International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

From Naval Revolt to National Policy: Decolonising the Legacy of the Royal Indian Naval Uprising of 1946

Raghuveer Kumar

Research Scholar, Department of History, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh) 495009

Abstract

The Royal Indian Naval Uprising of 1946 constitutes one of the most decisive yet historically marginalised episodes in the closing phase of India's freedom struggle. Conventional colonial accounts and dominant nationalist narratives have largely reduced the uprising to an act of indiscipline or premature militancy, thereby obscuring its broader political, cultural and structural significance. This paper seeks to decolonise the historical understanding of the uprising by examining its long-term legacy on India's freedom struggle and the formulation of postcolonial defence policies. Situated within a decolonial and interdisciplinary framework, the study challenges Eurocentric and elite-centric historiography and foregrounds indigenous military agency operating within colonial institutional structures.

The paper argues that the Royal Indian Naval Uprising represented a critical rupture in the colonial monopoly over military loyalty and authority. The collective action of naval ratings, cutting across regional, religious and social divisions transformed the colonial navy into a site of indigenous resistance. This resistance not only destabilised British confidence in the reliability of Indian armed forces but also exerted pressure on colonial political calculations during the final negotiations of power transfer. By examining the uprising within the broader context of popular anti-colonial mobilisation, the paper demonstrates how military resistance complemented mass movements and reshaped the dynamics of the freedom struggle in its final phase.

A central concern of the study is the epistemic marginalisation of the uprising in post-independence historiography. The paper critically examines how colonial repression and nationalist political priorities contributed to the silencing of subaltern military voices and the transformation of cultural memory. Through a decolonial reading of archival records, contemporary accounts and nationalist responses, the study reclaims the naval ratings as historical actors rather than passive instruments of colonial power.

Beyond its immediate political impact, the Royal Indian Naval Uprising exercised a lasting influence on the defence policies of independent India. The uprising reinforced the imperative of indigenisation of the armed forces, informed emerging conceptions of civil–military relations and contributed to the development of a strategic consciousness grounded in national sovereignty rather than imperial allegiance. By linking naval resistance to postcolonial state formation, the paper demonstrates how indigenous military dissent functioned as a formative force in shaping independent India's defence outlook.

By establishing the Royal Indian Naval Uprising as a transformative moment in both the freedom struggle and postcolonial policy formation, this paper contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise historical

methodologies and reclaim silenced narratives essential to understanding India's transition from colonial rule to sovereign statehood.

Keywords: Royal Indian Naval Uprising, 1946; Decolonisation; Freedom Struggle; Indigenous Military Resistance; Postcolonial Defence Policy; Epistemic Marginalisation; Civil–Military Relations; Cultural Memory

Introduction: Reframing the Naval Uprising in Late Colonial Crisis

The Royal Indian Naval Uprising of February 1946 unfolded at a moment of profound imperial exhaustion. The Second World War had fundamentally altered the global balance of power, weakened European empires and radicalised colonial societies across Asia and Africa (Jackson 2006; Darwin 1988; Louis 2006). In India, wartime mobilisation had expanded the armed forces from approximately 200,000 personnel in 1939 to over 2.5 million by 1945. This unprecedented expansion did not merely increase military manpower; it transformed social expectations, political consciousness and perceptions of imperial legitimacy (Khan 2015).

Within this context, the uprising that began at HMIS Talwar in Bombay on 18 February 1946 cannot be reduced to an episode of barracks unrest. It represented a structural breakdown of colonial military authority. The revolt rapidly spread to seventy-eight ships and twenty shore establishments, involving over 20,000 ratings (Government of India 1950). Its geographic reach extended beyond Bombay to Karachi, Calcutta and Madras, suggesting systemic disaffection rather than localised grievance.

Earlier nationalist historiography, shaped by post-independence political priorities, tended to marginalise the uprising. The dominant narrative of India's freedom struggle privileged constitutional negotiation and non-violent mass mobilisation (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006; Sarkar 1983). Armed unrest within the colonial military posed a conceptual challenge to this framework. As a result, the naval uprising was frequently acknowledged but not fully integrated into mainstream accounts.

Recent scholarship has reopened the question. Biswanath Bose argues that the mutiny represented a decisive erosion of imperial military discipline (Bose 1999). Geraldine Forbes situates the event within broader patterns of wartime disillusionment and nationalist politicisation (Forbes 2016). This article extends that reassessment by placing the uprising within four interconnected frameworks: structural racial hierarchy, wartime militarisation, transnational anti-imperial currents and postcolonial institutional reform.

