

**Transnational connections and anti-colonial radicalism in the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, 1946**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the spatial politics of the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny in 1946, and particularly calls for a more maritime sense of 'the political'. The RIN only existed from 1934 to 1950, eventually becoming the Indian Navy after independence. Its short history continues to be determined by its mutiny in 1946, which occurred due to a number of grievances, from anti-colonial nationalism, to more mundane challenges about the standard of food served to its sailors. Recently, Leela Gandhi (2014) has used the RIN Mutiny as an example to challenge the binary between elite/subaltern in much Indian historiography by reading it as firstly an 'anti-colonial counterpublic', or a space where alternative discourses to the dominant nationalist framings of independence were mobilised. Secondly, she sees the Mutiny, as a potential example of inconsequential ethics, whereby rather than worrying about causation, the Mutiny can be seen as an event where, rather than striving for a 'successful' result, a more experimental space of democratic politics took place. This paper argues that, whilst there is much to be admired in the Gandhi's reading of these events, she crucially forecloses the maritime nature of the RIN Mutiny. Discounting the fact that the maritime and naval aspects of the sailors lives were crucial, as travelling to different international locations allowed the sailors to learn about democracy and other ideas which in turn influenced their beliefs about what the future of India, and the RIN, should look like. As a result, the paper argues for an important intersection between anticolonialism, democratic politics and the naval/maritime to be explored in more depth.

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### Introduction

This paper examines the transnational spatial relations in and of naval ships and shore establishments and their potential for radical forms of political activity. It focuses on the specific relations that emerged in the ships of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) – the naval arm of the armed forces of the British Government of India (GoI). The RIN only existed from 1934 to 1950, eventually becoming the Indian Navy after independence. Its short history continues to be determined by the ‘mutiny’ in 1946 of nearly all of its sailors in ships and shore institutions. The mutiny occurred due to a number of grievances, from anti-colonial nationalism to more mundane challenges about the standard of food served to its sailors. The mutiny was one of the largest displays of disobedience of a number of mutinies in the immediate aftermath of World War Two. The RIN Mutiny was also a key event in the coming decolonisation of British India, marking a moment when the GoI’s armed forces became less reliable as post war nationalism increased (Chandra et al., 1989).

As a result, it is not surprising that the mutiny, and the RIN’s role in the evolution of the Republic of India’s future naval forces, has become of interest to a number of scholars (Davies, 2013, 2014a, Deshpande, 1996, 2016, Meyer, 2017, Spence, 2014, 2015a). However, one of the most striking recent pieces of scholarship about the RIN and its mutiny has come from Leela Gandhi (2014), who uses the depositions taken from RIN sailors at the Commission of Inquiry which took place after the Mutiny to argue that the sailors of the RIN attempted to form what she terms a ‘revolutionary counter-public’. Gandhi argues that this counter-public challenged existing Indian nationalist tropes, but also provided a space of experimentation, where new ideas could be tested, and where ‘success’ in the form of a concrete objective which is achieved should not be the only measure of the democratic and liberatory potential of political events like the Mutiny. This argument is useful in that it helps to destabilise some of the polarised arguments in Indian historiography which revolve around the distinction between elite and subaltern forms of activity. However, whilst this is a useful intervention into discussions of the RIN Mutiny, in this paper I argue that in her focus on the new forms of democratic activity that the mutiny produced, Gandhi crucially misses out on the importance of naval forms of mobility and activity within the RIN, and how these impacted upon the shape and form of the Mutiny itself.

This lack is of importance for the wider purposes of this special issue, as it stretches the formation of Indian nationalist and democratic activity, and shifts it to become less ‘terra-centric’, with forms of nationalist identity being produced through long term movements and engagements overseas in a variety of contexts. In this, I draw on work in mobilities studies, particularly military mobilities (Merriman et al. 2017). This scholarship has been important in challenging and destabilising some of the taken for granted categorisations that see military lives and spaces as clearly separate from civilian life. Whilst the likes of

Deshpande (1996, 2016) have long argued that the RIN needs to be understood as an institution with close links to civilian life, this more mobile approach to the study of the RIN mutiny is generative of a different account of the various spaces of the mutiny is produced that extended beyond India. This account, I argue, shows how the Mutiny, and indeed the RIN more generally, was a multi-scalar and dynamic process, which defies simple categorisation as a single event which can be easily categorised or placed as belonging within the confines of 'India' as a landmass. This complicates and expands the spatial imaginary of the RIN, so rather than a small colonial military force whose mutiny is of little consequence beyond the Indian subcontinent, we must rather read the RIN as a spatially extensive product of a situated set of naval, colonial and political practices.

The paper that follows firstly discusses the history of the RIN and the events of the Mutiny in 1946. The next section moves on to discuss in more depth Leela Gandhi's arguments about the Mutiny and its sailors as a potential revolutionary moment, and particularly as a moment of political inconsequentialism. The next section introduces the literature on political geographies, mobilities and militarism, before two more empirically focussed sections draw out the importance of the naval and the transnational to this study.

