the instructions issued by the Strike Committee.

Structure of Committee:

Leading Signaller M.S. Khan, wheat-complexioned Muslim from upper Punjab, now in Pakistan, and Petty Officer Telegraphist Madan Singh, a tall, lean Sikh, were unanimously elected as President and Vice-President respectively. Following were elected unanimously as the members of Naval Central Strike Committee.

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|--|-------------------|
| Leading Signaller M.S. Khan | – President |
| Petty Officer Telegraphist Madan Singh | – Vice- President |
| Chief Petty Officer, School Master Nawaz | – Member |
| Leading Signaller Bedi | – Member |
| Leading Signaller Basant Singh | – Member |
| Leading Seaman Nurul Hasan | – Member |
| Signaller S. Sen Gupta | – Member |
| Leading Seamen Ashraf Khan | – Member |
| Able Stoker Gomez | – Member |
| Stoker Mohd. Hussain | - Member |

Even though B. C. Dutt, R. K. Singh and S. Shyam were arrested, they showed the way and inspired the ratings and so they were regarded as members of the committee. The formation of Naval Central Strike Committee was done by election. The decision was taken

by the Committee, and put forth for the consent in front of the ratings. Some Committee members was within the jail (B. C. Dutt was under the naval arrest, and R. K. Singh was under arrest at the Arthur Road Jail)

Preparation for Struggle by NCSC

The White Ensign was removed from *Narbada, Heera, Khyber, Clive, Lawrence* and others ships. At about 12.30 p.m. meeting was called. Madan Singh (Vice-President- NCSC) suggested that each ship and establishment should send their one elected representative to form the Central Strike Committee. Exception was only made to Castle Barrack (it can send two representatives), because it stationed more ratings averagely than any other establishment. Means the Strike Committee represents the democratic value as applied to democratic institution, as the representatives elected on the basis of electorates. Another strike leader from the *Talwar* (Basant Singh) then addressed the gathering: “When we started the strike, we never thought we would get such enthusiastic support from all our fellow ratings. We have received news that practically all the ratings of the RIN had joined in our struggle. We are all proud of our unity”.

Work of NCSC:

NCSC played an important role during the mutiny. It was the communication setup between the British authorities and mutineers. NCSC eases the tension by controlling over the mutineers. From the beginning NCSC advocates the way of non-violence and persistent on the solution to the grievances through the dialogue. On the eve of mutiny, the NCSC issued following statement:

“While the Committee feels that it will do everything in its power to impress upon the authorities the need to immediately withdraw the armed guards, it strongly appeals to the comrades wherever they may be to maintain complete calm and solidarity and refuse to be stampeded into any kind of violent action on their part. It appeals to all comrades to remain non-violent and disciplined under the gravest provocations or even upon being done violence to.”

During the meeting on 20th February the President M. S. Khan of NSC (i.e. Naval Strike Committee) began: “We will carry on our fight till our demands are fulfilled. We must stand firm on our own legs and maintain our unity. We must keep together all sections of the ratings”. On the advice of Committee ratings on the sailing ship kept their moral high by singing the famous song written by Josh Malihabadi:

**काम है मेरा तघयुर
नाम है मेरा शबाब
मेरा नाम इन्कलाब ओ इन्कलाब**

(Means my task is to change, my name being youth and my slogan is revolution).

The number of ratings increased at the Castle Barracks increased nearly to 5000 to 6000 and the centre point shifted from HMIS Talwar to the Castle Barracks. The Committee decided the following program on 20th February for third day of mutiny:

1. Wait for information from the *Talwar* if the military guard is withdrawn.

- 2.If you do not get the desired news, go on a lying down hunger-strike from 7.30 in the morning.
- 3.No violence in words or deeds to be committed.
- 4.The hunger-strike will go on till the military is withdrawn.
- 5.No rumours to be believed unless confirmed by the NCSC.

The work process of Naval Central Strike Committee shows that, they feared the armed conflict between mutineers and military guards posted at the gates, because military guards prohibited the free movement of mutineers from one shore establishments to other establishments. So the committee was expecting the withdrawal of military guards from Talwar. Was the desired news for the committee was an acceptance of their demands by British authorities or something else? First upon it is not independence that they were expecting from the British. The mutiny started due to the bad food and so ratings refused to eat it. By now committee was also using non-violence to protest against British authorities' discrimination against them. It is important to see that the Royal Indian Navy is armed force of British India, they can avail the first choice of armed struggle against the British authorities, but rather they rejected bloodshed, and chose the path of non-violence. The way to protest with hunger-strike against the discrimination was the new chapter or thing in the naval force. As they are trained to fight with arms and ammunitions, it shows the new way of struggle within the Navy. Naval Central Strike Committee strictly warned against violence, not only in deeds but also from words. As words can provoke the situation, the committee took a stand that no one can represent the mutineers and ratings except the committee. So do not believe on any rumour spread deliberately to tense the situation.