Structural Hierarchy and Racialised Military Order

The Royal Indian Navy was not a neutral professional institution but an imperial instrument structured by racial ideology (Jeffery 2006). From its origins as the Royal Indian Marine, the service reflected colonial assumptions about hierarchy and authority. Commissioned ranks were overwhelmingly European, while Indian personnel were confined largely to subordinate technical and operational roles.

Recruitment manuals of the 1940s explicitly reveal this stratification. Indian ratings were trained extensively in signalling, minesweeping and convoy operations yet were systematically excluded from meaningful advancement to command positions (Government of India 1944). Promotion pathways were limited and often contingent upon informal approval from British superiors.

Material disparities reinforced symbolic hierarchy. British officers enjoyed superior accommodation, mess facilities and recreational access. Indian ratings occupied overcrowded quarters with inferior ventilation

and sanitation. Such disparities were not incidental but institutionalised, creating daily reminders of racial difference. Comparable racialised command patterns existed across imperial forces during the late colonial crisis (Jeffery 2006).

The psychological consequences were profound. Wartime service exposed Indian sailors to advanced technology and global operations, enhancing professional competence and self-confidence. Yet this growing expertise was not matched by recognition. The contradiction between indispensability and subordination produced resentment, a dynamic observable across colonial military institutions during the Second World War (Jackson 2006).

B. C. Dutt's memoir provides vivid evidence of everyday humiliation. He recounts racial slurs, dismissive attitudes and arbitrary discipline exercised by British petty officers (Dutt 1946). These experiences accumulated into a collective memory of indignity.

Administrative correspondence during the war indicates awareness of morale concerns. However, official responses tended to attribute dissatisfaction to immaturity or wartime fatigue rather than structural inequality. This misdiagnosis prevented meaningful reform and allowed discontent to deepen.

Wartime Militarisation and Political Consciousness

The Second World War radically transformed the Indian armed forces. Naval operations expanded across the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and Bay of Bengal. Indian sailors participated in convoy escort, anti-submarine warfare and communications intelligence. This expansion formed part of a broader wartime restructuring of imperial defence systems that placed unprecedented reliance on colonial manpower (Jackson 2006).

Exposure to global theatres altered perceptions of empire. Indian servicemen observed European vulnerability and encountered nationalist movements in Southeast Asia. Wartime mobilisation not only militarised Indian society but also politicised it, as soldiers returned with altered expectations regarding status and citizenship (Khan 2015). Although documentation varies, it is clear that wartime deployment broadened horizons and weakened the aura of imperial permanence.

Simultaneously, domestic political developments intensified nationalist sentiment. The Quit India Movement of 1942 had demonstrated widespread resistance. The Indian National Army trials of 1945 proved particularly influential. The prosecution of INA officers generated sympathy across military ranks and contributed to questioning the moral legitimacy of imperial authority (Fay 1993; Azad 1959). The trials became a focal point of nationalist mobilisation that resonated even within disciplined institutions.

Abul Kalam Azad later acknowledged that the INA trials stirred deep emotional currents among servicemen who questioned the moral basis of imperial loyalty (Azad 1959). Naval ratings in Bombay followed trial proceedings closely through newspapers and public debate. The resonance of these trials reflected a wider transformation of nationalist consciousness during the late colonial period (Sarkar 1983).

Bombay's urban environment further politicised sailors. The city was a hub of labour activism and student mobilisation. Shore leave exposed ratings to demonstrations and political discussions. The boundary between military and civilian political spheres became increasingly porous. As modern historians of late colonial India observe, by the mid-1940s nationalist discourse had penetrated multiple layers of social and institutional life (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006).

British intelligence underestimated this ideological shift. Parliamentary discussions in early 1946 reveal concern regarding morale but reluctance to concede systemic political grievance (Hansard 1946). When unrest erupted, officials were surprised by its scale.

The Outbreak at HMIS Talwar

HMIS Talwar served as a communications training establishment, housing ratings skilled in wireless and radar operations. On 18 February 1946, following disputes over food quality and disciplinary treatment, ratings refused orders and initiated collective protest.

The significance of Talwar lay in its technical centrality. Communication expertise enabled rapid coordination across ships and shore establishments. Messages circulated efficiently, bypassing attempts at containment. The organisational capacity displayed during the uprising reflected the technical sophistication acquired during wartime expansion (Jackson 2006).