### The Royal Indian Navy and the Mutiny of 1946

The Royal Indian Navy existed from 1934 to 1950<sup>ii</sup>, eventually becoming the current Indian Navy. During this time, its main task was coastal protection of British India and it was a small branch of Britain's imperial armed forces – on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1939, the number of active service ratings was 1,451 (Report of the Commission of Inquiry: 14). The organisational doctrine of the RIN was largely taken from Royal Navy (for a detailed account of the evolution of military forces and doctrines in India, see Deshpande, 2005). Certain concessions were made, such as the providing of either 'vegetarian' or 'meat' rations for ratings to choose from, however, communal differences and religious practices were not taken into account in any great detail. There was also an unwritten racial bar within the service, as the majority of officers were white and taken from across the Empire, whilst the Non-Commissioned Officers and Ratings were of Indian origin. This situation was slowly changing: the first Indian commissioned officer joined the service in 1928 and, by 1939, out of 91 officers joining the service in that year, 29 were classed as 'Indian', whilst 4 were 'Anglo-Indian' (Report of the Commission of Inquiry: 9).

Following the outbreak of World War Two the RIN rapidly expanded in order to meet the demands of the war, especially after Japan's entry into war with the British Empire in late 1941, which meant a greater role for the small force in protecting shipping in the seas around India and beyond. As a result, by September 1945, around 22,000 ratings were listed as active service, and this expansion placed huge strain on the Navy's organisation. Indeed, the RIN was marked by serious desertion problems – Deshpande (2016: 9) estimates that the RIN recruited over 43000 men during the war, and that 35% of sailors deserted. The ships of the RIN were small escort-type vessels, employed mainly on activities like convoy

duty or patrols around the coast of India, but served alongside the Royal Navy throughout the war in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean theatres. In addition, the RIN had its own infrastructure, developing a number of shore-establishments in India, but also staffing other establishments from Aden to South-East Asia. The RIN was generally praised for its roles in military actions, especially in actions along the Burmese coast late in the war, and the ships and men of the RIN saw themselves as at least equal to fellow sailors in other allied navies (Report of the Commission of Inquiry: 297-8; Dutt, 1971).

However, between 1942 and 1945 there were also nine separate mutinies on ships of the RIN. These mutinies arose for specific grievances for each ship, but the naval authorities often blamed a breakdown of the 'chain of command' on-board each ship, often due to communal/religious issues not being taken into account by superior officers. After the Mutiny of 1946, the Commission of Inquiry stated:

“The number of Mutinies [between 1942 and 1945] and the manner in which many of them originated show that many of the ratings were prone to indiscipline and had exaggerated notions about their own rights which reacted unfavourably on their sense of duty and loyalty to the Service” (Commission of Inquiry: 30)

This disparity between the ratings' and the colonial elite's understandings of what constituted 'normal' standards of behaviour is of obvious importance, based as it was upon colonialist prejudices towards Indians' rights as citizens of the British Empire, alongside preconceived notions of what constituted appropriate norms for behaviour within a military organisation. The tensions here were further enhanced by huge growth in the RIN and its demand for able-bodied young men to fill its ranks. After 1942, recruiting officers told potential recruits that by joining the RIN, they were getting a job for life in a safer service than the Army, probably in a technical role (such as in the signals branch) with a good chance of promotion to officer-rank with a few years, followed by a good pension. Upon joining the RIN, many found that instead of this they were asked to do menial tasks (such as cleaning the toilets) which were intended by the RIN officers to break down communal divisions between sailors, as well as make them suitably disciplined bodies fit for naval service. Instead, many of the sailors, especially those who were from well-educated or middle class backgrounds, found these tasks offensive to their communal identity, a marker of their civilian life which many were unwilling to give up upon joining the RIN. On top of this, it quickly became apparent that there was little or no chance of promotion beyond Petty Officer Rank<sup>iii</sup>. This was not uncommon across all branches of the Indian military during World War Two, but the Navy was particularly poor at producing recruitment literature that did not leave sailors disenfranchised by service life (Deshpande, 1996).

Recruitment of officers also altered, as the demand for suitable officers – pre-war generally taken to mean the white non-Indians who formed the bulk of the officer class – had to be filled, and as a result, increasing numbers of men drawn from across the British Empire and beyond were recruited, often haphazardly as a result of the happenstance occurrences that

took place during World War Two. The majority came from the UK, but others were drawn from wherever they could be found. For example, the Report of the Commission of Inquiry notes that during this time, 1 American, 9 Dutch, 1 Turk, 5 Iraqi's, 2 Russians, 11 Norwegians and 1 Yugoslav were recruited, as well as an unclear number of Australians, Canadians and South Africans. This haphazard approach to recruitment, born of desperation, had significant consequences. As the official report puts it (with a degree of understatement): "It is questionable whether it was wise to recruit officer material from foreign countries, especially those affected by colour prejudice" (248).

On top of this, the food served on board ship was often awful, with poor quality ingredients and poorly trained cooks. A 1945 survey of the quality of *atta*<sup>iv</sup> found that most of it was only suitable for consumption by animals (Report of the Commission of Inquiry). Food in general, and its dreadful flavour, continued to be a significant grievance post-war. As they were rapidly demobilised and moved onto shore barracks, the ratings found their 'jobs for life' disappearing. This also created large numbers of men being demobilised, being moved 'off-ship' and into shore establishments in preparation for eventual discharge. As a result, many were placed in over-crowded accommodation, with consequent poor sanitary conditions. Overall, service in the RIN in early 1946 was clearly difficult for ordinary ratings, and any future prospects seemed bleak.

