

Title: *Meanings of Failed Action:*  
a reassessment of the 1946 Royal Indian Navy uprising

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Samples attached separately:

*People's Age* 23 February 1947, anniversary edition

India Office file cover

One of Attlee's telegram to Wavell

Communication ratings on HMI Signal School

## ***Meanings of Failed Action:***

### **a reassessment of the 1946 Royal Indian Navy uprising**

**Abstract:** The exhibition *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* opened in Mumbai on 17 March 2017 and in New Delhi on 8 February 2018. The second part of Vivan Sundaram's *The History Project*,<sup>1</sup> this new installation was intended to mark seventy years of Indian independence and partition by exploring an often forgotten moment of Indian history: the uprising of the Royal Indian Navy's ratings in February 1946, when 10,000 naval ratings took charge of 66 ships across the Indian subcontinent in the name of the 'Quit India' movement. R.I.A.F. men, Sepoys, Bombay's industrial workers and the city's population joined in, marching in solidarity with the ratings irrespective of caste and religious affiliation. But the Congress and the Muslim League condemned the action and consented to British military intervention, which resulted in the deaths of over two hundred people and the ratings' imprisonment. The event has since been erased from Indian national history, perhaps because, had the insurrection succeeded, India's struggle for freedom might have taken a different turn. I worked on the exhibition as a researcher for the artist, with Ashish Rajadhyaksha and David Chapman, for over a year. The question we sought to answer during those months was: what is the significance of that uprising for India today? With this question in mind, in what follows I focus on the documents we unearthed in the process – pamphlets, slogans, the ratings' statements to the police and Inquiry, their memories and prison letters – and examine the motivations and hopes that defined the strikers' action. What kind of freedom did the ratings stand for?

**Keywords:** Royal Indian Navy, nationalism, uprising, historiography, individuation, Vivan Sundaram.

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<sup>1</sup> At Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, 17-25 Mar. 2017, and Kiran Nadar Museum of Modern Art, Feb. 2018 [See <http://insurrection1946.in>, accessed 30 Dec. 2017]. The first part consists of *Structures of Memory: Modern Bengal*, at Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta 1998.

What you notice as realistic...is not necessarily or certainly real.  
 The potential and the historical roots and the detours of possibilities also belong to reality.  
 The realistic result, the actual result, is only an abstraction that has murdered  
 all other possibilities for the moment. But these possibilities will recur.  
 Alexander Kluge<sup>2</sup>

## The event

On 18 February 1946 a strike was declared on the H.M.I.S. Talwar, the signal training establishment of the Royal Indian Navy at Colaba, Bombay. Called by 1,100 communication ratings, it quickly spread: by the end of the next day a total of around 10,000 naval ratings had taken charge of 66 ships and on-shore naval establishments across the subcontinent.<sup>3</sup> The uprising's *foci* were Bombay and Karachi, but sympathetic strikes took place in other military establishments in Bombay, Madras, Vishakhapatnam, Calcutta, Delhi, Cochin, Jamnagar, the Andamans, Baharain and Aden, involving also R.I.A.F. men and Sepoys. On the following day the ratings issued a 'Charter of Demands' that asked for

1. Release of all Indian political prisoners;
2. Release of all Indian National Army personnel unconditionally;
3. Withdrawal of all Indian troops from Indonesia and Egypt;
4. British nationals to quit India;
5. Actions against the commanding officer and signal bosonshead for rough treatment of the crew;
6. Release of all detainees (naval ratings);
7. Speedy demobilisation of the RIN ratings and officers;
8. Equal status with the British navy regarding pay, family allowances and other facilities;
9. Best class of Indian food;
10. No return of clothing kit after discharge from service;
11. Better treatment from officers to subordinates;

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Kluge and Jan Dawson, 'The Invisible Indivisible Man: Alexander Kluge Interview', in *Film Comment*, November-December 1974. [Available at <https://www.filmcomment.com/issue/november-december-1974/>, accessed 3 May 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 480: according to some sources, 20,000 ratings took part in the strike, which involved 78 ships and 20 shore establishments.

## 12. Installation of Indian officers and supervisors.<sup>4</sup>

The ratings appealed to the nationalist leadership of India, then at the threshold of independence from British rule, but the Congress and the Muslim League condemned the ratings' action and refused support. On the fourth day the city's industrial workers from the nearby mills joined in solidarity, while the city's population marched in large numbers.

When news came in that the Royal Indian Navy ships in Bombay harbour had mutinied and that, in support of them, the trade unions in Bombay had declared a general strike, the colonial establishment initially deployed Indian soldiers. But the ratings' actions merely sparked solidarity between the sailors, infantry soldiers, airmen and R.I.A.F. pilots, ordinary mill hands, students, workers, citizens in many cantonments, military stations as far afield as Karachi, the Punjab, Calcutta and port cities of the Peninsula. As the loyalty of the Indian soldiers could not longer be assured, and the riots in Bombay spread from the Fort Barracks on to the streets, first off Colaba and then off Parel-Lalbaug, the British forces were called in: the Royal Navy, the military and the police. The heavy cruiser H.M.S. Glasgow was posted to take charge of the rebellion. Bombay closed down. In an All India Radio broadcast Vice-Admiral John Henry Godfrey, Flag Officer Commanding R.I.N., demanded 'unconditional surrender', threatening 'if necessary' to wipe out the navy.<sup>5</sup> The curfew that followed resulted in over two hundred people dead, most of them civilians,<sup>6</sup> including Kamal Donde, Communist activist and Treasurer of the Parel Mahila Sangh, the association which collected food from the homes of mill workers and organised the *koli* (fisher caste) women to deliver it to the striking sailors. The strike ended on the dawn of 23 February, when the Naval Central Strike Committee (N.C.S.C.) asked for black flags of surrender to be raised. In spite of the national leaders'

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<sup>4</sup> Biswanath Bose, *RIN Mutiny: 1946 (Reference and Guide for All)* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1988), p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> John Henry Godfrey, *Private Papers*, Vol. 2. 1943-46, National Maritime Museum London, GOD/42. In the foreign press, news of Godfrey's All India Radio broadcast was reported by, among other papers, the *Daily Telegraph* (21 Feb. 1946, p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 483: 228 civilian died in Bombay and 1046 were injured.

reassurance, a large contingent of ratings was arrested, imprisoned for months in camps under appalling conditions, and eventually discharged with dishonour.