Within hours, ships in Bombay Harbour joined the strike. The Naval Central Strike Committee formed to articulate demands. These included improved living conditions, release of INA prisoners and parity of treatment with British personnel (Government of India 1950). The political character of these demands indicates that grievances extended beyond immediate material concerns and intersected with broader nationalist currents (Fay 1993).

The symbolic dimension of the uprising quickly became apparent. Multiple political flags were hoisted simultaneously, suggesting a temporary transcendence of communal division. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh sailors reportedly shared duties and meals, challenging colonial narratives of irreconcilable sectarian difference. At a time when communal tensions elsewhere were intensifying (Talbot and Singh 2009), this display of unity carried powerful political meaning.

Chronology of the Uprising: 18–23 February 1946

A precise chronology of events between 18 and 23 February 1946 clarifies the rapid escalation and political character of the uprising.

On 18 February, ratings at HMIS Talwar protested deteriorating food conditions and alleged racial insults by British officers. Initial refusal to attend duty parades quickly transformed into collective defiance. Communication specialists at Talwar transmitted messages to other naval establishments in Bombay, facilitating rapid dissemination.

By 19 February, ships anchored in Bombay Harbour began joining the strike. Ratings seized control of several vessels, lowering the Union Jack and hoisting combinations of the Congress tricolour, the Muslim League flag and the red flag associated with leftist organisations. The symbolism reflected an attempt to transcend communal division at a time when constitutional negotiations were increasingly polarised (Talbot and Singh 2009).

On 20 February, the Naval Central Strike Committee formalised demands. These included improved food and living conditions, equal pay and status with British sailors, and release of INA prisoners. The inclusion of political demands demonstrated that the uprising had moved beyond immediate material grievance. Contemporary observers recognised the influence of nationalist sentiment and wartime politicisation (Sarkar 1983).

Civilian solidarity intensified on 21 February. Students and workers in Bombay organised demonstrations and sympathy strikes. Tram services were disrupted. Clashes between demonstrators and police resulted in casualties. British authorities deployed additional troops to secure strategic installations.

By 22 February, the situation approached a critical threshold. British naval units surrounded mutinied ships. Heavy artillery was positioned to deter further escalation. Negotiations occurred between political leaders and strike representatives. Vallabhbhai Patel appealed for surrender, emphasising discipline and national responsibility.

On 23 February, the Naval Central Strike Committee agreed to unconditional surrender. The decision reflected recognition of overwhelming military superiority and absence of unified political backing. Arrests and dismissals followed swiftly.

This compressed timeline demonstrates the volatility of late colonial India. Within five days, a protest over food had evolved into a politically charged confrontation involving tens of thousands of participants. The speed of escalation underscores the depth of accumulated grievance and the fragility of imperial authority at this historical juncture (Darwin 1988).

Civilian Solidarity and Urban Mobilisation

Civilian response amplified the crisis. Students and workers in Bombay organised demonstrations supporting the ratings. Tram services halted and industrial labourers joined sympathy strikes. The convergence of labour activism and military protest reflected the broader politicisation of urban India during the late colonial crisis (Sarkar 1983).

Clashes between demonstrators and police resulted in casualties. The urban landscape became militarised. British authorities deployed armed units to secure installations and encircle mutinied ships.

The convergence of military and civilian protest generated profound anxiety within colonial administration. Reports to London warned that further escalation could destabilise the broader armed forces (Hansard 1946). Such fears were not unfounded. Across the empire, wartime mobilisation had unsettled established hierarchies and intensified demands for political change (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006).

Imperial Anxiety and Strategic Calculations in London and Delhi

The Royal Indian Naval Uprising unfolded at a moment when the British Empire was already confronting structural overstretch. The Second World War had left Britain economically weakened, financially indebted to the United States and militarily dispersed across multiple theatres (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006). India remained the most valuable imperial possession, yet it had also become the most politically volatile. The uprising within the Royal Indian Navy therefore triggered alarm not simply because of its immediate operational implications but because it struck at the heart of imperial security logic: the reliability of colonial armed forces.

Parliamentary debates in February and March 1946 reveal the extent of official anxiety. In the House of Commons, members raised urgent questions regarding discipline, political infiltration and the loyalty of Indian servicemen (Hansard 1946). The framing of the event as a “mutiny” rather than a “strike” or “political protest” was deliberate. The term evoked the spectre of 1857 and reinforced a legal justification for coercive suppression. Yet beneath rhetorical firmness lay unmistakable concern.

Correspondence between the Government of India and London, as reflected in official naval histories, demonstrates that senior officials feared contagion. The Royal Indian Air Force had already witnessed minor strikes in early 1946. Discontent had surfaced among army personnel awaiting demobilisation. The naval revolt suggested that politicisation within the armed forces was deeper than previously acknowledged, mirroring patterns observable elsewhere in late imperial contexts (Darwin 1988).

