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India

The 1946 Revolution in India – History’s loss!

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Truth, as they say, is the first casualty of war. The situation of the ruling classes of India and Pakistan is so disdainful that they cannot go to war nor they can sustain a genuine peace. What they contrive are virtual wars and hoaxes of peace. In the ongoing rhetoric of war and the hysteria being propped up by the subcontinent's elite, once again truth and sanity are the foremost victims. It's the organic nature of the region's postcolonial bourgeoisie being reflected in their hypocrisy, crookedness and deceit of their politics, ethics, morality and character. These odious characteristics stem from their origins.

The so-called independence of the South Asian subcontinent was won not through a struggle by the national bourgeois leaders but through negotiations and deals with the British Raj's wily bureaucrats. Such 'liberation' never transform the lives of the populace and ensue social prosperity but the old rotten system continues to coerce the masses only with superficially different contours and colours of the elite and the state. India and Pakistan artificially grafted and imposed ruling elites by the British imperialists resulted in the continuance of the rule of the capitalist caricature set up by the Raj. These upstart elites continued to practise the British ploy of 'divide and rule' to perpetuate their exploitative rulership along with the imperialist plunder even after the end of direct colonial rule. Hence the war mongering and whipping up of religious and nationalistic chauvinism we are witnessed in the last seven decades.

However the British in connivance with their toady native elites could only enforce this set up after the betrayal and defeat of one of the most glorious episodes of mass upsurge—the 1946 revolution, distorted as "Sailors' Mutiny" by official historians. These have also repeatedly falsified the true facts and events that led to independence. Internationally and regionally these narratives proclaimed that this independence was won by the Indian National Congress led by Gandhi, Patel and Nehru and Muslim League led by Jinnah. While they conveniently concealed the struggles and role played by workers, youth, peasants and the Indian army, navy, air force and the police rankers in the struggle for independence. Marx had elaborated that during and after the first Indian war of independence in 1857 the British conquered India by using the Indian troops. However by 1946 British were no longer confident of relying on Indian soldiers in the British Indian Army to sustain their coercive rule. There was a volcanic rebellion that had even shocked the wily strategists of the Raj.

This revolt led by the sailors and workers had forced the British to an early departure from the subcontinent and the movement was on the verge of abolishing the socioeconomic system that has enslaved the oppressed masses for generations. Its protraction is the root cause of the misery, deprivation, tyranny, bigotry and bloodshed that has been ravaging the subcontinent's masses with the largest concentration of poverty on the planet ever since. The atrocious counter-revolution was inflicted through the bloodied partition of 1947 the wounds of which are still festering.

Seventy-two years ago, this week of February 1946, a revolutionary spark triggered an heroic uprising that engulfed the South Asian subcontinent where the masses were up in arms defying the might of the imperialists and the repressive colonial state. The ebbing of this revolutionary wave and its defeat though the deceit and sabotage of the local leaders led to the horrors of the holocaust of Partition. Carving up of the Indian subcontinent on religious lines resulted in massacres with killings of over one and a half million souls and enforced migration of over twenty million. However the brilliant episode of the Sailors' Revolt has enormous lessons and examples of the audacious role and courage that it instilled in the hearts and minds of the ordinary people in such revolutionary periods that are historical exceptions.

The naval revolt of February 1946 erupted due to the accumulation of resentment over a long period among the sailors. The salary of the British sailors was 10 times more than that of the Indian sailors. So also were their perks

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and privileges. However, the major cause of the revolt was political. The trial of the Indian National Army (INA) leaders and its struggle during the siege of Imphal, when the INA inflicted massive damage on the British army gave the sailors a profound belief that the mighty British Empire was not all that invincible.

The revolt started on February 18, 1946, when 1100 sailors on the H.M.S. Talwar stopped work and declared an official strike at dawn. The sailors unanimously elected signalman M.S. Khan as President and petty officer telegraphist Madan Singh as Vice-President. Leading signaller Bedi Basant Singh, S.C. Sen Gupta, Chief Petty Officer, School Master Nawaz, Seaman Ashraf Khan, Able Stokers Gomez and Mohammad Hussain were also elected to the Central Strike Committee. The Central Strike Committee had a resolute destiny for their struggle – complete political and socioeconomic liberation.

In the Bombay Harbour, the revolt quickly spread to 22 ships and the Castle Barracks and Fort Barracks shore bases. The strikes spread like wild fire to military establishments in Karachi, Madras, Vishakhapatnam, Calcutta, Delhi, Cochin, Jamnagar, and Andaman's Islands on to the shores of the Middle East in Bahrain and Aden. They were able to win over almost all the 70 ships and all the 20 seashore establishments with over 30,000 sailors actively participating in the revolt. The next morning Indian sailors seized military vehicles in the dockyards, and drove around Bombay shouting slogans in support of the INA prisoners and chanting slogans like ‘Hindu-Muslim eik hain’ (Hindus and Muslims are One). The Central Strike Committee issued a leaflet that ended with the call, ‘Long live the solidarity of workers, soldiers, students and peasants. Long live Revolution’.

