



Identity and the assemblages of protest: The spatial politics of the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, 1946



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ABSTRACT

This paper develops geographical understandings of political action by examining the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946 using assemblage theory. This Mutiny of colonial armed forces has generally been characterised in one of three ways: as part of a post-World War Two nationalist 'upsurge' in India; as a sign of poor military organisation, and; as a potentially revolutionary moment against a dominant bourgeoisie. It is argued that each of these perspectives is incomplete. Rather, by examining the ways in which naval service shaped the lives of the sailors and their political outlook, the paper argues that the hybrid and contested political identities produced are best understood through utilising assemblage theory. Assemblage theory stresses the nature of society as a series of always emergent processes, with different components interacting and potentially producing new societal forms. Therefore, the sailors involved in the RIN Mutiny emerged as political actors through their engagement with multiple aspects of life as they experienced it as individuals. This has important implications for understanding the geographies of political protest more generally by showing how individuals are able to reformulate their political identities as part of wider assemblages.

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"As soon as we finish one proceeding we begin another, forever proceduring or procedured, in the family, in school, in the army, on the job. School tells us "you're not at home any more"; the army tells us, "You're not in school anymore" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 230).

1. Introduction

On February the 18th 1946 the Petty Officers and ratings¹ of His Majesty's Indian Ship (HMIS) *Talwar*, a shore installation² of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) in Bombay, struck their work over a number of perceived injustices. These included issues ranging from the banal (the poor food served in the RIN), through to the overtly political (the continued British rule of the Indian subcontinent). As news of the Mutiny spread, shore establishments and ships in Bombay also

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¹ 'Petty Officers' are middle ranking members of naval service. They do not hold a commission, unlike full ranking officers, and effectively act as a buffer zone between the authority of the officer class and the lower ranks. Equivalent ranks in an army would be a sergeant or similar. 'Ratings' are the lowest ranks of a navy, below officers and Non-Commissioned Officers. The term covers a range of positions within naval hierarchy, in this case, a signalman, able-seaman or stoker would all be classed as 'ratings'.

² In the British naval nomenclature in use within the RIN, *Talwar*, despite being a base in the Colaba district of Bombay, is still known as a 'ship', and thus given the prefix HMIS.

refused work and marched through the centre of Bombay. The following day, ratings in other RIN naval centres also struck work and protested. Over the next 5 days, nearly 20,000 sailors 'mutinied' in military stations across South Asia and as far as the Andaman Islands and Aden. In Bombay and Karachi violence broke out between the sailors and colonial authorities. Rising tensions led to the Commanding Officer of the RIN, Vice Admiral Godfrey, releasing a statement on the 21st on All India Radio threatening the sailors with their destruction. This threat, coupled with calls from a number of Indian nationalist leaders for the ratings to stand down, meant that many mutineers had surrendered by the 23rd of February.

This flashpoint in India's decolonisation has variously been understood from three perspectives. Firstly, it is seen as an example of poor military administration (Madsen, 2003; Spector, 1981). Here, the Mutiny is seen as avoidable, if only the RIN had an organisational structure that was better able to cope with a recruiting policy that took men from a variety of communal and religious backgrounds across British India. The second viewpoint sees the Mutiny as part of a wider post-World War Two nationalist 'upsurge' in India (Chandra et al., 1989; James, 1997), as Indian citizens began to ask questions about when, not if, they would gain independence from British rule. Finally, the Mutiny has been appropriated by the left as a revolutionary moment that was missed (Banerjee, 1981; Bose, 1988; Das, 1994; Dutt, 1971). The Mutiny, from this perspective, was a moment when the revolution-

ary masses could have risen if they had been ably supported. The nationalist leadership of colonial India is blamed for this failure, as they are perceived to have betrayed the mutineers in order to secure the control of India following its independence for themselves.³ This last viewpoint was understandably of concern to the senior officers of the RIN, and the Government of India (GoI). Throughout much of the Commission of Inquiry after the Mutiny, officials were keen to discover if the sailors had been in contact with any 'outside' or 'Communitistic' influences which could have incited them to rebellion.

Each of the viewpoints has a degree of 'truth' to them, but also misses out something of the wider picture of events not only within the RIN, but also in Indian and post-war Imperial society. Crucially, all three perspectives remove agency from the sailors themselves, viewing them as tools who were utilised by important individuals like Vallabhbhai Patel and Nehru, or who were let down by a variety of organisational structures they had no hope of changing. This paper will argue that using assemblage to examine the politics of this event produces a more nuanced account of the RIN Mutiny. In particular, I examine the ways in which the sailors, through the processes of being a sailor and living in the RIN, created and inhabited a number of more open political identities than those allowed by a more singular perspective of the RIN Mutiny.