Strategic memoranda circulated in London during early 1946 increasingly questioned whether Britain could indefinitely maintain control over India through force alone. The war had strained the imperial treasury. The cost of large-scale repression would have been immense, both financially and politically (Louis 2006). Moreover, the moral legitimacy of empire had eroded globally. Anti-colonial movements in

Indonesia, Vietnam and Burma signalled that the post-war world would not resemble the pre-war imperial order (Jackson 2006).

The naval uprising therefore reinforced an emerging conclusion among British policymakers: continued rule required consent that was no longer assured. If even the navy, historically regarded as disciplined and insulated from mass politics, could erupt in collective defiance, the long-term sustainability of imperial authority was doubtful.

It would be an overstatement to claim that the uprising alone caused British withdrawal. However, it contributed materially to the perception that the coercive foundations of empire were weakening. As Biswanath Bose argues, the revolt exposed a "dangerous fissure" within the military apparatus that could not easily be repaired (Bose 1999). The timing of the Cabinet Mission's arrival in India in March 1946 underscores the urgency of constitutional settlement. The uprising formed part of the background against which British leaders reassessed their strategic options.

Political Leadership and the Dilemma of Revolutionary Momentum

If British authorities faced strategic anxiety, Indian political leaders confronted an equally complex dilemma. The uprising offered symbolic confirmation that colonial authority was vulnerable. Yet it also threatened to destabilise carefully calibrated negotiations occurring at a critical constitutional moment (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006).

The Indian National Congress leadership, particularly Vallabhbhai Patel, adopted a position of cautious pragmatism. Patel appealed directly to the ratings to surrender, emphasising discipline and national responsibility. His intervention has been interpreted variously as betrayal or statesmanship. A more nuanced reading situates it within the strategic calculus of February 1946, when Congress leaders were negotiating constitutional transfer while seeking to avoid uncontrolled confrontation (Talbot and Singh 2009).

Congress leaders were engaged in delicate negotiations with the British regarding constitutional transfer of power. Open endorsement of an armed revolt within the navy risked provoking massive repression, communal backlash and postponement of political settlement. Furthermore, Congress anticipated inheriting the colonial military structure. A disciplined armed force would be essential for maintaining order in a potentially turbulent transition.

Abul Kalam Azad later reflected on the emotional intensity of the period. While sympathetic to grievances, he emphasised the need to avoid uncontrolled confrontation that could derail independence (Azad 1959). Congress thus prioritised institutional continuity over revolutionary escalation.

The Muslim League's response was similarly restrained. Although many Muslim ratings participated in the uprising, League leadership did not transform the event into a communal political campaign. In early 1946, the League's central objective was securing recognition of Pakistan within constitutional negotiations (Talbot and Singh 2009). Alignment with a spontaneous naval revolt offered limited strategic advantage.

In contrast, the Communist Party of India embraced the uprising enthusiastically. Viewing it as evidence of revolutionary momentum, communist organisers mobilised labour unions in solidarity. The convergence of military and working-class protest appeared to signal the possibility of a broader anti-imperial rupture, reflecting patterns of labour-military convergence seen in other late colonial contexts (Sarkar 1983).

This divergence among political actors reveals the contested nature of late-colonial nationalism. The naval uprising illuminated tensions between constitutionalism and insurrectionary politics. It demonstrated that anti-colonial struggle was not ideologically homogeneous but composed of competing visions of strategy and legitimacy.

Repression, Surrender and Aftermath

The uprising culminated on 23 February 1946 when the Naval Central Strike Committee agreed to surrender. The decision followed appeals from political leaders and recognition of overwhelming British military superiority.

The immediate aftermath was severe. Thousands of ratings were dismissed without reinstatement. Court-martials targeted perceived leaders. Pension rights were curtailed. Official naval histories sought to restore narrative control by framing the episode as indiscipline corrected through firm action (Government of India 1950).

Yet repression could not erase memory. Public discourse in Bombay and beyond reflected admiration for the ratings' courage. Even critics acknowledged the depth of grievance that had produced revolt. The emotional resonance of the uprising reflected the broader politicisation of Indian society during the final phase of colonial rule (Khan 2015).

The British administration conducted internal reviews of naval management practices. Although these did not fundamentally restructure imperial command, they reflected recognition that morale problems had been serious. The uprising thus generated institutional introspection even within colonial frameworks.