However, some of the men of the RIN had concerns about the nature of colonial rule. As noted above, despite the many grievances the sailors faced, the RIN performed well in theatres of war. During the war, many men were told that they were fighting against dictatorship and foreign invasion in the form of the Axis powers. At the same time, many sailors went on shore leave in ports in India and were often abused by Indian nationalists as they were seen as helping British imperial power to maintain its dominion. Thus, having won the war against 'tyranny', together with hearing about widely reported nationalist agitations in the post-war period, many ratings openly questioned the nature of their service and the paradox of having fought for freedom whilst helping to protect and enforce foreign rule.

For one group of ratings, these issues demanded even greater action. Whilst in service in Southeast Asia during the war, some sailors came into contact with captured soldiers of the Indian National Army (INA). These troops, led by the exiled nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, were soldiers who were captured by the Japanese during the fall of Singapore. Under Bose's leadership, they fought with the Japanese against the British in Burma, with the eventual goal of capturing Delhi and freeing India from British rule. For the sailors who came into contact with these troops – traitors to the British, martyrs to (some) Indian nationalists – the exposure to a form of violent, militaristic resistance to British rule, together with the sympathy these soldiers received in India, was revolutionary: M.R. Gupta, a sailor from HMIS *Chamak* stated:

"Political consciousness amongst the ratings was one of the factors that brought forth the strike [mutiny]. The country wide applause and sympathy to the INA men

triggered the inborn yearning for freedom among the ratings and in order to counter balance the disgrace they meet from their country men [sic], they thought they must do something for the country's sake which might give them this better opinion among the masses. They knew beyond doubt that by helping the British to win laurels in the war, they had fastened the iron chains of slavery for India and the public looked on the ratings as traitors who impeded the path of independence” (Karachi Witnesses, 152 – 3, emphasis in original)

The ratings radicalised in this way were often involved in fomenting discontent and promoting nationalism to other sailors. B. C. Dutt is seen as one of the key instigators of the RIN Mutiny – on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 1946 he was arrested in possession of seditious materials, having been caught painting nationalist slogans on the walls of His Majesty's Indian Ship (HMIS) *Talwar*, a shore installation in the signals branch of the RIN in downtown Bombay, shortly before the visit of the Commander in Chief of military operations in India, Sir Claude Auchinleck. Dutt's arrest, detention and subsequent discharge from service was one of many initial 'sparks' which caused the sailors of *Talwar* to mutiny. This was enhanced by the commanding officer, Commander King, of *Talwar* being noted as a particularly abusive officer, who was prone to haranguing and swearing at the men under his command, mis-using a number of racially derogatory epithets such as 'coolies' or 'junglies' (Dutt, 1971, 101), terms which he seems to have misinterpreted as less offensive than many of the sailors under his command understood them to be<sup>v</sup>.

As a result of all of the above pressures, on February the 18th 1946 the Petty Officers and ratings of *Talwar*, refused to work. As a signalling establishment, news of the Mutiny spread quickly, and shore establishments and ships in Bombay also refused to work and marched through the centre of Bombay. The following day, ratings in other RIN naval centres also struck and protested, and a Central Strike Committee in Bombay attempted to organise the sailors and their protests. Over the next 5 days, nearly 20,000 sailors 'mutinied' by refusing to work 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 armed forces, and in Bombay, which was experiencing significant urban unrest prior to the RIN mutiny, around 200 people, primarily members of the urban poor, were killed as the GoI authorities attempted to enforce control fearing a broader, Communist-inspired, revolt (Deshpande, 2016: 70). 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, and bombers were flown over Bombay harbour to emphasise his words. 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.

There are now a number of counter-narratives at play that have emerged since the events of the Mutiny. The first, driven by the official Commission of Inquiry's report and findings, argued that the main cause of the Mutiny lay in the poor administration of the service

creating a number of grievances, and that as a result, the Mutiny could be read as a form of labour struggle for better pay and conditions. Whilst it was, in military terms a mutiny, many of the sailors at the Commission of Inquiry attempted to justify the events as a 'strike'. This approach places the blame for the mutiny on the rapid expansion of the service during World War Two, especially in the practice of recruiting too many people, of varying suitability for naval life, too quickly. The second approach is largely driven by accounts published by former mutineers and other radical sections of postcolonial Indian society (Banerjee, 1981, Bose, 1988, Dutt, 1971, Gourgey, 1996). In contrast to the first account, these have argued that the mutiny was a moment of potentially radical change that could have led to a process of left-wing decolonisation that was shut down by the leaders of the nascent anticolonial movement in India in an attempt to guard their vested interests in the coming transfer of power. For those familiar with arguments about the historiography of India and its relation to the subaltern, this division in historiographical narrative is likely to be familiar, dividing Indian history between elite and subaltern interpretations. As a result, in the next section, I turn to one of the most recent attempts to interrogate and move beyond this binary narrative.