The incident remains a political enigma. On the one hand widely considered a failure, the R.I.N. 'mutiny' (as it was soon labelled by the colonial administration) has been viewed as a relatively minor incident at an especially turbulent moment in Indian politics. With the outbreak of WWII, British-ruled territories across South and South-East Asia were became a massive asset in the war effort, providing huge quantities of soldiers.<sup>7</sup> In India, Britain's failure to consult with the nationalist leaders about the country's participation in the war and Churchill's refusal to grant a measure of freedom in return for cooperation opened up divisions within the nationalist leadership. The Congress opposed participation unless its demands were met, the Muslim League offered support in return of promises of autonomous sovereignty for Indian Muslims, and, by January 1942, even while reiterating the Congress' demands, the Communist Part of India (C.P.I.) lined up with the international Communist movement calling for full support for the anti-fascist war. From December 1941 the Japanese advance through South-East Asia swept the British out of Malaysia, Singapore and Burma, and threatened to reach also India. For the populations involved in fighting back there was no question of going back to colonial rule after the war. Nationalist movements were active across the region, and contact and solidarity with these populations played an important role in the politicisation of the Indian men serving in the navy. The British defeat at the hands of the Japanese also led to a renewed but feeble attempt to enlist Congress' support for the war effort, with the Cripps Mission. Gandhi's response to its collapse was the Quit India Resolution (August 1942) and, as the nationalist leaders were arrested and mass demonstrations against their arrest were brutally repressed, demonstrations and strikes turned into a violent and widespread popular offensive. Thousands were killed and injured, and many more imprisoned. The so-called 'August Rebellion'

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<sup>7</sup> See Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (London: Allan Lane, 2004).

lasted barely a month, but it had a lasting psychological impact on the Indian population, their sense of political entitlement and consciousness. For the leaders it brought to the foreground the issue of discipline among the masses – a concern shared by nationalist and colonial leaders alike and one that would partly determine their response to the R.I.N. uprising. Finally, an important factor in this context were the trials of 20,000 Indian National Army prisoners, which the British foolishly decided, initially, to hold as public trials at the Red Fort in Delhi. The trials attracted nation-wide sympathy for Subhas Chandra Bose's soldiers and, from November 1945, triggered a pattern of periodic upheavals in Calcutta (by students and workers, Hindu and Muslim) that went on for months. Unconditional release of all I.N.A. prisoners was, significantly, one of the ratings' demands.

Between late 1945 and early 1946 India thus saw an unprecedented wave of strikes, often violent, across civilian and military establishments. One view has been to see these disturbances, for all their scale and diversity, as having been efficiently quelled in the end; at best as having hastened the coming of independence by a few months. This is the reading offered by Bipan Chandra in his seminal *India's Struggle for Independence* (1988). On the other hand Sumit Sarkar concludes his magisterial *Modern India: 1885–1947* (1983) claiming that, had this insurrection succeeded, India's struggle for freedom might have taken a new turn. It was a challenge to the empire, shaking up a British patrician state and an imperial order the full might of which was on display in the events that took place in Bombay in those six days. But it also revealed schisms within a nationalist movement that was on the verge of forming the country's first independent government. For this, the six days that marked the rating's uprising were erased from Indian national history for decades.<sup>8</sup> Over the years, however, poets, artists and, in a few instances, ex-ratings and sympathisers have returned to

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<sup>8</sup> The R.I.N. uprising is not discussed in Sumit Sarkar's *Modern Times* (2014) or in Partha Chatterjee's *The Black Hole of Empire* (2012). It is, however, examined in a very recent article by John M. Meyer, 'The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946: Nationalist Competition and Civil-Military Relations in Postwar India', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 45, no. 1 (2017), pp. 46-49. I have no information about memory of the event in Pakistan historiography.

reappraise the events of February 1946 because, seventy years on, the ratings' actions have resisted being assimilated into any single narrative. What kind of freedom did the ratings stand for?

### **The evidence**

Research in Indian and British archives reveals that a large amount of material is available on the R.I.N. strike. Most of it consists of either official documents produced by the colonial administration, the British government in London, the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry (set up soon after the event), and the Navy, or of press reports. In spite of colonial censorship and Commander-in-Chief Claude Auchinleck's astute use of the press, the R.I.N. 'mutiny' was reported by every major and minor newspaper in the country. The international press, including a larger than expected range of British regional newspapers, also covered it.<sup>9</sup> What is striking, given the extent of the coverage, is the relative scarcity of photographs. The picture that returns over and over is of a march of ratings in the streets of Bombay.<sup>10</sup> It had originally appeared in *The Times of India* (20 February 1946, p. 8) with the title 'R.I.N. Demonstrators Run Wild in Bombay' and a caption that read 'The procession of R.I.N. demonstrators in Bombay who, armed with various weapons, created a wave of terror in the Fort area on Tuesday morning. The demonstration was in sympathy with the "strike" of ratings on H.M.I.S. Talwar.' Note that no weapon is visible in the picture; the only thing carried by one of the demonstrators seems to be the Indian Swaraj tricolour.<sup>11</sup> This photograph was followed two days later by another, in the front page of *The Times of India* (22 February 1946, p. 1), of 'about a 1,000 R.I.A.F.

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<sup>9</sup> In India, the R.I.N. strike was reported in the *Hindustan*, *The Times of India*, *Bombay Chronicle*, *The Pioneer*, *The Bombay Sentinel*, *Aaj*, *The Star*, *Jugantar*, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, *The People's Age*, *The Free Press Journal* and *The Student*. In Britain by *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Western Daily Express*, *Nottingham Evening Post* and *Gloucestershire Eco*. Major international newspapers also covered it, including *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Life Magazine* and *Pravda*, as did Moscow and German radios.

<sup>10</sup> This photograph featured in *Hindustan* (23 Feb. 1946), *The Student* (9 Mar. 1946), and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (26 Feb. 1946).

<sup>11</sup> This had become the official flag of Congress in 1931, was used as the battle ensign of the Indian National Army and, by 1946, as the symbol of the independence movement.

men [who] struck work in sympathy with the R.I.N. mutineers.’ Indeed the few photos published at the time show either marches (including the *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1946, p. 1) and rallies (*The Bombay Chronicle*, 28 February 1946, p. 1), or the damage caused by the event, sometimes captioned as ‘acts of sabotage’ (for instance, in *The Sphere: the Empire’s Illustrated Weekly*, 2 March 1946, p. 259). Only the *People’s Age*, organ of the C.P.I., and *The Student* published harrowing photographs of the casualties a week or so after the events (respectively on 3 March 1946, p. 1, and 9 March). Recent research in the archives of *The Times of India* reveals that several other pictures were taken at the time which, however, never appeared in any of the major papers.<sup>12</sup> A few of these show demonstrations, but also the deployment of the British army’s against civilians (soldiers with rifles and tanks) and the casualties of the army’s brutal retaliation (piles of bodies in the morgue, and lines of bodies and the injured in the streets of Bombay).