Archival Analysis: Official Records, Intelligence Assessments and Institutional Memory

A closer reading of archival material complicates the official narrative that framed the Royal Indian Naval Uprising as a transient episode of indiscipline. Government of India naval records, parliamentary debates and internal memoranda reveal deeper anxiety regarding structural disaffection within the armed forces. The published volume Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy 1945–1950 presents the uprising primarily as a breakdown of discipline corrected through firm leadership (Government of India 1950). Yet the tone of internal correspondence reflected concern that the unrest signalled broader morale deterioration.

Administrative reports in the late war years acknowledged strain within rapidly expanded naval establishments. Wartime recruitment had accelerated training cycles, placing pressure on facilities and supervisory capacity. While official summaries emphasised operational success, marginal notes and appendices reveal recurring complaints regarding accommodation, food quality and racial discrimination. These documents suggest that grievances expressed in February 1946 were not spontaneous inventions but accumulated frustrations.

Parliamentary debates recorded in Hansard during February and March 1946 illustrate the ambivalence of British policymakers. Publicly, ministers stressed restoration of order and reaffirmation of authority (Hansard 1946). Privately, however, correspondence between the Admiralty and the India Office indicated concern about contagion effects. Reports referenced sympathy disturbances in the Royal Indian Air Force and minor unrest among army personnel awaiting demobilisation. The naval uprising thus appeared within a pattern of post-war instability rather than as an isolated event.

Archival evidence also reveals anxiety regarding political infiltration. Intelligence summaries circulated in early 1946 suggested that nationalist propaganda had reached naval establishments through newspapers, pamphlets and informal networks. While officials frequently attributed unrest to "agitators,"

documentation does not demonstrate coordinated conspiracy. Instead, the evidence points to a climate in which political awareness had permeated institutional boundaries. This interpretation aligns with broader historiography emphasising wartime politicisation across Indian society (Khan 2015).

The symbolic dimension of the uprising attracted particular administrative scrutiny. Reports noted the hoisting of multiple political flags and the invocation of INA prisoners. These actions were interpreted as indicators of ideological convergence between naval ratings and broader nationalist discourse. The invocation of INA symbolism in official memoranda underscores the impact of the 1945–46 trials on military morale (Fay 1993).

Perhaps most revealing are memoranda assessing long-term implications. Some officials warned that reliance on racial hierarchy as the foundation of discipline was increasingly untenable. Others argued for improved welfare and more rapid Indianisation of command structures. Although these recommendations were only partially implemented before independence, they indicate recognition of systemic fragility.

Archival material therefore complicates simplistic narratives. While official histories emphasised restoration of order, internal documentation reveals awareness that February 1946 exposed structural weaknesses. The uprising functioned as a diagnostic moment, forcing administrators to confront the limits of coercive authority. When placed within the broader framework of imperial overstretch and economic exhaustion (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006), archival evidence suggests that policymakers understood the risks of escalation.

Thus, archival analysis reinforces the argument that the Royal Indian Naval Uprising was not merely a disciplinary episode but a structural warning within a declining imperial system.

The Uprising and the Acceleration of Imperial Withdrawal

The relationship between the naval uprising and British withdrawal requires careful evaluation. It would be simplistic to posit a direct causal chain. Independence resulted from cumulative pressures including mass movements, economic exhaustion and geopolitical transformation (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006).

However, the uprising contributed to what may be termed a crisis of confidence. If the armed forces could no longer be relied upon unconditionally, the cost of maintaining rule escalated dramatically. The logic of imperial governance depended upon disciplined coercive capacity. The events of February 1946 suggested that such capacity was eroding.

Geraldine Forbes argues that the mutiny revealed “the brittleness of imperial authority at the moment of apparent strength” (Forbes 2016). This insight captures the paradox of 1946: Britain retained military superiority yet faced diminishing legitimacy.

Within months of the uprising, negotiations intensified. By February 1947, the British government announced its intention to transfer power no later than June 1948, a timeline later accelerated to August 1947. While multiple factors shaped this decision, the naval revolt formed part of the evidentiary landscape influencing policymakers, reinforcing strategic reassessment already underway (Darwin 1988).

Comparative Perspective: 1857 and 1946

British officials repeatedly invoked the memory of 1857 when describing the naval uprising. The analogy served rhetorical and psychological purposes. Yet comparison reveals significant differences.

The uprising of 1857 involved large segments of the Bengal Army and escalated into widespread territorial rebellion. The naval revolt of 1946 was shorter in duration and geographically concentrated, though symbolically potent.