#### The RIN Mutiny as a moment of democratic inconsequence

Leela Gandhi's book *The Common Cause* (2014) is an extended investigation into the diverse currents that make up democratic practices. The book challenges accounts that see democracy as something that only emerges in 'Western' contexts by arguing for a global and situated sense of how minor gestures and actions form important spaces for democratic experimentation. Gandhi challenges us to look beyond some of the more traditional histories of ideas that are well established in the study of post/anticolonialism (such as the Indian anticolonial struggle being clearly mapped out into a number of key events and/or stages, such as the Swadeshi Movement or the Quit India Movement), and instead argues for a heterogeneous reading of the range, variety and scope of activities that could be thought of as democratic that existed alongside or within anticolonial politics. In order to accomplish this new reading of democracy and anticolonialism, Gandhi asks us to turn towards events that were seemingly insignificant or limited and ask instead about the experiences of 'the democratic' that lay within these spaces and experiments.

In the book, Gandhi devotes a chapter to discussing the RIN Mutiny as an event of important democratic 'inconsequentialism'. Following from the above, this 'inconsequence' is not simply a signifier for a meaningless or fruitless event that can safely be consigned to the dustbin of history. Instead, inconsequence is her attempt, drawing on Ranajit Guha's (1983) wariness about the binaries created by reading official documents through 'the prose of counter insurgency', to read an alternative history of the mutiny that challenges the binary between the 'official' and 'revolutionary' scripts that dominate discussion of these events. Thus, instead of reading the RIN through the lens of either a revolutionary moment that was closed down by the nationalist elite, or an irrelevant, and too late, struggle for better



working conditions in the rapidly changing infrastructure of the RIN itself, we should read it as a space for radical experimentation that drew upon pre-existing grievances and social structures and sought to forge a radical alternative, but which was ultimately unsuccessful.

Thus, Gandhi argues that we must read the RIN Mutiny as something that possesses its own trajectory, rather than trying to inscribe it with any one particularly normative framework. In this, I am in broad agreement with her (see Davies, 2013a). Going through the archival material in the National Archives of India in Delhi in 2010, which primarily deal with the official Commission of Inquiry that took place shortly after the Mutiny, what becomes clear is the difficulty in trying to inscribe any one particular 'script' to the extremely heterogeneous readings of the Mutiny that the sailors used to create what David Featherstone (2003) has called 'Maps of Grievance', or the ways in which actors make sense of the varied connections of solidarity and antagonism that flow through political networks. From complaints about food and abuse by senior officers, other sailors were concerned about the perceived immorality of naval life that was created by the organisational structure of the RIN, whilst others simply felt betrayed by the service conditions having signed up for something else entirely.

From here Gandhi reads the mutiny from 3 different but overlapping perspectives. One, as what she terms an 'anti-colonial counterpublic', or a space where alternative discourses to the dominant nationalist framings of independence were mobilised. Two, as a potential example of inconsequential ethics, whereby rather than worrying about causation, the Mutiny can be seen as a more experimental space, and, rather than striving for a 'successful' result, the mutiny becomes a more experimental space of democratic politics. Finally, developing this second point, Gandhi reads the mutiny through its connections to previous mutinies in India, particularly 1857, but also the affective connections it had to later mutinies in India amongst other armed forces, together with the Mutiny's effects upon both the mutineers and their testimonies in the Commission of Inquiry.

In principle, these three readings of the RIN Mutiny are all useful postcolonial interrogations of the event. Indeed, my previous work on the Mutiny (Davies, 2013a, 2013b, 2014) has largely been an attempt to disrupt some of the dominant discourses that circulate about the Mutiny. However, Gandhi's examination of the Mutiny fundamentally misses out the maritime nature of the RIN. Whilst she does include some reference to the transnational nature of the RIN Mutiny, by including it with other mutinies that were more generically military, her account excludes possible genealogical connections to other maritime mutinies (including those that took place in the RIN beforehand, but see also Denning, 1992, Featherstone, 2009, Jaffer, 2015), but also makes little mention of what being in service in the RIN would mean, other than a few references to the transnational lives of the sailors. This is crucial, especially when taken in the context of a service that had already suffered from mutinies aboard its ships during wartime. As a result of all of this, Gandhi ends up focussing on issues related to food and its perceived role in the mutiny, but also how it

became utilised as an object of concern in the Commission of Inquiry. Again, this is a valid part of the mutiny – as we saw above – however, this focus occludes many of the other aspects of the Mutiny that only become foregrounded when taking a more maritime perspective.

### Maritime military mobilities

The turn over the last decade to thinking about mobilities in the social science has begun to have consequences for understandings of military spaces. Put simply, mobilities literatures have examined the range of ways in which movement (and its counter, stillness, or immobility) impacts human existence. Drawing on Cresswell (2010), this has involved examining the various ways in which mobility actually occurs (e.g. speed, rhythm, route etc.) and through the particular constellations of more-than-human infrastructure which have emerged historically and facilitate or hinder certain forms of mobility (e.g. the emergence of the railways and the choices made at that time which continue to impact current railway infrastructure such as the gauge of the railway sleepers).

This mobilities turn has had consequences for understanding maritime issues, or more specifically ship-based or oceanic issues (see, for example, Anim-Addo, Hasty & Peters, 2014, Peters, 2015, Steinberg and Peters, 2015). Such scholarship has understood how both the sea as a material object is itself mobile and fluid, but also subject to a number of infrastructures, not least the ship, an always mobile (even when docked, the ship is often subject to the movement of the sea/water it sits in/on), self-contained space, cut off from 'dry-land', shifting cargos of materials and humans around the globe. This has made for a more nuanced understanding of the social aspects of maritime life, making visible those spaces of life at sea which are usually hidden or ignored by the 'landed' nature of much work in the social sciences.