### **The installation**

*Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* was presented in the form of a monumental installation. Much of the historical material used was sourced over a period of twelve months by myself and Ashish Rajadhyaksha from British and Indian archives, including the extensive oral history collection of the Imperial War Museum, London. Other material was especially recorded for the sound-work, which was authored by sound artist David Chapman. The show originally run in Mumbai in March 2017 for nine days, was extensively covered by the media and seen by some 1,500 people. It re-opened in New Delhi in February 2018 as part of a major retrospective of Vivan Sundaram’s work.

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<sup>12</sup> Vikram Doctor, ‘In the 70<sup>th</sup> Year of Independence, Here is a Look Back at the Long Forgotten 1946 RIN Mutiny’, in *The Economic Times* (2 April 2017), [<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/in-the-70th-year-of-independence-here-is-a-look-back-at-the-long-forgotten-1946-rin-mutiny-in-mumbai/articleshow/57967250.cms>, accessed 31 October 2017].



Central to the installation was a 40 foot-long steel-and-aluminium container with colour-coated walls. The 'hold', illuminated by a coordinated light design, served as a performance space where a seated audience heard a 40-minute sound-work that merged archival and contemporary recordings. We knew from the start that this could not be a chronicle of the uprising. Voices of participants to the uprising and eyewitnesses combined with annotative texts by Indian historians and renditions of poetry, music, theatre and sound effects. The idea behind what turned out to be a fairly abstract yet emotional performance, was to open up the events of February 1946 to their potential and possibilities for today. During those nine days the public and school groups were thus invited to participate in talks and discussions. In the gallery space outside the container, excerpts from Indian and international newspapers, in multiple languages and with diverse points of view, were collaged to construct a long mural of the events and their aftermath. They included graphics and photographs from tabloids, broadsheets, student journals and political pamphlets. The fourth element of the installation was an archive of documents sourced from India and Britain: copies of telegraphic communications between the Viceroy Archibald Wavell, the Secretary of State for India and Burma Frederick Pethick-Lawrence and Prime Minister Clement Attlee, original political pamphlets, copies of Bombay police files on the ratings, including ratings letters from camps and prisons. A separate section, the 'library', displayed new books on the uprising and especially reprinted versions of older publications, while next to it projections showed still images of everyday life in the Royal Indian Navy, ashore and on board, naval recruitment pamphlets, and a selection of diary jottings, letters and private notes of British army and naval officers stationed in India commenting on the mutiny and on other political uprisings taking place within the armed forces. Finally, on a stage facing the container was displayed a reproduction of the painting *RIN Bombay Naval Mutiny* (1962) by Chittaprosad, a major artist working with the C.P.I. known for his graphic representations of its struggles.

## **Invisibility**

With the exception of Chittaprosad's remarkable political drawings, which appeared at the time in the *People's Age*, and coverage in *The Free Press Journal*, whose editor was approached directly by the ratings,<sup>13</sup> none of the papers gave any ground of confidence to the strikers. By far the majority of them followed either the colonial administration or the nationalist leadership's line – positions which, in the event, aligned. In the leaders' eyes, as for the newspapers, this was a violent, faceless crowd – a 'mobocracy', as Gandhi saw it.<sup>14</sup>

The ratings, workers and civilians who took part in the strike belonged to different religious communities and castes, but marched as a single crowd. Significantly, writing about the photos in *The Times of India's* archive, Vikram Doctor observes that

The images are...confusing because their cause isn't clear. Most pictures of protests have banners, placards and clearly distinguishable sides. Some pictures of the RIN protests show the marches that the rebelling navy ratings took out, so there is some semblance of organised protest, not random chaos. But what were the flags they were following? Who were the leaders of the marches?<sup>15</sup>

The only newspaper to put a face to the events was *The Free Press Journal* (29 February 1946, p. 1): a picture of Balai Chand Dutt, the Leading Telegraphist of H.M.I.S. Talwar who had played a central role from the start. As Dutt himself put it, 'where the R.I.N. mutiny was concerned, the rulers and the leaders of the ruled were no longer adversaries, but allies.'<sup>16</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and even Aruna Asaf Ali, the most militant of the Congress' leading figures, called on the ratings to surrender and return to work. They advised them 'not to mix

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<sup>13</sup> Balai Chand Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents* (Mumbai: Bhashya Prakashan, 2015). Originally published in 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, 'Democracy vs Mobocracy', in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 21, (New Delhi: Publications Division Government of India, 1999), pp. 245-241.

<sup>15</sup> Doctor, 'In the 70<sup>th</sup> Year of Independence, Here is a Look Back at the Long Forgotten 1946 RIN Mutiny'. On the ships the ratings hoisted three flags tied together: the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Communist Party of India's flags.

<sup>16</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, p. 234.

up “political demands along with service demands”; to “remain calm” and to formulate to the Naval authorities their service demands.’<sup>17</sup> When the British army struck, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians, the national leaders looked the other way. After the surrender their promise to do their best to see that the striking ratings would not be victimised was soon forgotten. Years later B.C. Dutt would write: ‘we had our battleship Potemkin but no Eisenstein.’<sup>18</sup>

In the light of what was clearly a concerted effort on the part of the colonial and nationalist establishments, and of the media, to isolate the ratings from the people who marched in their support, what interests me here are documents that convey the ratings’ voices, the language the ratings used to advance their demands. Newspapers and photographs were not within the ratings’ reach, but the 1,100 who struck work on H.M.I.S. Talwar were communication ratings, adept at encoding, decoding and intercepting messages in several Indian languages as well as English. The wireless, telegraph and other forms of writing – pamphlets, slogans and letters – were media well within their reach. There are also the statements, the ‘evidence’ many of them gave when called as witnesses in front of the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry. Third, there is B.C. Dutt’s own account, his *Mutiny of the Innocents*, written many years after the event and first published in 1971. These written documents are worth closer scrutiny than they have been deemed to deserve to date. What the ratings said and *how* they said it may tell us something of the reasons for the invisibility of the R.I.N. uprising in Indian historiography and its significance today.