A mass fervour of support swept across united India in support of the striking sailors. On the morning of February 21, 1946, British guards opened fire at the Indian sailors in the Castle Barracks and this transformed the revolt into a violent armed uprising.

Hundreds of strikers from ships, minesweepers and shore establishments in Bombay demonstrated near the Victoria Terminus of the Indian Railways. When British ordered Indian soldiers to fire at the striking sailors, the latter refused to shoot at their fellow Indian brothers.

On February 20 and 21, the striking sailors gave a call for a general strike, which evoked incredible response. Three hundred thousand workers put down their tools and walked out of textile factories, mills, railways and other industries in Bombay and many other cities and towns in the country. Barricades were set up on the streets that were pitched battles of youth and workers with the police and army. The strike was a direct challenge to the British rule. In Calcutta, over 120,000 people came out and other Indian cities and towns witnessed strikes and demonstrations on a similar scale.

The revolt spread in the other Indian armed forces of the Raj. Nearly 2000 men in the Royal Indian Army Signal Corps mutinied near Jabalpur. There were mini-revolts by Indian gunners in Madras, signallers at Allahabad, and clerical staff at army headquarters in Delhi. Indian officers of the RIAF refused to fly out British troops to attack the sailors and to pilot planes to bomb the ships. Felled trees blocked train tracks and roads. The RAF strikes spread to airbases in Allahabad, Mauripur (Karachi), Dum -Dum (Calcutta) Kanpur, Palam (Delhi), Poona, Vizagapatam, Kallang, Chaklala (Rawalpindi), Lahore and Negombo. The strike also spread to South East Asia where 4000 airmen struck at Seletar, Singapore.

The workers from railways, docks, postal services and other sectors were radicalised and joining the strike movement. This was a scenario British never expected to be faced with and it was this movement of the proletariat that forced them to retreat. In an interview in March 1976, Clement Atlee, the post-war British prime minister of the times reminisced, “The RIN Mutiny which made the British realise that the Indian armed forces could no longer be trusted to prop up the British.” When asked about the extent to which the British decision to quit India was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's and his movement, Atlee's lips widened in a smile of disdain and he uttered, slowly, “Minimal.”

Sir Stafford Cripps in the debate at the British House of Commons had said, "The Indians in the (Royal Indian) Army are not obeying the British officers... In these conditions if we have to rule India for a long time, we have to keep a permanent British army for a long time in a vast country of four hundred million. We have no such army and money...."

In Karachi, striking sailors took over the H.M.S. Hindustan and Bahadur ships anchored at Manora Island. The sailors then took out a procession through the streets of Karachi and were joined a large number of the city's residents. Karachi's British army commander sent two platoons of Baluch soldiers to suppress the revolt. The Baluch refused to fire upon their brothers. The British then called on their 'loyal' Gorkha troops to put down the revolt. The British commanders were shocked when even Gorkha soldiers refused to fire upon the striking sailors. Then the British troops were summoned that started firing and the sailors on the ships retaliated. The firing and attacks and counter-attacks continued for four hours. Six of the sailors were killed, more than 30 were wounded. Trade unions in Karachi called a general strike, and the whole city was shut down. More than 35,000 people, Hindus and Muslims marched towards Eidgah and held a massive rally despite intimidation, harassment, arrests, baton charge and live firing injuring more than 50 protestors.

As World War II was coming to an end, India was entering a period of stormy resurgence of the working-class movement. Industrial strikes in virtually all the major cities – Bombay, Calcutta, Allahabad, Delhi, Madras, Lahore and Karachi erupted with full force. The Indian working class courageously jumped into the fray ignoring massive state oppression, arrests, beatings and even bullets as the decisive force in the struggle for liberation. Towards the end of 1945, the Bombay and Calcutta dockworkers refused to load ships going to Indonesia with supplies for troops meant to suppress the national liberation struggles there.

At the beginning of 1946, this strike wave assumed a highly political character. On January 24, 1946, 175,000 textile and industrial workers went on strike in Bombay to protest the shooting of demonstrators celebrating the birthday of Subhash Chandra Bose, leader of the "Azad (Free) Indian Government" and organiser of the Indian National Army. Railway workers' strikes, series of student demonstrations throughout India brought large swathes of the Indian proletariat in other sectors of industry and services into militant struggle. Throughout these demonstrations the inspiring and fiery slogan "Long Live the Revolution!" was echoing across united India.