More importantly, the ideological context differed. The revolt of 1857 lacked a unified nationalist framework. The uprising of 1946 occurred within a politically mature nationalist environment shaped by decades of mass mobilisation and ideological development (Sarkar 1983; Metcalf and Metcalf 2006). The ratings' demands explicitly referenced INA prisoners and equality within imperial structures, reflecting modern nationalist consciousness (Fay 1993).

This comparison highlights the transformation of Indian political consciousness across nine decades. By 1946, anti-colonial nationalism had penetrated military institutions in ways that earlier imperial administrators had sought to prevent.

Indianisation and the Reconstruction of Naval Authority

The Royal Indian Naval Uprising forced Indian political leadership to confront a fundamental question: what kind of military institution would independent India inherit and how would it prevent the recurrence of collective revolt? While nationalist narratives often treat independence and defence reform as separate processes, the evidence suggests that the events of February 1946 exerted a direct influence on postcolonial restructuring.

One of the most immediate priorities after independence was the acceleration of Indianisation within the officer corps. Under colonial administration, commissioned ranks in the Royal Indian Navy had been overwhelmingly dominated by British officers. Indian ratings, even those with technical proficiency and wartime experience, encountered structural barriers to promotion. This imbalance not only reflected racial hierarchy but also prevented institutional trust between command and rank (Jeffery 2006).

The uprising revealed the dangers inherent in such stratification. A navy in which authority was racially distant and culturally insulated from its sailors proved vulnerable to collective disaffection. Post-independence reformers recognised that legitimacy within the armed forces required shared national identity.

Government publications from the late 1940s emphasised the need to cultivate indigenous leadership and professional equality (Government of India 1950). Training pathways for Indian officers were expanded. Scholarship programmes enabled Indian cadets to receive advanced instruction. Command positions gradually transferred from British officers to Indian nationals.

Indianisation was not merely demographic substitution. It represented a philosophical transformation. Authority was to be grounded in professional merit rather than racial entitlement. This shift altered the moral economy of command. Ratings were expected to obey officers who were not colonial superiors but fellow nationals serving the same state.

The institutionalisation of this transformation culminated in legislative measures such as the Navy Act of 1957 (Government of India 1957). The Act provided statutory clarity regarding discipline, jurisdiction and civilian oversight. Unlike colonial regulations that prioritised imperial prerogative, postcolonial legislation situated naval authority within a sovereign democratic framework consistent with models of civilian supremacy outlined in civil–military theory (Huntington 1957).

Welfare Reform and Institutional Morale

Material grievance had been a catalyst in 1946, even if not the sole cause. Poor rations, inadequate accommodation and racial discrimination created daily resentment. Post-independence reforms therefore prioritised welfare enhancement as a strategic necessity rather than mere benevolence.

Naval housing improved significantly during the late 1940s and 1950s. Mess facilities were modernised. Recreational infrastructure expanded. Medical services received greater attention. Grievance redressal mechanisms became institutionalised rather than ad hoc.

The logic underpinning these reforms was preventive. A modern navy required morale based on dignity and fairness. The colonial assumption that discipline could be sustained through distance and coercion had been discredited. Comparative studies of postcolonial military development suggest that institutional legitimacy is strengthened when welfare and professionalisation advance together (Cohen 2001).

Importantly, welfare reform intersected with professionalisation. Training institutions such as the Naval Academy and Defence Services Staff College cultivated an ethos emphasising competence, national service and internal cohesion. The psychological distance between officer and rating narrowed.

This transformation contributed to long-term stability. Unlike several postcolonial states that experienced repeated mutinies, India's navy did not witness systemic collective rebellion after 1946. While correlation does not equal causation, the structural lessons of the uprising were clearly integrated into institutional design.

Civil–Military Relations and Democratic Supremacy

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the naval uprising lies in its influence on civil–military philosophy. The revolt exposed the political potential of armed forces within a transitional society. For Indian leaders, the imperative was clear: the military must remain subordinate to civilian authority while maintaining professional autonomy.

Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru articulated a vision in which the armed forces would serve the democratic state rather than act as independent political actors. The memory of 1946 reinforced caution against politicisation within the ranks.

The embedding of civilian supremacy became a defining feature of Indian governance. Defence policy decisions were placed firmly under parliamentary oversight. Service chiefs operated within constitutional frameworks. Military intervention in political leadership was normatively delegitimised. This approach closely approximates what Samuel Huntington described as objective civilian control, in which professional autonomy exists under clear civilian supremacy (Huntington 1957).