### **Collective and singular voices**

Contemporary and later commentators have tended to assimilate the ratings’ demands and actions into two narratives. One tendency has been to reduce the first to complaints about unsatisfactory service

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

conditions and racially-based mistreatment. This was the story preferred by the political establishment, colonial and nationalist. The other situates the ratings' actions within a pre-existing narrative of factions within Indian nationalism, where the R.I.N. strike is linked to the I.N.A. trial and/or conflated with the strategies and position of the C.P.I.. The I.N.A. trials were indeed a crucial factor in this and other uprisings in those months, and the C.P.I. did intervene by calling a workers' strike in support of the ratings. It also circulated pamphlets that were found in the ratings' possession. Some of these have a distinctly political, inflammatory flavour, and all of them are signed by a collective entity or a representative thereof:

Jai Hind...

Friends, when we, Hindus and Muslims, are fighting together for the freedom of our motherland, there is no power on earth that will stop us from achieving the same. Today on our side, are the Navy, the Air Force and we are getting reinforcements. ...Either perish yourself or abolish slavery.

Jai Mazdoor, Jai Hind, Jai Kisan<sup>19</sup>

Free India Government

Appeal of the Central Strike Committee of the R.I.N.

The Committee has withdrawn the strike.

Compliments to the brave population.

Time requires we will fight again.

On the refusal by Government of the demands by the R.I.N., the R.I.N. ratings went on strike. The strike was stamped as 'mutiny', and threatened to destroy the entire Indian Navy. On this the military workers and the general public supported the just mutiny of the Indian ratings. The British Military excited at the solidarity of the people fired on unarmed people. Over 350 persons (men and women) were killed and thousands injured. The massacre of the Indian navy was saved on account of the solidarity and sacrifices of Hindus, Muslims, touchables and untouchables.

The Central Strike Committee has issued the following statement and withdrawn the strike...after congratulating the general support of the people and expecting a further support, should any of them be victimised or punished.

For this reason everyone should resume work and refrain from strike after congratulating the hundreds of martyrs.

D.S. Vaidya, Secretary, Bombay Committee, C.P.I.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In Hindi *mazdoor* and *kisan* mean, respectively, worker, labourer and farmer, peasant.

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the documents quoted in this essay, including police files and, below, ratings' letters, were Bombay Police records and are part of papers recently recovered by Shekhar Krishnan in his late father's private archive, Mumbai. They I would like to thank Shekhar for making this material available.

The ratings' own slogans use a less orthodox language, but are also in a collective voice:

An Eye Here Also Please

Visit the most glorious hell in Bombay – Versova – our demob centre

Witness here our sufferings – hunger – injustice – oppression

Witness also the broom and bucket parade – at 6:30 am every morning

Why do we suffer? Is this the reward of our loyalty and service during the war?<sup>21</sup>

The C.P.I. was the only party to support the ratings. By the time it intervened, however, the ratings' strike had already spread to most of the navy's establishments. This is to say that there is little to be gained by reducing the R.I.N. uprising to this or any other political organisations. In reality, navy files passed on to the Bombay police at the time show that by far the majority of the ratings did not have a history of political activism nor had ever belonged to a party. For instance, the file (dated 23 February 1946) of M.S. Khan, the rating elected unanimously by the ratings as president of the N.C.S.C., states:

he is not connected with any political movement...During the mutiny he almost certainly came under the influence of subversive political elements. He has an unusual amount of control and command over large number of men and undoubtedly averted several outbreaks of violence during the mutiny.

A secret navy communiqué similarly reveals that top navy ranking officials had come to the conclusion that 'the majority have been misled...our object is to punish the ringleaders...the remainder we wish to make into good and willing sailors as soon as possible.'<sup>22</sup> In the event, 'once it was all over, 476 sailors were permanently discharged from the navy.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Included as evidence in the *Report of the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry*, 1946, British Library: IOR: L/MIL/17/9/379, p. 401. For an interesting discussion of conceptualisations of the relation between the crowd and the individual in the context of revolutionary socialism in South Asia, more specifically, in Bhagat Singh's writings, see J. Daniel Elam, 'The "Arch Priestess of Anarchy" Visits Lahore: Violence, Love, and the Worldliness of Revolutionary Texts', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2013), pp. 140-54.

<sup>22</sup> John Henry Godfrey, *Private Papers*.

<sup>23</sup> Doctor, 'In the 70<sup>th</sup> Year of Independence, Here is a Look Back at the Long Forgotten 1946 RIN Mutiny'.

After the ‘mutiny’, whether the ratings had since embraced politics or not, found guilty or innocent, the Bombay police was tasked to keep track of their movements. Police files list systematically hundreds of ratings’ particulars, including R.I.N. number, name, rank, next of kin and home address, date of birth, physical description, distinguishing marks, charges, prison in which their penalty was to be served and expected date of release. In many instances, a history of the rating’s career is also given:

Ex-warrant Engineer M.L. Chandramani, R.I.N.V.R.

Released from the R.I.N. on 18/4/46

And at present living at [follows address] Bombay

Educated at: The Bombay Government High School from 1927 to 1935, and at the B.G. National College from 1935 to 1936. Passed matriculation and F.Y.A.

Was employed by the Bombay telephone Company from 1937 to 1939 as an apprentice on a salary of Rs.100/- p.m., then by Caltex & Co. from April 1939 to 1942 in the Accounts department on a salary of Rs.100/- p.m.. Following this he was employed as Manager of the firm Indo-African Export Coy on a salary of Rs.225/- p.m. from August 1942 to July 1943. He then left to join the Crescent Transport Company as a supervisor on a salary of Rs.150/- p.m.

Chandramani applied for a Permanent Commission in the Royal Indian Navy in October 1943, but at that time was not considered. He applied later, in February 1944 stating that he had made no previous application and was accepted for a temporary Commission in the Special Branch of the Royal Indian Navy Voluntary Reserve.

Hi Service reports indicate that he was few Officer-like qualities and he has not been recommended for a Permanent Commission...