Specifically, the paper thinks through the processes which created contentious political identities amongst the sailors of the RIN. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, each sailor was in a process of 'becoming', actively negotiating their place as liminal political subjects who worked for the colonial military whilst resisting the various injustices they saw in their life aboard ship. Rather than imagining that the 'average sailor' was a non-political actor until the Mutiny of 1946, I argue that life in the military combined with wider anti-colonialisms to create a contested and emergent sense of identity amongst the sailors. This helped create the conditions for the ratings themselves to voice their grievances towards both the RIN and the colonial state.

Adopting this approach opens up ground in understanding the shape and form of Indian nationalism prior to independence, but also reshapes the possibilities of subaltern nationalism. Whilst geographers have long recognised the hybrid and contested identities which colonialism produced (Blunt, 2005; Legg, 2007; Phillips, 2002) by examining the mobile politics of the RIN sailors, the production of nationalism becomes more spatially extensive. Geographically, this is more than just a 'long-distance nationalism' (Anderson, 1998), it also produces a less terra-centric understanding of the networks that both held together and contested imperialism (Lester, 2001), instead focussing on the distinctly naval ways in which sailors' political identities were constituted and in turn contested British colonialism.

In order to examine the assemblages of the RIN and its men, a number of sources are drawn upon. The primary source of data was the RIN Mutiny Papers in the National Archives of India, New Delhi which included official reports and witness testimonies from the mutineers taken at the subsequent Commission of Inquiry. Further information was taken from the India Office Records Collection in the British Library, London, the National Archives, London, and from a variety of pamphlets, newspapers and books published at the time of the Mutiny. A final set of sources were ret-

pective biographical accounts by the mutineers. Utilising these archives and texts creates a sense of how the ratings were caught between different political identities, and which each sailor had to negotiate. I draw on the particular experiences of one sailor, Balrai Chandra (B.C.) Dutt, in more depth to explore how wider subjectivities (such as his status as a colonial subject and sailor) were interpreted and rationalised by him into a more personal identity. Dutt was from a relatively respectable *bhadralok* family in West Bengal. Disenchanted with the prospects of village life, he joined the RIN in 1941, and served successfully enough to be promoted to the rank of Leading Telegraphist by 1946. However, he also played a leading role in the 1946 Mutiny (discussed below), and was discharged from the service. After his discharge, he worked as a journalist for the *Free Press* journal in Bombay, and eventually published his memoirs of the Mutiny and his life in the RIN, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, in 1971. Whilst it is difficult to trace individual sailors and their lives before, during and after naval service, Dutt's appearance before the Commission of Inquiry in Bombay in May 1946 allows us to see the sailor as he was disciplined by the naval authorities. Secondly, his memoirs allow us an insight into his post hoc rationalisations of the Mutiny as a revolutionary moment, and the affect it subsequently had on his life.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section examines recent scholarship on the networks of commerce and trade in the Indian Ocean. These have produced a more vibrant reading of sailors' identities in the first half of the Twentieth Century but have largely omitted the *naval* sailor, instead concentrating on the *lascar*, or merchant sailor of broadly South Asian descent. This therefore excludes sailors who explicitly worked and fought for their colonial governors. I then discuss assemblage theory and argue that it creates a sociospatial imaginary that allows a deeper understanding of how participants in political events are caught up in complex power relations between actors at a variety of spatial scales. This emphasises the ways in which the ratings of the RIN created and negotiated their own political identities from a number of different trajectories. Following a third section which outlines the many grievances faced by the RIN sailors, I draw out this dynamism in two sections which explore the experiences of the sailors during their life in the RIN before, during and after the Mutiny. These sections explore how the sailors' identities were produced and contested by the processes that they took part in during their life in the RIN. I conclude by arguing that these processes do more than shed light on an underexplored colonial episode. Instead, they have important implications for how geographers have theorised both anti-colonial struggles, and how they have understood the practices of resistant politics more generally.

2. Politics and the Indian Ocean 'World'

Recent scholarship has argued that, in the same way that we can now see an Atlantic Ocean 'world' begin to function from the 17th Century, the Indian Ocean can also be viewed as a distinct region connected by networks of trade and migration (Bose, 2006; Pearson, 2003). In particular, there has been a concentration on the lives of those people who took part in the development and contestation of the economic and political systems that maintained the British Empire in the region (Kothari, 2011; Metcalf, 2007). One consequence of this turn has been a relative proliferation of work on *lascar* seamen. In the civilian merchant marine, *lascars* were sailors from South and Southeast Asia who were employed in a variety of positions within the shipboard hierarchy. There is a long history of understanding how these sailors moved through the networks of European imperial trade, from the early modern period (Fisher, 2006), through to *lascars'* engagement with steamships

³ This interpretation has also led to attempts to re-name the 'Mutiny' as a 'revolt' or 'uprising'. Similarly, others have characterised the mutiny as a 'strike'. The terminology tends to adhere closely to the perspective of events one is taking – organisational perspectives tend towards strike, whilst the revolutionary perspective encourages use of 'uprising'. Each use has the potential to overplay the agency of one particular actor at the expense of another. I use the official 'mutiny', for the reason that it is defined in naval terms as any situation where two or more sailors raise the same grievance before their superiors.

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