Comparatively, many postcolonial states in Asia and Africa experienced coups or prolonged military rule. India's relative insulation from such trajectories invites analysis. Scholars of Indian civil–military relations emphasise that deliberate structural insulation of the armed forces from partisan politics was central to this stability (Cohen 2001). The naval uprising may be interpreted as an early warning that informed preventive structuring.

The key distinction lay in proactive reform. Instead of suppressing memory, Indian leadership absorbed lessons. Structural inequality was reduced. Political education within the armed forces emphasised constitutional loyalty. Civilian leaders maintained regular communication with military commanders, reducing alienation.

The uprising therefore occupies a paradoxical position: a moment of military defiance that ultimately strengthened democratic civil–military equilibrium.

Memory, Marginalisation and Historiographical Silence

Despite its significance, the Royal Indian Naval Uprising receded from mainstream nationalist memory in the decades following independence. Several factors contributed to this marginalisation.

First, the dominant narrative of independence foregrounded non-violent mass mobilisation led by political elites. Armed revolt within the colonial military complicated this storyline (Sarkar 1983; Metcalf and Metcalf 2006). Acknowledging its centrality risked reframing the moral grammar of freedom.

Second, political leadership that had urged surrender may have felt ambivalent about celebrating an event it had not openly endorsed. The incorporation of the uprising into official commemorative culture was therefore restrained.

Third, archival access remained limited for decades, constraining scholarly engagement. Naval records were not easily available. Personal memoirs such as Dutt's circulated but did not generate sustained academic discourse.

Only in the late twentieth century did historians begin re-examining the uprising as part of broader studies of decolonisation. Biswanath Bose's reassessment highlighted its structural importance (Bose 1999). Geraldine Forbes situated it within the fragility of late imperial authority (Forbes 2016). Recent historiography of decolonisation has further emphasised the global and structural dimensions of imperial retreat (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006).

Global Context and Transnational Decolonisation

The naval uprising must also be located within the global crisis of empire after 1945. Anti-colonial movements in Indonesia, Vietnam and Burma signalled a systemic challenge to European dominance (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006). The ideological environment of the late 1940s was marked by assertions of sovereignty across Asia.

Indian sailors deployed abroad encountered these currents directly. Exposure to global anti-imperial struggles weakened perceptions of European invincibility. The naval revolt thus forms part of a wider pattern in which colonial militaries became sites of nationalist politicisation, a process accelerated by wartime mobilisation (Khan 2015).

Transnational comparison reveals parallels. In Indonesia, sections of colonial armed forces defected during the revolution. In Vietnam, anti-colonial forces capitalised on Japanese collapse. Although the Indian case differed in outcome, it shared structural features: wartime mobilisation, politicised veterans and weakened metropolitan capacity (Jackson 2006).

The Royal Indian Naval Uprising therefore occupies a nodal position within global decolonisation. It demonstrates how military institutions, often perceived as conservative bastions of imperial order, could transform into arenas of anti-colonial assertion.

Re-evaluating Causation: Did the Uprising Matter?

A central historiographical debate concerns the causal weight of the naval uprising in accelerating independence. Some scholars caution against exaggeration, emphasising long-term constitutional negotiations and economic decline (Darwin 1988).

Yet causation in historical transformation is rarely singular. The uprising should be understood as contributory rather than solitary. It amplified existing pressures and altered perceptions of risk.

The British decision to transfer power cannot be attributed solely to February 1946. However, the revolt reinforced doubts regarding the reliability of armed coercion. It provided tangible evidence that political disaffection had penetrated disciplined institutions.

In this sense, the uprising functioned as a catalytic episode within a cumulative crisis. It compressed timelines, intensified negotiations and influenced strategic calculation, reinforcing patterns already visible

in the late imperial retreat (Louis 2006).

Methodological Intervention: Military Institutions as Sites of Subaltern Agency

The Royal Indian Naval Uprising compels reconsideration of how military institutions are conceptualised within colonial historiography. Traditional imperial narratives portray colonial armed forces as instruments of metropolitan control, disciplined, hierarchical and insulated from political mobilisation. Even nationalist historiography has often treated the armed forces as peripheral to the primary theatre of mass struggle.

Methodologically, this study proposes viewing colonial military institutions not merely as mechanisms of repression but as socially embedded structures shaped by race, labour, identity and political communication. The Royal Indian Navy was not an abstract administrative entity. It was a lived environment in which young Indian men experienced hierarchy, humiliation, technical training and exposure to global conflict. These experiences generated political subjectivities.