A.R. Rattray, Rear Admiral

The likes of M.L. Chandramani were not the rule among the ratings. A glance at the police files – at the addresses of their next of kin (usually the father) – shows that by far the majority came from the countryside. As B.C. Dutt recounts, before joining the navy many, like Dutt, ‘had never seen an Englishman before.’ During WWII the R.I.N. had expanded in an unprecedented way. Regulations were changed to recruit largely among the Indian population, male and female.<sup>24</sup> Many who joined in the first half of the 1940s were recruited from villages where their family’s traditional occupation and

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<sup>24</sup> The Women Royal Indian Naval Service was set up during WW2 at the initiative of Vice-Admiral John Godfrey. See John Henry Godfrey, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral J. H. Godfrey, Vol. 6 1943-1946*, 1964, deposited on 24 April 1966 at Churchill Archive, GDFY 1/8, p. 81.

subsistence was mostly agricultural and clearly caste-defined. Most Indian recruits, on entrance, must have thought of themselves, first and foremost, as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, belonging to specific castes and from very diverse regions of South Asia.<sup>25</sup> From here to begin to see oneself as a citizen of a nation in the modern sense of the term, as an individual entitled to political participation, is an enormous step, and not only in view of the brevity of the uprising.

In *The Glass Palace* Amitav Ghosh renders well how long a way many of the men who joined the I.N.A. must have travelled:

“But your father and grandfather were here,” Arjun said to Hardy. “It was they who helped in the colonisation of these places. They must have seen some of the things that we’ve seen. Did they never speak of all this?”

“They did not see things as we do,” Hardy said. “They were illiterate yaar. You have to remember that we’re the first generation of educated Indian soldiers.”

“But still, they had eyes, they had ears, they must have occasionally talked to local people?” Hardy shrugged. “The truth is yaar, they weren’t interested; they didn’t care; the only place that was real to them was their village.”

“How is that even possible...?”

In the following weeks Arjun thought often of this: it was as though he and his peers had been singled out to pay the price of a monumental inwardness.<sup>26</sup>

As for Ghosh’s protagonists, joining the navy brought the sons of farmers from remote villages of India into contact with other parts of the British empire. Whether interaction with the Malay, Burmese and other populations gave the newly recruited ratings a sense of being ‘Indian’, or what this might have meant to them, is impossible to say here. Andrew Davies has examined the practices and organisational structures of the R.I.N. and argued that the spatial politics of life in the navy created distinctly maritime social and cultural relations: an understanding of space and place that forced those

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<sup>25</sup> John Henry Godfrey, *Report on the Royal Indian Navy 1943 – 1944*, 1945, Imperial War Museum London, Documents.3250, Appendix 1, Tables 6 and 7 show that on 31 December 1944 the R.I.N.’s communal distribution and ‘development’ was as follows: 7,375 Hindus, 9,215 Muslims, 3,855 Christians, 225 Anglo-Indians, 79 Parsees, 232 Sikhs and 155 ‘Others’. By far the largest intake increase from the previous year had been among Hindus (up by 68 per cent). The same report also shows that 7,312 were from the Southern Provinces, 3,221 from the Western Provinces, 4,021 from the Eastern Provinces, 453 from the Central Provinces, 6,002 from the North and North-West Frontier Provinces, and 127 ‘Miscellaneous’. By far the largest intake increase since 1943 was from the Southern Provinces (up by 62 per cent).

<sup>26</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 348-49.

who joined to leave behind, or at least put on hold, traditional, religiously legitimated social conventions.<sup>27</sup> Moments of this process are manifest in the statements given by the ratings to the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry. Without exception the ratings appear to have experienced this process as an abuse, a deprivation. For instance, Seaman Abdul Latif is reported to complain that ‘he was given pig’s flesh to eat, although he was a Muslim’,<sup>28</sup> while communication rating T.K. Murti

and 7 other ratings were sent to Officers’ Mess to clean utensils, forks and spoons, etc....they were sent to do this work because there was no other work for [them]. He is a Brahmin....The same spoons that were used for non-vegetarians were used for vegetarians.<sup>29</sup>

While deprived of what they clearly perceived as traditional entitlements, each of the ratings expressed in these statements also a great deal of pride about their newly acquired identity: their position and role as units of an institution that had promised them something better than what they had where they had come from. For many did join the navy to escape poor living conditions, looking for a better way to sustain their family, complement its farming income, and for better prospects. All of the ratings who appeared as witnesses in front of the Commission of Enquiry were thus acutely aware that to specific ranks and roles attached specific wages, for so it was stated in the navy’s recruitment pamphlets and regulations:

Mohd. Nasrullah – Store assistant in H.M.I.S. Akbar. He has passed the Intermediate Examination and was recruited in 1945...He was recruited on Rs.65/- and is now getting Rs.70/-. He says that this is too meagre a sum as a chaprassi can easily earn Rs.40/- or Rs.50/- a month.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew Davies, ‘From “Landsman” to “Seaman”? Colonial Discipline, Organization and Resistance in the Royal Indian Navy, 1946’, in *Social and Cultural Geography*, Vol. 14, no. 8 (2013), pp. 868-87.

<sup>28</sup> *Report of the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry*, p. 537.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* These complaints are clearly reminiscent of 1857. For a thought-provoking discussion of the functioning and resonances of religious identity and ideas of pollution from the perspective of Indian nationalism and modernity, see Faisal Devji, ‘The Mutiny to Come’, in *New Literary History*, Vol. 40, no. 2 (2009), pp. 411-30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.



M.G.K. Moorthi – He joined the navy in October 1942...He had passed his Matriculation Examination. He is now getting Rs.150/- in Bombay. He says that at the time of recruitment the Recruiting Officer told him that a Warrant Officer's pay was Rs.250/- to Rs.300/-. When asked whether a matriculate hoped to get Rs.250/- in 6 months after beginning on Rs.40/-, he said he believed the Recruiting Officer because he showed him examples of matriculates who became commissioned officer and cited his own instance.<sup>31</sup>

B. Kothu – he comes from Ratnagiri and was recruited to the R.I.N. in Bombay in 1942. He said "Commander Smith said that I will be given Rs.50/- as pay on the H.M.I.S. Bahadur and was given only Rs.14/14-."<sup>32</sup>

The rating advanced pay and career demands that would have been unconceivable in the pre-industrial economy from which they originally came. But this is not to say that although the navy did challenge and perhaps undermined the ratings' sense of themselves as belonging to religiously sanctioned social categories, in depriving them of the privileges that traditional Indian society accorded them, the navy also transformed these men into fully modern individuals. Like any other military institution, the navy at best replaced, at worst simply overwrote, those pre-modern categories other, equally non-negotiable positions within a rigid military hierarchy. Hence the ratings' complaints that, in reality, not only pay, but also other rank entitlements and status were not respected:

Though a communication rating, I had to do much work for which I was not recruited...I was asked to scrub the deck and paint the ship's side and do other things...while my duty was radar operator...Because of improper treatment by the officers many ratings refused to do work for which they were not recruited. They were placed behind bars for the refusal. They were kept in the cells for 16 days. They were radar ratings.<sup>33</sup>

The personnel of the Accountant Branch were...not employed for the brick-laying business...Lieutenant Menzies asked us to do this work as well as cleaning lorries which can easily be done by civilian coolies at the current rate... We 23 Writers who were qualified were treated worse than a P.W..<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 535.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 536.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 537.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 536.