The last years of colonial rule also saw a remarkably sharp increase in strikes on economic issues all over the country – the all-India strike of the Post and Telegraph Department employees being the most prominent. The pent-up economic grievances during the war, combined with the high prices, scarcity of food and other essentials and a drop in real wages, drove the working class to the limits of its tolerance. In anticipation of freedom expectations were rocketing to the skies. The people saw Independence as an end to their miseries. The workers were now struggling for what they hoped freedom would bring them as a matter of right.

It's an historical satire that Congress and Muslim League implacable rivals both condemned the Royal Indian Navy revolt. These leaders of the native bourgeois condemned the striking sailors and workers. Mahatma Gandhi issued a statement criticising the rebels. The Muslim League too denounced the strikers, arguing that 'unrest on the streets was not the best way to deal with grievances and that protest should be through constitutional methods only'. Valabhbhai Patel demanded the sailors to surrender and summoned the vice-president of the sailors strike committee, Petty Officer Madan Singh in a flat in Bombay and literally shouted at him and demanding to sabotage the revolt. Nehru, who did not want to be left behind Patel, in another meeting with Madan, advised him and his comrades to surrender and bring the navy revolt to an end. Nehru even held a press conference to reprimand the revolting sailors.

The Communist Party of India was in a dilemma due to the flawed ideological concepts of the leaders. On the one hand, the CPI wanted to 'be with the people', in order to restore some of its credibility lost during the war, when the

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party overtly supported the British Raj in the name of 'People's War'. Their rank-and-file, particularly the students, enthusiastically joined the uprisings in Bombay and Calcutta. Ultimately this contrast in policy led to the beginning of the split of the CPI after differences emerged between its two main leaders Bhalchandra Trimbak Ranadive and P.S. Joshi.

Ranadive was the party's main trade union leader and hence was active in strike action and deeply influenced by the uprising. He wanted the party to take up the leadership of the revolutionary movement. While Joshi, general secretary of the CPI at the time was more receptive to the instructions from Moscow under Stalin. However at the second Party Congress held in Calcutta in February 1948 the party elected Ranadive in place of P.C. Joshi as CPI's general secretary. But in 1950 Ranadive was deposed, and denounced by the party as a "left adventurer". The split materialised in 1964 and two parties that emerged were the CPI and CPI (M). Ranadive was the founder and leader of the CPI (M) that has emerged as the largest communist party in India.

The betrayal of the political leadership ultimately led the movement into disarray and it scattered. On February 24, 1946, white flags were raised from the decks of all ships to announce surrender. In its last session, the strike committee passed a resolution that stated, "Our uprising was an important historical event in the lives of our people. For the first time, the blood of uniformed and non-uniformed workers flowed in one current for the same collective cause. We the workers in uniform shall never forget this. We also know that you, our proletarian brothers and sisters shall also never forget this. The coming generations, learning its lessons shall accomplish what we have not been able to achieve. Long live the working masses. Long, lives Revolution".

With a revolutionary party having cadres tempered in the foundations of Marxism could have provided a direction to the sailors, soldiers and millions of workers who came out on the streets across united India. Soviets could easily have been established in Bombay, Lahore, Calcutta, Karachi, Allahabad, Peshawar, Madras, Kanpur, Delhi and many other major metropolitan cities. Unfortunately due to the criminal role played by the Comintern and the leadership of the CPI with the disastrous policy of forming 'people's front' with the "progressive bourgeois" of Congress and the Muslim League missed a historic opportunity. Despite their overtures to the British by supporting the imperialist war, when the time came for the transfer of power the preferred option for British imperialism were the bourgeois parties, the Congress and the Muslim League, as they wanted to ensure continuity of capitalist plunder.

The victory of the 1946 revolution could have changed the course of history. The rising mass movement would have neither paused at the stage of national independence nor it would have accepted capitalist exploitation and coercion. The harrowing genocides and vicious religious and sectarian hatreds that in particular drenched Punjab and Bengal in innocent human blood during the sweltering, humid and stifling summer of 1947; are still tearing apart the social fabric of south Asia. These would have never transpired. The united class struggle would have gone forward for the socioeconomic transformation through a socialist revolution. With the revolutionary storm sweeping through China and most of the East, at the time, a revolutionary victory in the united Indian subcontinent would have become the precursor of the red dawn setting the Asian continent alight. With the overthrow of capitalism and breaking up of the strangle hold of imperialist oppression and plunder its revolutionary impacts on a world scale would have brought the destiny of human emancipation close to sights.

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