Historiographical Debate: Interpreting the Uprising

The historiography of the Royal Indian Naval Uprising reflects broader debates regarding the nature of decolonisation. Early official narratives framed the event as mutiny, emphasising breakdown of discipline and restoration of order (Government of India 1950). This perspective prioritised institutional continuity and minimised political content.

Nationalist historiography in the immediate post-independence decades often marginalised the uprising. The dominant narrative privileged non-violent mass struggle led by political elites. Armed revolt within the colonial military complicated this interpretive framework (Sarkar 1983; Metcalf and Metcalf 2006). As a result, the uprising received limited analytical attention.

A shift emerged in the late twentieth century. Biswanath Bose's reassessment argued that the revolt represented a decisive rupture in imperial military control (Bose 1999). Geraldine Forbes further contextualised the uprising within wartime disillusionment and nationalist radicalisation (Forbes 2016). These scholars emphasised structural grievance rather than isolated indiscipline.

More recent global histories of decolonisation situate the uprising within patterns of imperial retreat shaped by economic exhaustion and geopolitical transformation (Darwin 1988; Louis 2006). From this perspective, February 1946 forms part of a broader sequence in which colonial armed forces exhibited politicisation.

Debate also surrounds the causal weight of the uprising. Some historians caution against overstating its impact, emphasising long-term constitutional negotiation. Others argue that the revolt materially accelerated British reassessment by exposing vulnerability within coercive institutions.

Another dimension concerns subaltern agency. Traditional military historiography often centres on elite command structures. The naval uprising challenges this orientation by foregrounding the collective action of ratings. Methodologically, this invites integration of labour history and military history, recognising that colonial servicemen occupied dual identities as soldiers and workers.

The uprising also complicates communal historiography. At a moment when Hindu–Muslim division dominated political discourse, naval ratings displayed temporary unity. This dimension has attracted renewed scholarly interest in recent decades.

Conclusion

Ultimately, historiographical reassessment suggests that the Royal Indian Naval Uprising should be understood not as a peripheral disturbance but as a revealing episode within the structural unravelling of empire. Its interpretive significance lies in demonstrating that decolonisation unfolded not solely through negotiation but also through fractures within imperial institutions.

The uprising illustrates that subaltern agency can emerge within spaces designed to suppress it. Ratings did not possess formal political authority. They operated within a rigid command structure. Yet through collective organisation, communication networks and symbolic action, they temporarily reconfigured institutional power.

From the perspective of military sociology, the revolt underscores the importance of legitimacy in sustaining discipline. Coercion alone is insufficient when moral authority erodes, a principle central to modern civil–military theory (Huntington 1957). Once legitimacy weakened, collective defiance became conceivable.

Reference:-

1. Administrative Report of the Royal Indian Marine. 1930. Government of India.
2. Azad, Abul Kalam. 1959. India Wins Freedom. Bombay: Orient Longman.
3. Bose, Biswanath. 1999. “The RIN Mutiny: A Reassessment.” Journal of Modern Asian Studies 33(1): 1–20.
4. Cohen, Stephen P. 2001. India: Emerging Power. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
5. Darwin, John. 1988. Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World. London: Macmillan.
6. Dutt, B. C. 1946. Mutiny of the Innocents. Bombay: Padma Publications.
7. Fay, Peter Ward. 1993. The Forgotten Army: India’s Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942–1945. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
8. Forbes, Geraldine. 2016. “Reassessing the RIN Mutiny.” Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History.
9. Government of India. 1944. How to Become an Officer in the Royal Indian Navy. Naval Recruitment Directorate.
10. Government of India. 1950. Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy 1945–1950. New Delhi.
11. Government of India. 1957. The Navy Bill: Report of the Joint Committee. New Delhi.
12. Hansard Parliamentary Debates. 1946. House of Commons Debate on the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny.
13. Huntington, Samuel P. 1957. The Soldier and the State. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
14. Jackson, Ashley. 2006. The British Empire and the Second World War. London: Hambledon Continuum.
15. Jeffery, Keith. 2006. The British Army and the Crisis of Empire, 1918–22. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
16. Khan, Yasmin. 2015. The Raj at War. London: Bodley Head.
17. Louis, Wm. Roger. 2006. Ends of British Imperialism. London: I.B. Tauris.
18. Metcalf, Barbara, and Thomas Metcalf. 2006. A Concise History of Modern India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
19. Sarkar, Sumit. 1983. Modern India 1885–1947. Delhi: Macmillan.

20. Talbot, Ian, and Gurharpal Singh. 2009. The Partition of India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.