We have been told that our navy is based on the model of the Royal Navy. The same principles are followed, but the pay is different...We always compare ourselves to our mother Navy, the Royal Navy and expect the same conditions, because in the [recruitment] pamphlets our status was compared to that in the R.N..<sup>35</sup>

Written all over the ratings' complaints is a sense of being bereft of status. They struck work in order to demand that the R.I.N. upheld its regulation, not to challenge it as an institution. They were thus taken by surprise when R.I.N. command and the colonial administration labelled their action a 'mutiny', because none of them saw themselves, to begin with, as making political demands.

Written several decades after the events, B.C. Dutt's *Mutiny of the Innocents* retrospectively presents its protagonist, the young B.C. Dutt himself, as politically inspired from the start. He was, after all, arrested for painting a nationalist slogan on the walls of the H.M.I.S. Talwar, and it was also in his support that signal trainees on the same establishment struck work. Yet one of the most salient moments in B.C. Dutt's dramatic story is when he realises the full implications of that spontaneous, impulsive and solitary act. This is how he describes the mental leap that took over him after being arrested and interrogated for hours to the point of exhaustion:

I was a senior rating-Leading Telegraphist...I was taken into custody. Only then did the enormity of the crime dawn on me. It was a jolt out of a beautiful dream...I was almost senseless with fear. My whole future, my one ambition of making the Navy my career, appeared to be in ruin. It was a strange sensation. I thought I would not be able to walk the distance of about a hundred yards to the Guard Room. After a few minutes, I noticed Syam...and some other trainee ratings being brought under escort toward the Guard Room. They were innocent. None of them had anything to do with our movement. But all of them were close to me...Once I saw them under arrest, I came back to my senses. Fear left me completely. Now I could see my position clearly. I realised I was a prize prisoner.

[After hours of interrogation] I made my stand clearer. I told them that I considered myself a political prisoner and not a lowly criminal. And so I was entitled to certain basic amenities...The Admiral said: you are not a political prisoner, there is no such thing in the Navy. You are a defaulter and are being treated as such. Naval regulation cannot be changed to suit your fancy."

"I have nothing more to add, Sir," I replied and went into total silence. That suited me fine.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>36</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, pp. 105, 114.

It is only when he finally realises that by virtue of his ‘crime’ he is no longer entitled to his military privileges that B.C. Dutt comes to fully identify with the national slogan he had hastily painted on the ship’s walls. No sooner his military status is taken away from him that something else comes to his rescue: the realisation that as a political prisoner he would be

entitled to certain basic amenities. If I am denied the amenities there is no question of my taking part in any further proceedings. More: not only I would not answer questions but I would not eat. It was a play for more time. A respite was badly needed.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Abdul Hamid Malabari, a rating from H.M.I.S. Nasik, wrote in a letter (dated 25 April 1946) to the press from Mullund Camp, where he was imprisoned with hundreds of other ratings:

Sirs,...the fact is that when I was on board a ship an officer abused me. I said “Sir, do not abuse me.” At this he was offended and put me in open arrest. After this, these people read out a punishment to me. The punishment was this – 3 months Arthur Road jail. On the second day the strike occurred. In this I took an active part. Due to this they were unable to punish me. Now I am in Mullund Camp (East Camp) and am undergoing great hardship.

I return to this and similar letters shortly. My point here is that being bereft of status, deprived of the privileges that came with caste, religious affiliation or military rank was a fundamental dimension of the ratings’ journey towards, perhaps, politicisation, more likely, given the evidence, something more important: a new sense of self without which progressive politicisation would have not been possible. This is not to say that the ratings were not affected by the political movements of this conjuncture. I am arguing, rather, that in order to be receptive to the idealism of their time, the ratings must have undergone a process of individuation, whereby they began to think of themselves as individuals, free from traditional, military or other hierarchical classifications and entitled to participation, as equal and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

private individuals, into a democratic public sphere willing to enfranchise their subjective needs. It is this process that their letters manifest.

In *Mutiny of the Innocents* B.C. Dutt claims that when the ratings were called to testify in front of the commission they were advised not to reveal their ‘conspiratorial activities’ and ‘blame none. Discrimination, bad food, bad service conditions, discontent, yes; but no politics.’<sup>38</sup> Yet, even if purged of any politics, perhaps in the interest of the testifying strikers, it is nevertheless a challenge to the R.I.N.’s authority that gradually emerges from the ratings’ evidence. It emerges, I argue, in spite of the ratings themselves – out of an acquired but spontaneous sense of status deprivation, an acutely perceived inconsistency<sup>39</sup> between what they deemed their entitlements to be and the reality of these entitlements’ negation:

We were told “When you will be released, you will be provided service somewhere”. This turned out to be an absolutely false promise...I believed in that promise. There was no reason not to accept an Officer’s word on that occasion.<sup>40</sup>

C.R. Kumar...referred to continued disappointment from the time of recruitment onwards in all phases of life in the RIN and to the hatred of the system of the administration produced thereby.<sup>41</sup>

From where they stood, if the R.I.N. was not capable or willing to grant them the rights to which they were entitled by their rank, then what right did the navy have to demand compliance? It is as if politicisation sets in at this point by default and, as in B.C. Dutt’s dramatic account, in the first instance as a strategy for survival under duress, a practical move of defence against the punishment imposed by an institution which they fully embraced but which punished them for upholding its very standards. And as the institution legitimating their new military sense of entitlement, the navy, and its authority

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>39</sup> For the notion of status deprivation and inconsistency in an earlier context, see Michael McKeon’s *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> *Report of the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry*, p. 533.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 538.

gradually came to be called into question, then so did the colonial apparatus of which the navy was an essential element. The shooting of civilians on the fourth day must have done the rest. It was a violent, indiscriminate attack that effectively bridged the gulf between the sailors – cut off and isolated in Fort and Castle Barracks – and the crowds marching outside. This was a crowd whose energy and discontent was being scooped up by the sections of political opposition that had a history of mobilisation with the city's working population. But the activities of the C.P.I. or any radical agent did not make the ratings political; what turned them, perhaps in large numbers, collectively into opponents of the Raj, in spite of the nationalist leaderships' refusal of support, was the denial of perceived (and promised) entitlements and the army charge.