It is interesting then to read this maritime mobility-work alongside the emergent studies of mobilities in the military. Here the range of interventions by Merriman et al. (2016) which call for more attention to the ways in which military spaces can be better understood through the mobilities paradigm is particularly useful. I draw particularly on Isla Forsyth's section of the above article, which examines the impacts that military mobilities have on those at their edges – the 'collateral' who are drawn in to military situations but are not directly involved, or who exist on the edges of military encounters. Forsyth particularly argues for a feminist relational perspective, drawing on both a feminist geopolitics (Sharp, 2007) and a more-than-human sense of the political (Dittmer, 2013) which explores the ways that military mobilities operate across different scales in violent ways – for example, the geopolitical decision to launch drone strikes in an attempt to destabilise a terrorist network, and the consequences when civilian targets are mistakenly attacked. This feminist, relational, more-than-human perspective is useful as it draws out the ways in which military mobilities are never exempt from the social (and indeed Anirudh Deshpande's work on the RIN mutiny has long recognised this – see Deshpande, 1989, 1996, 2016), even though the

military is often depicted and understood in popular culture as a relatively monolithic space of hawkish masculinity.

Forsyth is speaking towards understandings of violent military encounters, and a better understanding of the material and corporeal nature of the violence of military activity. However, for the purposes of this paper, this perspective is also useful in expanding the understanding of the RIN Mutiny beyond the binary revolutionary/administrative failure accounts that dominate by focussing on the lived experiences of the sailors of the RIN and their positions within the military machine that subjected them to various forms of structural violence in order to make the 'disciplined' subjects (see also Davies, 2013a here). However, it also helps to interrogate some of Gandhi's arguments about the RIN and its mutiny in 1946, as it destabilises the nation-state focussed, 'landed' (i.e. terra-centric) nature of her account. This is also important as it contributes to a growing amount of literature that focusses on the intersections between maritime spaces as spaces of mutiny and radicalism (Frykman et al., 2013, Jaffer, 2015). In addition, reading the mutiny alongside the likes of Itty Abraham's (2015) paper on the Singapore mutiny of 1915 is instructive. To Abraham, the now largely forgotten mutiny of Indian soldiers in Singapore shows how military and imperial categorisations, in this case where soldiers were viewed as 'military migrant workers', were inadequate to understand the internationalist frameworks through which soldiers constructed their own subjectivities. Instead, drawing on Ahuja's (2010) idea of the 'corrosiveness of comparison', Abraham argues that the movement of Indian soldiers around the Empire allowed them to develop their own positionality in relation to the colonial system. To Abraham, then, long-distance travel creates 'insurgent' effects by allowing the subjects of empire to think internationally about their own position in the world, and this was often in sharp contrast to the imperial order. In the next sections of the paper, I begin to draw out some of these ideas through some empirical discussion.

### The importance of the 'Naval'

It is important to focus on the naval as writing on the military maritime tends to focus on the strategic and tactical elements of winning battles at sea, rather than the social relations of life on board. Although there have been a few attempts to look at the Royal Navy and the effects of its recruitment had upon the lower deck in World War 2 (McKee, 2002), there have been less on these issues within colonial navies (for an exception, see Spence, 2015b). Clearly then, there is a need to understand what the effects of being in the navy actually were. The identity of the naval sailor is clearly marked by militarism, particularly through the naval organisation's attempts to enforce discipline and control. This military attempt to discipline its subjects is not surprising, as the work of Foucault on the space of the military camp/barracks reminds us (Foucault 1995 [1977]), as well as more colonially driven studies on discipline in the barracks/cantonment (Wald 2012). In the case of navies, this militarisation runs alongside the perception that containment and discipline are necessary to maintain standards of safety in life aboard ship.

The naval ship is a complicated and ever changing space, despite its seeming 'solidity'. As a complex socio-technical object, even the smallest ship (such as those that made up the RIN) was made up of a huge variety of machines and organisms – from the rats and other vermin which lived on board, engines, pets of the crew, sensors (RADAR, SONAR etc.), the crew themselves, weapons and their ammunition, armour, fuel and food – all of which could change from deployment to deployment, needed to be maintained, or could be destroyed/killed if the ship entered battle. However, the navy is made up of not only ships, but also barracks, offices, parade grounds, brigs, magazines, warehouses and a variety of other spaces. To work within the huge variety of structures of such an organisation requires an understanding of the specific terminology and technical knowledge written down as 'naval doctrine' which governed everything from the seemingly mundane like what different parts of the ship were called, or how to maintain basic levels of crew fitness on board the ship, through to the inherently technical issues like how best to locate a submerged submarine or the best practice for loading a gun and firing it.

