

# GS Foundation 2024: Modern India

## Handout 42: The Post-war Upsurge (1945-46)

Nikhil Sheth

With the end of the Second World War in April 1945, India's freedom struggle entered the final phase. When the government lifted the ban on the Congress and released the Congress leaders in June 1945, they expected to find a demoralised people. Instead, they found tumultuous crowds impatient to do something. Indian people were now ready to launch the penultimate phase of their struggle. Popular energy resurfaced after three years of repression. People's expectations were heightened by the release of their leaders.

### Red Fort Trials (Nov 45 – May 46)

*"Laal quile se aayi aawaz, Sahgal, Dhillon, Shahnawaz".*

*"[the trials] gave form to the old contest: England vs India...a trial of strength between the will of the Indian people and the will of those who hold power in India". – Nehru*

- The political impact of Subhas Bose's effort was felt in India after his journey was over. The 20,000 INA soldiers who surrendered were interrogated and sent back to India.
- There were **ten trials in total**; the most celebrated one was that of the three INA commanders—**P. K. Sehgal, G. S. Dhillon and Shah Nawaz Khan**—in the Red Fort in Delhi. Sehgal, Dhillon and Khan were charged with **treason, murder and abatement of murder**. It was followed by the trials of Abdul Rashid, Shinghara Singh, Fateh Khan and Captain Malik Munawar Khan Awan.
- The government planned the **Public Trial**, but this **created a big stir in the politics of the country**. The government's idea behind the public trial was to appraise the public of the 'horrors' committed by INA and ruthlessly penalize the army officers for treason. The exact opposite came to pass.
- The **Congress leadership** spontaneously supported the INA and criticised the British Government.
  - Congress leaders, sensitive to public opinion, decided to defend the accused of the INA trial and the AICC announced the formation of a Defence Committee for these 'misguided patriots'. The Indian National Congress made the release of the three defendants an important political issue during the agitation for independence of 1945-6.
  - Both Jawaharlal Nehru and Jinnah joined the team of defence lawyers with Bhulabhai Desai and Tej Bahadur Sapru in defending the INA prisoners.
  - The Indian National Congress passed a resolution in September 1945 in their support.
  - Soon an INA relief committee was set up for fund mobilisation. The people liberally contributed to this fund.
  - An INA week was observed from 5 to 11 November and large number of meetings were held all over the country in which every political party participated, including the Muslim League.
- **Student Movement** in Calcutta (21-23 Nov 1945)



- The students in Calcutta organized massive protests and demonstrations in the city. There was a popular outburst in Calcutta which set a pattern of periodic upheavals in the city. A large procession was taken out, consisting of students as well as people, led by different political groups. A series of strikes in schools, colleges, offices, factories swept over the city. Several students were killed in this agitation which further spread in the subsequent days as it was joined by the working class and taximen.
- **Communal harmony**
  - This movement marked the **last major campaign in which the forces of the Congress and the Muslim League aligned together**; the Congress tricolor and the green flag of the League were flown together at protests. The **remarkable communal harmony** demonstrated in the riots unnerved the colonial administration.
- The INA trial had evoked a **strong protest in the Indian army**.
  - What disturbed the British the most was the impact of the INA trials on the loyalty of the army. Even though a majority of Indian army personnel remained loyal, there was great empathy and admiration for INA commanders.
  - Several men in uniform not only contributed to the fund being raised for supporting the INA men, but they also attended in uniform the reception being extended to the released INA prisoners.
- **Successful outcome**
  - Despite this aggressive and widespread opposition, the court martial was carried out and all three defendants were sentenced to deportation for life. This sentence, however, was never carried out, as the immense public pressure of the demonstrations forced **Claude Auchinleck**, Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, to release all three defendants.
  - This was followed by a remission of sentences for the first batch of INA undertrials. Soon this was followed by the gradual withdrawal of Indian soldiers from Indo-China and Indonesia, which was one the major demands of the people.
- **Rashid Ali and Calcutta Riots (Feb 1946)**
  - But that was not the end of the matter. When **Abdul Rashid of the INA was sentenced to 7-years rigorous imprisonment**, Calcutta once again exploded, once again firing took place in which a number of people were killed.
  - Both the Hindus and the Muslims participated in those demonstrations. Quite a few students died when the police opened fire on the demonstrations.