Collective political mobilisation, however, does neither require nor necessarily result in a sense of enfranchisement into the public sphere as a private individual. As Indian historians have long argued, there was little in Gandhi's strategies or address that made room for that. Noting, in another context, that for Gandhi 'Kisans and Labour' were not to be organised 'on an all-India basis',<sup>42</sup> Ranajit Guha has also observed that

[S]o we get within the ideological unity of Gandhism as a whole the conception of a national framework of politics in which the peasants are mobilised but do not participate, of a nation of which they are a part but a national state from which they are forever distanced.<sup>43</sup>

Something other than collective political mobilisation intervened to lend the striking ratings a sense of individuation in the modern sense of the term. On the sixth day, the S.C.N.C. decided to surrender unconditionally. The ratings were sent to prison camps in the thousands and, after months there, either discharged with dishonour or sent to prisons across the country. From there, they sent short letters that were intercepted by the military and eventually passed on to the Bombay police, whose task it was to

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<sup>42</sup>Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, Ahmedabad, 1941, [<https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/mahatma-gandhi-books/constructive-programme-its-meaning-and-place#page/6/mode/2up>, accessed 18 April 2017].

<sup>43</sup>Ranjit Guha, 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writing on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 194.

keep track of the incriminated ratings when eventually released. These letters speak, first and foremost, of physical deprivation:

[T]hose other boys who are in the other camp got diarrhoea [sic], the reason for this is they were given bad food. There are here 100 or 200 men in bad health...These people are discharging men in small groups at a time. They are not giving them anything or any money,...At present I am not feeling well also.

Your friend M.A. Hamid R.I.N. i.e. I.N.N.<sup>44</sup>

Some of our men in South Camp have been taken away. I do not know what their condition is. It appears they will be sent to jail. But the policy is to discharge them. Their P.I.B.s have been collected, their kit has been mustered and collected. Their lost kit has also been collected...What more should I write?

Yours faithfully, Rajeshwas Singh, writing from East Camp

Second, they speak of isolation:

Sir please write all affairs in detail because we do not receive any news from outside.

(Translation of a letter from Kanarese dated 30.4.46 from E.S.R. Shenoy, Prison No. 27836, Yeravda Central Prison, Poona, (ex-R.I.N. rating) to M.N. Shenoy, Room No. 16, Floor No. 2 [follows full address], Dadar, Bombay.)

Shantaram's namaskars to Annaya. In their power they have awarded me 42 days. They have kept the punishment a secret. No witness has come against me. When I was awarded punishment there was nobody with me. I was taken to Mulund and there awarded punishment and brought here secretly. There are still 28 days left for me.

A very serious charge is being laid against me. I have no one to help me. Sir, have mercy on me and give this to the press. My name is Abdul Hamid Malabari.

Third, there is a clear sense in these letters that none of the ratings by this time regarded themselves any longer as a member of the navy. From imprisonment they write to friends signing as friends, or to the press giving simply their name:

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<sup>44</sup> Indian National Navy.

Dear friend, I am quite well...I wrote letter when I was detained in Mulund Camp you may received. Now I am in Yarwad central Jail for the period 28 days which I was sentenced by the R.I.N. authorities. I am coming Bombay on the 15th of May. Up to that time please collect my private articles. Please pass my Namaste to all your friends.

G.P. Gupta ex-R.I.N.

The ratings' rank within the navy had given them a new sense of entitlement, but this was now taken away from them. It is at this point of ultimate dejection and isolation – stripped of all they thought they had as Brahmin, Hindu or Muslim, Communication Officers or Chief Petty Officers – that the ratings begin to speak of themselves no longer or not only as farmers' sons or ratings, but first and foremost as private individuals.

### **The logic of historical realism**

We can now begin to grasp the importance of the fact that, contrary to historical interpretations, R.I.N. strikers' requests and actions were neither simply about poor conditions of service, nor were they mouthpieces for the C.P.I.. Their 'Charter of Demands' asked for things that, on the surface, may seem disparate, even contradictory, as, for instance, on the one hand that 'British nationals quit India' and, on the other, 'equal status with the British navy regarding pay, family allowances and other facilities'. Running through the ratings' charter are two discourses: of (colonial) rank privilege and, at the same time, nationalist politics. But the contradiction is only apparent. From where they stood, not one of their individual demands must have seemed more important than, separate from, or in tension with the others. Just as in the ratings' statements to the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry complaints of unfair treatment, poor working conditions and lack of prospects were expressed also as a general and widespread discontent about the R.I.N., so here the right to both better treatment and working conditions *and* to political self-determination are expressed in the same sheet, as a single charter. To separate out one type of demand from the other – or to coerce the events of February 1946 into either one narrative (of mere conditions of service) or the other (of pre-organised politicisation) – is to pass

in silence the radical social transformation undergone by these men: from Hindu or Muslim farmer, to proud colonial sailor, to nationalist striker and finally, all this having been taken away from them, to nothing more than a private individual. It was only from such a position of individuation that the ratings could become politicised in a progressive sense of the term (as opposed to collectively mobilised), for as Hannah Arendt observed

Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life... Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity [their private subjectivity], so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.<sup>45</sup>

For historian Bipan Chandra too many limitations marked the ratings' uprising for it to be regarded as a movement that could have led India to a more radical path. There was, in Chandra's view,

no place for the men and women of small towns and villages who had formed the backbone of the mass movements of the earlier decades...the upheavals were confined to a few urban centres...The communal unity witnessed was more organisational unity than unity of the people...The view that communal unity forged in the struggles of 1945-46 could, if taken further, have averted partition, seems to be based on wishful thinking rather than concrete historical possibility...The Congress' role is seen as one of defusing the revolutionary situation, prompted by its fear that the situation would go out of its control...The belief is that if the Congress leaders had not surrendered for their desire for power, a different path to independence would have emerged. In our view, [the R.I.N. mutiny and the upsurges triggered by the I.N.A. trials] were an extension of the earlier nationalist activities with which the Congress was integrally associated.<sup>46</sup>