Thus, the colonial naval sailor is conditioned by the multi-scalar spaces of a navy beyond his immediate vicinity to the wider 'machine' of the navy itself (see Rediker 2007: Ch. 8, for an account of the vast machine of the slave trade). As potentially unruly subjects, yet also ones who needed to be developed into a crew who can operate the complex machinery of a military ship or shore establishment, it is not surprising that there was a significant overlap with colonial discourses of the subject as child-like and needing to be governed by a strong authority (Land, 2006). The naval sailor was expected to conform to their role in an organisation that is run on an extremely hierarchical basis, and thus, disciplinary practices and the ordering of bodies sit at the heart of how scholars have theorised naval organisation. Foucault, for example, at numerous points refers to ships to examine certain models of governance. In his 'Society, Territory, Population' lectures, Foucault traces developments from ancient Greece to the present in order to show how the ship is constructed as a model for 'good' governance, with the captain taking supreme responsibility for what happens on board, expected to steer the ship through dangerous waters and take responsibility for the safekeeping of the crew/cargo (Foucault 2007: 97, 122-123). These disciplinary systems were and are always partial and contested, especially in a maritime labour context (Ahuja, 2008), but are also distinctly 'maritime'.

In practice, and similar to the 'martial races' theory at work in colonial armies, the RIN was heavily influenced by what Spence (2015b) calls 'seafaring race theory' – whereby certain groups from across the empire were deemed to be better suited to life at sea than others. For the RIN, some aspects of this 'theory' are summed up in a 1945 document for new officers unfamiliar with India published by the Government of India on its 'Creeds and Customs', which is filled with familiar environmentally determinist tropes about which geographical areas would be useful for recruiting the most militaristic individuals who could be turned into sailors, for example: "The climatic conditions of Assam and Bengal are not conducive to strenuous or energetic work, and the long connections with western

civilisation and education have tended to produce an astute people.” However, the officers of the RIN, especially those who had been recruited after the outbreak of hostilities in World War Two, often showed a flagrant disregard for even these stereotypical doctrines and behaviours. Witness statements in the Commission of Inquiry often spoke of instances of ill-treatment of the sailors at the hands of officers or of their white matelots. Sometimes this was verbal abuse, such as the abuse of Commander King at HMIS *Talwar*. Elsewhere however, this abuse was both physical and/or religious - Leading Telegraphist Akram, for example, related the story of one Gunner Smith kicking over Muslim sailors whilst they were at prayer and commanding them to stand to attention (Witnesses Memos Submitted to the Enquiry).

Despite the problems with recruitment and desertion outlined above, once members of the service, the RIN sought to re-educate its sailors so that they would function effectively as a team. Firstly, this involved standard military tactics of removing personal space from the sailor so that military life was seen as distinctive from civilian life – thus personal space for belongings was limited across the RIN and any attempt to differentiate between sailors on civilian lines (e.g. class, religion, caste) was rigidly prohibited – indeed, this was often the cause of the many ‘minor’ mutinies about RIN ships during wartime. This was further developed through a deliberate process of ‘mixing’ sailors from different communal backgrounds in the same branches of the service. Under testimony at the Commission of Inquiry, senior officials claimed this process of breaking down boundaries was ‘amongst the best things we have done’ (Testimony of Commodore Jefford, Commission of Inquiry). The official reason for this mixing lay in the development of a secular ‘modern’ naval force that was, at the time of the Mutiny, going to be suitable for an independent India.

In practice, mixing was limited by a number of factors both internal and external to the navy, such as the military authorities belief in the ‘martial races’ as discussed above (see also Deshpande, 1996). However, education also proved a significant barrier to ‘mixing’, as roles within the armed forces were determined by education. The navy in particular needed men (and to a lesser extent women) who possessed a relatively high level of education to be able to man the signalling technologies present on board the RINs ships and in its establishments. As a result, it often recruited amongst university graduates as well as targeting its recruitment towards different, often better educated, groups than the Indian Army. This most obviously backfired during the mutiny as sailors were able to use their education and skills in telegraphy to directly inform other ships about events in Bombay, hence the ability of the Mutiny to spread across the Indian Ocean with relative ease.

Overall, this recruitment of different groups and forcing them to live together in close proximity with little personal space was, of course, one of the main reasons why the administration’s attempts to introduce a doctrine that treated every man as ‘equal’ and rigidly enforcing that equality failed as ratings resisted attempts they deemed culturally inappropriate – recruiting matriculated students who were told they were going to be

officers and then making them clean the toilets being a clear example. This also means that reading the RIN Mutiny as an act of subaltern agency is too simplistic to understand the range and scope of individuals who were involved in fomenting resistance within the RIN – for instance, BC Dutt, one of the figureheads of resistance prior to the Mutiny, was a Bhadrak<sup>vi</sup> who before joining the navy had never carried his own luggage (Dutt, 1971). However, despite his relatively elite caste status, Dutt found the fraternity created by being a member of the navy particularly attractive – his grievances specifically related to Indian independence having been radicalised during campaigns in Burma in World War Two. Thus, naval life sought to develop a sense of fraternal communal identity, which was in turn supposed to inspire loyalty to the service, and by extension to the colonial regime. However, in fact, what often happened was this process of creating a collective naval identity served to limit communal identities amongst the sailors and instead reprocessed them into newer pan-Indian identities that subsequently allowed some sailors to become revolutionary nationalists, whilst others simply became more aware of a broader Indian identity. The various ways in which the tensions of this process of ‘mixing’ played out within the ships and shore establishments of the Navy is a key aspect of how the naval/maritime identities were productive of different political trajectories.