Demands of NCSC:

The most important aim of the formation of NCSC was to put forward the demands to the authorities. The demands of the NCSC On the 19th February at 0930, the Flag Officer, Bombay, arrived in HMIS *Talwar* and a meeting with the representatives was held. The demands put forward by the 14 representatives were

- a. No victimization of strikers
- b. Release of R. K. SINGH Telegraphist from Arthur Road Prison immediately.
- c. Speedy demobilization according to age and service group with reasonable peace time employment
- d. Immediate disciplinary action against Commander KING for inhuman behaviour and vulgar language.
- e. Best class of Indian food.
- f. R.N. scales of pay, family allowance, travelling facilities and use of NAAFI Stores.
- g. No kit to be taken back at time of release.
- h. Immediate grant of more gratuity and treasury pay to men on release.
- i. Good behaviour of officers towards lower deck personnel.
- j. Quick regular promotion of lower deck personnel to officers. Officers from abroad to be stopped.

k. A new Commanding Officer of the Signal School of to be appointed.

Mutineers asked that all demands to be decided by the authorities concerned by 1700 (Naval traditions to use the time as 24 hrs pattern) through a 'National Leader' who would be nominated. In this way Committee gave ultimatum to British authorities to solve the issue. Their eleven demands showed the grievances among the ratings. Not even a single demand showed the demand of independence from British rule. So to assume that they really felt that asking for independence is far away thing in that situation, even that was not their cup of tea.

The above mentioned demands of mutineers were related to their own grievances and there solutions. But the following protests were also put forward to be registered with the Government of India:-

- 1.Immediate release of political leaders as well as I.N.A. including Captain Rashid.
- 2.Immediate and impartial enquiry into the firing on the public all over India.
3. Immediate withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia and Middle East.
- 4.The threat of a destructive military conflict hung high over Bombay on 21 February as the Strike Committee, with a call to 'Action Stations', shifted command to the RIN Flagship HMIS *Narbada*. All rebel ships manned guns, raised steam and began to hoot their intention of defending their comrades on shore.

The mutineers were only taking their orders from the Naval Central Strike Committee. The decision onboard the ship and establishments were taken by the collective leadership of mutineers. M. S. Khan (President of NCSC) then ordered to gather steam, load their guns and be ready for the next orders. He warned them that, if necessary, they would have to take a battle positions and surround the whole of the Bombay city. For, he said, "You must defend your own ships and the dockyards at any cost".

The Naval Central Strike Committee asked the people for their support. So within two-three days after the beginning of the mutiny the people of Bombay demonstrated their support. The first stage of support was through the street procession. This procession and disturbances in city caused riots and complete failure of law and order. The mutineers at least got their leadership through the Naval Central Strike Committee.

Conclusion-

Royal Indian Naval Mutiny 1946 was well co-ordinated by the Naval Central Strike Committee. The committee played a well-established communication bridge between the mutinying ratings and the British establishment. The demands made by the committee shows the determination of committee towards the Indian independence. The membership structure of committee shows the secular nature of the mutiny.

Even though the mutiny was sudden incident, but formation of Central Strike Committee on democratic basis, creating the committee from each shore establishments and ships representatives' shows that they were going on the right path on the first look. Creation of Naval Central Strike Committee opened a channel for the dialogue between mutineers and British authorities. Thus the central command would handle and control the whole situation.

Committee was representing the mutineers so they not only contacted with British authorities but also they requested to national leaders to pay heed to their demands. Later onwards committee asked to Aruna Asaf Ali to led them. So we can say formation of committee worked as the safety valve to British authorities and it avoided the major armed conflict and casualties.

Reference

- i) G. D. Sharma, *Untold Story 1946 Naval Mutiny, Last war of Independence*, Vij Books India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2015, p. ix.
- ii) *The Sunday Tribune*, February 12, 2006. URL <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2006/20060212/spectrum/main2.htm>
- iii) B. C. Dutt, op.cit., p.126.
- iv) Anirudh Deshpande, *Hope and Despair*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2016, p.59.
- v) Later became the Naval Chief of Pakistan Navy and he is the father of recently retired Pakistan Army General Rahil Sharif.
- vi) He became *Free Press Journal* Reporter after dismissed from Royal Indian Navy and later on went to Canada as a Radio Operator in the Aviation field.
- vii) B. C. Dutt, op.cit., p.127.
- viii) Biswanath, op.cit., p.172.
- ix) Ibid., p.81.
- x) Biswanath, op.cit., p.84.
- xi) Ibid.
- xii) Ibid., p.82.
- xiii) Anirudh, op. cit., p.65.
- xiv) Ibid., pp.84-85.
- xv) Government of India, War Department (1946), *RIN Mutiny Enquiry Commission Report, Volume-I*, p.61.
- xvi) Home Department, Political Section, File No-05/21/46, Date-19/02/46, p.7.
- xvii) Government of India, War Department (1946), *RIN Mutiny Enquiry Commission Report, Volume-I*, p.62.
- xviii) Anirudh, op. cit., p.60.
- xix) Ibid., p.87.