The INA Defence Committee: Katju, Sapru, Nehru, Asaf Ali, Bhulabhai Desai



Captain Ram Singh, who had composed the patriotic song 'Kadam Kadam Badhaye Ja' plays the violin for Gandhiji at the Harijan Colony, 1945



The number of demonstrations and hartals in the country during 1945-46 was very high. There was not a single industry which was not affected by working class unrest. Discontent was widespread even among the Indian members of the Indian Air Force, Police, Post and Telegraph etc. This discontent found manifestation in the Royal Indian Navy uprising in 1946.

### **The Revolt of the Royal Indian Navy (1946) (RIN Mutiny)**

*INA might less successful directly but the army, main pillar of the Raj, was infected with nationalism due the activities of INA. Now it directed its guns against British themselves.*

Sunil Khilnani

*‘the gulf that separated the people from the armed forces had once for all been bridged. The janata and soldier have come very close to each other.’ – Nehru*

*“The discipline of the army cannot be tampered with since we will want an army even in free India.” – Patel*

The naval mutiny, which occurred in Bombay and other harbours of India, was one of the most heroic episodes in India's struggle for freedom.

- **Background**

- The R.I.N. was the most colonial of all colonial institutions. Racial discrimination in the crudest form continued unabated in the institution.
- To meet the war-time requirements there was a recruitment drive to enlarge the Royal Indian Navy which brought in men from all parts of the country.
- Their recent exposure to the wider world while serving the empire during the Second World War, excitement due to INA trial and the ongoing country-wide popular upsurge had a growing impact on the RIN.

- **Beginning and spread of Mutiny:**

- On **February 18, 1946**, the ratings of the naval ship **Talwar at the Bombay Port** went on hunger-strike against bad food and racial insults.
- They took control of the ships and with mounted guns, they were willing to open fire. The rebels jointly raised on the mastheads of the rebel fleet the tricolour, crescent and hammer-and-sickle. The ratings renamed the Royal Indian Navy as the Indian National Navy and announced that hereafter they would take orders only from the national leaders.
- A **Naval Central Strike Committee** headed by **M.S. Khan** was set up. They put forward five major demands.
  - Better food
  - Equal pay for both Indian and white sailors
  - Release of INA and other political prisoners
  - Indianization of the Navy
  - Withdrawal of British troops from Indonesia

- **Soon, the strike spread to other naval establishments:**

- The revolt quickly spread to Calcutta, Madras, Karachi and other ports. By 22 February, the strike virtually engulfed all the naval bases of the country involving 78 ships, 20 shore establishments and 20,000 Ratings.
- **Mutiny in the city of Bombay**
  - The rebel soldiers in Bombay organised demonstrations on the streets carrying the flags of the Congress, the League and the communists. They looted the armoury Bombay. Admiral Godfrey asked the rebels to surrender. He threatened them to destroy the navy. The Maratha artillery refused to open fire on the vessels when they were ordered to do so.
  - The rebels enjoyed the support of the common people. They were joined by the working class of Bombay, which struck work and joined demonstrations in their favour. Thus, the **R.I.N uprising took a mass character** in which thousands of people participated.
  - On February 21, when the British forces opened fire on the sailors, the movement took a violent turn. The movement went on spontaneously until February 24. In several clashes between the army and the people more than 300 people were killed and 2,000 injured.
- **Reaction by the National leadership**
  - The rebels expected that the nationalist leaders would offer their support to the revolt. Nehru, Patel and Azad condemned the actions of the ratings.
    - Jinnah advised the ratings to surrender.
    - Gandhi suggested that if the British officials misbehaved with the Indian sailors, the latter had the right to resign from their jobs.
    - Even the communist leaders did not show much sympathy for the rebels.
  - Finally, when Admiral Godfrey threatened to destroy the city of Bombay by repeated shelling, Patel managed to persuade the ratings to surrender on **February 23, 1946**, giving an assurance that the national parties would do whatever was necessary to prevent any victimization of the rebels.
- It is true that the RIN revolt had a short span of life. But it clearly demonstrated that the British could no longer take the loyalty of the Indian soldiers for granted. Besides, a stern message also went home to them that in future the people and the army might join hands to throw them out from the Indian soil. All this, perhaps, hastened the process of the British decision to end their occupation of India at their earliest.



HMIS Talwar, Bombay