For some sailors, the RIN was also a space of moral decay. A rating named Bansilal, from HMIS *Jumna*, related at the Commission of Enquiry that:

“I started smoking in HMIS *Bahadur*. I used to smoke very seldom in my home. I used to smoke stealthily on account of fear of my parents. I began to smoke because the whole world smokes. I thought it was necessary to smoke because everyone in the navy smokes.” (Bombay Witness statements: 142)

This statement flags the nature of many of the young men of the RIN, who still felt juvenile guilt about smoking thanks to parental and societal moral values and fear of discovery. Elsewhere, other sailors spoke about how, by forcing them to live away from home (both their home place in India, and also during their overseas travels on board the RINs ships) the navy forced them to live immoral lives by hindering their ability to get married and thereby encouraging them to visit with prostitutes (Witness Memo of Petty Officer Telegraphist A.P. Nair). Both of these sentiments played into the hands of the colonial authorities’ characterisation of the sailors as impressionable young men who needed strong military discipline in order to be turned into reliable sailors. This helps to understand why much of the questioning of the witnesses of the Commission of Inquiry concerns the extent to which ratings in the navy were able to access papers and pamphlets from outside the Navy. Key here was a fear of the ordered military organisation being corrupted by an ingress of Communist and other radical literature. This is crucial, as it points to the always impossible boundary that the naval administration sought to impose between military and civilian worlds coming under serious strain as the moment of decolonisation approached.

Overall, the intersections of naval/maritime life with the lives of the ratings of the RIN is of clear importance to understanding the trajectory of the RIN Mutiny. As a result, whilst Gandhi is right in many ways to resist the temptation to form a dominant narrative of the RIN Mutiny, by downplaying the naval/maritime, she does miss a huge range of the variety of grievances which the sailors mapped on to their experiences of naval life. These grievances emerged through the operations of the navy as detailed above, but in order to show more clearly how the political understandings of the mutineering sailors of 1946 were shaped, it is also necessary to examine how these sailors lives extended beyond the relatively disciplined spaces of the RIN to other spaces, in South Asia and beyond.

### The importance of the transnational maritime

As outlined in the previous section, I think it is impossible to ignore the maritime elements of the RIN Mutiny, but this next section focusses on aspects of naval life which involved the sailors' mobility across space, but their practices of immobility by being within the space of the ship as it travelled. However, whilst the likes of Gandhi and others have drawn out the variety of landed connections to the Mutiny (see, for example, Spence, 2015a's focus on events in Bombay), or to wider currents in Indian society (Deshpande, 2016) the transnational nature of life in a navy is, I argue here, still important to recognise. One element of this is how the transnational became ingrained in many of the ideas of the sailors of the RIN, and how they were transmitted to other individuals and organisations. For instance, David Featherstone (2017) has recently shown how the events of February 1946 were important to Communist organisers like John Saville, who was based in Karachi, Bombay and elsewhere in India. Featherstone shows how Saville and others discussed the RIN Mutiny in the 'Forces' Parliaments' which were taking place across the British Empire's armed forces at the time, and were shut down, according to Saville as a result of these discussions. The RIN Mutiny was then, alongside significant other moments of unrest and mutiny across the Empire, of significant importance towards broader inter- and transnational political networks. In Saville's case, this was clearly Communist, and there is probably much more work to be done exploring this linkages across the British Empire. However, this also points towards links to the internationalist ideas of Abraham (2015) discussed above. In this section, I explore how some of the RIN sailors made sense of their place in this international world.

The mobile experience of being a sailor who travelled around the world is crucial here. The ratings of the RIN developed specifically political identities in their engagement with other political struggles they encountered during their lives at sea, and they were clearly able to position these struggles in the wider discourses of anti-colonialism and an emerging new world order which were circulating in India and beyond. Shaih Shahadat Ali, speaking at the Bombay Witness stand to the Commission of Inquiry stated:

“If you kindly visit the mofussil<sup>vii</sup> place[s] in India you can find that even a 10 or 12 year old educated boy is shouting slogans [for Indian independence]. ... *The world*

*situation is changing*, and similarly the internal feelings of every Indian soldier and sailor is changing towards the country's freedom." (Bombay witnesses: 584, emphasis added)

The RIN sailors were clearly aware of the wider context of political struggle they were caught up in, and important here are the embodied and sensed feelings of both nationalist pride, but also a broader cosmopolitan reaction against oppression. Part of this was undoubtedly caused by interactions between sailors and events in India, such as political agitations in Bombay and Karachi (Deshpande, 2016). However, the involvement of the sailors of the RIN in a struggle against what they were told was tyranny abroad in the form of European Fascism and Japanese imperialism naturally led many sailors to ask questions about India's place in the world.

"If you see with your own eyes, you know more. For instance you find that people sacrifice everything for their countries. They work hard and fight for their freedom. Naturally it affects us more than reading books . . . *You meet different types of people. You know their civilisation and culture. You know what they are living and fighting for. Naturally, you turn on thinking about your own country*" (P.O. Tel. S.W. Ray, Bombay Witnesses: 598).