In actual fact the R.I.N. uprising extended well beyond the urban centres of Bombay and Karachi: the *Report of the R.I.N. Commission of Enquiry* shows that but a very small number of R.I.N. establishments failed to join the uprising, and the many that did were located across the Indian Ocean. The extent of the strike and the speed at which it spread were significantly helped by the ratings'

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<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, pp. 481-84.



control of telecommunications, which should not be underestimated.<sup>47</sup> R.I.N. annual reports and police files also indicate that by far the majority of the ratings were originally from small towns and villages. As for communal unity, the evidence – including pamphlets, personal accounts and photographs – is that it was spontaneous, *in spite* of organisational disunity (for instance, Congress and the Muslim League’s initially divergent positions, or Jinnah’s later appeal to some ratings as ‘Muslim ratings’). That leaves us with the Congress and with Chandra’s claim that the belief that the communal unity which marked this and other uprisings of 1945-46 could, ‘if taken further, have averted partition, seems to be based on wishful thinking rather than concrete historical possibility.’<sup>48</sup>

What evidence there is shows that the Congress leadership was both taken by surprise and either incapable or unwilling to grasp the significance of the ratings’ actions. On 19 February the ratings appealed to Aruna Asaf Ali to intervene on their behalf, to address a meeting and to act as their spokesperson. She advised them to remain calm, and to go see Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the highest Congress authority in the city at the time. Patel in turn advised them to lay down all arms and go through the formality of a surrender, promising them that the Congress would do its level best to see that there would be no victimisation. ‘We are not surrendering to the British. We are surrendering to our own people’, he told them.<sup>49</sup> On 23 February, in a statement to the press, Gandhi declared:

I have followed the events now happening in India with painful interest... This mutiny and what is following is not, in any sense of the term, non-violent action... There is such a thing as thoughtful violent action. What I see happening now is not thoughtful.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> It is a measure of the ratings’ control of telecommunications that, as documents in the British Library show, telegraphic communication between Prime Minister Attlee and the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, was interrupted for whole days at a time, especially during the first few days of the uprising.

<sup>48</sup> Chandra, *India’s Struggle for Independence*, p. 482.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Patel: A Life* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 2005), p. 355.

<sup>50</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, ‘572. Statement to the Press’, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 89 (New Delhi: Publications Division Government of India, 1999), p. 441.

The following day, in a private letter to Gandhi (dated 24 February 1946) Patel complained: ‘We are done for, finished, if we don’t stand up to this.’<sup>51</sup> He explained to the Mahatma:

She [Aruna Asaf Ali] wired Jawahar [Nehru]...Jawahar sent me a wire saying that if necessary he would leave important work and come. I replied that he need not. Even so he comes tomorrow.<sup>52</sup>

On his arrival, on 25 February 1946, Nehru commended the ratings for their bravery, but reminded them of the violence at the disposal of the state:

Unless it is the violence of the armies..., petty insurrectionary type of action...must go down before superior violence...If there is going to be violence, it should be on the biggest scale possible at the right time with the right preparation.<sup>53</sup>

Congress leaders condemned the spontaneity that characterised the ratings’ action, which they dismissed as ‘petty’, disqualified as ‘not thoughtful’, and ultimately perceived as a threat to the Congress and its leadership. As John M. Meyer also noted,<sup>54</sup> Congress leaders, determined to play a decisive role in the transfer of power, feared that a military-led insurrection might cost them their place at the negotiating table. With their open refusal of support, as much as with the words in the correspondence cited above, Congress thus dissociated itself fully from the uprising. They did not see the ratings’ strike as an extension of earlier nationalist activities, and rightly so. With the benefit of 70 years of hindsight, the ratings’ trajectory, had it been ‘taken further’, appears today to have had potentially far greater consequences than collective mobilisation. What the leadership’s ‘thoughtful’, ‘rightly prepared’ strategies left behind – what was, in Guha’s words, ‘forever distanced’ – was the

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<sup>51</sup> Gandhi, *Patel: A Life*, p. 356.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. 15, S. Gopal (ed.) (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1982), pp. 11-12.

<sup>54</sup> Meyer, ‘The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946: Nationalist Competition and Civil-Military Relations in Postwar India’.

ratings' own sense of active participation, their enfranchisement as individuals into an emerging Indian democratic public sphere.

## Conclusion

The Congress failed to assess the long-term consequences of their dismissal of the ratings. These are in full sight today, at a time when *Hindutva* - an ideology promoting the hegemony of Hindus, of the Hindu way of life and, in Narendra Modi's inflection, a call to become Hindu politically - is conflated all too successfully with the nation and its future.<sup>55</sup> Can, in this present context, an uprising marked by individuals uniting *as* individuals, above and beyond religious and caste identification, really be written off as 'wishful thinking'? The way out of this may well require us to think 'unrealistically'. Imagining – as Alexander Kluge urges us to do in this article's opening quotation and as we tried to do with Vivan Sundaram's new installation – that 'the same story can take a different direction'<sup>56</sup> can also enable us to brush history against the grain, against entrenched patterns of 'realistic' thought. The R.I.N. uprising of 1946 was a short-lived event – six days that are now mostly forgotten, leaving behind a bundle of letters from a few disgraced men. But what Kluge calls an 'economy of combined trivials'<sup>57</sup> can challenge dominant economies of 'reality'. Such a position, even though purely hypothetical, has, as Devin Fore reminds us,<sup>58</sup> 'inestimable tactical value.' Perhaps our public, whose response to the installation was enthusiastic, also felt this way when they asked: who were these men? This article was written in answer to that question.

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<sup>55</sup> Suhas Palshikar 'India's Second Dominant Party System', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, no. 12 (25 Mar. 2017), p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Kluge 'Rede zum Büchner Preis 2003', [2003], [<http://www.kluge-alexander.de/zur-person/reden/2003-buechner-preis%20.html>, accessed 5 May 2017]: 'Die gleiche Geschichte an anderem Ort, zu anderer Zeit kann zu jedem Moment einen anderen Ausgang nehmen.'

<sup>57</sup> Alexander Kluge, 'Thesen 1-4', in Christian Schulte (ed.), *In Gefahr und grösster Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod: Texte zu Kino, Film, Politik* (Berlin: Vorwerk, 1999), p. 155: 'eine Ökonomie der kombinierten Nebensachen.'

<sup>58</sup> Devin Fore, 'Introduction', in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge *History and Obstinacy* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), p. 64.