In his testimony, both here and elsewhere in the archive, Ray constantly refers to this political tendency as a natural situation, drawing on essentialist and primordial constructions of patriotic nationalism. However, and drawing on some of the literatures mentioned above, it is important here to place these ideas within a context of the embodied cosmopolitanism of being a sailor overseas and experiencing struggles against perceived injustices. For men like Ray, reading pamphlets or newspapers is secondary to the being overseas, seeing other's struggles against grievances, and recognising that these political struggles have parallels with one's own. This is what Ahuja (2010) has termed the 'corrosiveness of comparison' where colonial subjects' political lives were transformed by their encounters with others as a consequence of travel. This opened up the spaces of negotiation that the sailor could use to develop their own political identity. The threat of naval discipline could attempt to enforce certain sets of beliefs, but the exposure to struggles against tyranny and injustice overseas, for some of the sailors, was enough for them to argue that sticking to naval procedure was less important than the freedom of India from overseas rule.

This cosmopolitan maritime life was a crucial mechanism by which RIN sailors became politicised, and social engagement and learning from others was a key part of the emergence of nationalist thought in the RIN. The need for colonial authorities to discipline the men of the INA who were captured fighting in Burma necessitated their transport back to the subcontinent to stand trial in Delhi. In some cases, (and in an act of astonishing short-sightedness by senior officers of the armed forces) the ships of the RIN were used to transport these captives back, and these moments when the men of the RIN came into



contact with the men of the INA were important. Biswanath Bose was on board such a ship, which had important effects on his own political position as he attempted to subvert the hierarchy of naval organisation:

The ship to which [I] belonged had also carried some [INA] men to India from Rangoon, which not only allowed [me] to mix with the INA men but also see them in action. But, however, sympathetic you may be, it will bring you only ruins if you do not obey the masters and/or their agents, or if you side with their opponents as was the situation then. [I] in terms of naval rules was forbidden to talk or discuss politics in the ship or anywhere. [I] looked like a disciplined rating. When [my] colleagues (Nurul Islam and Ashraf Kahn, both leading Seamen) talked and put some questions about Netaji [Subhas Chandra Bose] and his people secretly, [I] answered two or three out of ten, for [I] was just sensing how loyal and patriotic the colleagues were. The flow of news about the arrested INA men sprang so high that at a later stage all the officers and ratings in RIN ships discussed about it [sic] openly and without any bar (Bose 1988: 18).

Crucially, it was the ability to see these men over the period of time as they were transported back from Burma that allowed them to act upon Bose – the space of the ship itself became somewhere where radicalism could find a home, and the public nature of the space between the sailors of the lower deck meant that a degree of connection could take place, even with captured INA officers. Bose's accounts of the importance of being in Burma are given more credence when read alongside B.C. Dutt's (1971) accounts of life in the RIN, and in particular, his sense of being radicalised in Burma as a result of his experiences of racial inequality there, from both RIN and Indian Army officers, whilst fighting alongside the British against the Japanese. Dutt's sense of grievance with the RIN and the colonial authorities stems from this time, and it is from there, alongside his more clandestine engagement with domestic politics in Bombay, that he began his nationalist activities, which eventually led to his arrest in February 1946 in HMIS *Talwar*.

The ability to question colonial rule then, was somewhat easier once the sailors of the RIN had moved overseas away from India, whether to Europe in the case of Telegraphist Ray, or to Burma for the likes of Bose and Dutt, and is an example of Abraham's (2015) ideas about the emergence of international identities. As I have argued elsewhere, (Davies, 2013b, 2014) the space of the ship was crucial here as it allowed 'large-scale' issues, such as the freedom of India from colonial rule, to be negotiated and mobilised through specific, relatively safe spaces in the lower decks of the RIN's vessels. Similarly, Telegraphist Ahmed of HMIS *Talwar* said that access to illicit materials was widespread through the RIN:

Every rating obtained some sort of matter concerning INA Subhashe's [sic] photos and speeches, [the INAs] newspapers in Roman Urdu, pamphlets such as 'Delhi Chalo' and 'Blood and Hunger' published in Thailand. Especially communication

branch ratings had their kit-bags full of such things including INA gramophone records. (Memo's of Witnesses submitted to the Commission: 131)

However, more than just the space of the lower deck, it was also the fact of travelling long distances to other places that allowed sailors like Ray to experience first-hand aspects of colonial difference that they may not have realised in India, and also the length of time that the ship was travelling that allowed conversations and discussions between the sailors to take place. The introduction of subversive material that people could read, look at or listen to together, alongside more extreme cases such as the introduction of a group of explicitly anti-colonial INA soldiers, into the confined spaces of an RIN ship (or shore establishment) challenged the supposedly disciplined space of the ship, and only served to enhance many of the existing grievances which were already present. As a result, it is the very process of moving, whether through sailors experiencing and recognising the struggles of others overseas in World War Two, or through moving on the seas in company with other disaffected sailors and anti-colonialists, that forms a crucial aspect of the eventual mutiny in 1946. This is not to say that they are the only reason for the Mutiny, nor to give them primacy over some of the other accounts, but instead to argue that the nature of the mutiny requires a situated account that takes these experiences seriously.

### Conclusions

Throughout this paper, I have argued for a renewed sense of the maritime and naval, drawing on recent studies on maritime & military mobilities, to be drawn into studies of the RIN Mutiny of 1946. Previous scholarship has occasionally stressed maritime or military aspects of the mutiny (indeed, these would be hard to ignore), but the overarching narratives of 'organisational' or 'revolutionary' understandings of the mutiny occlude these at the expense of trying to prove their own standpoint as correct rather than treating the event in a more situated way. Leela Gandhi's scholarship has usefully prised open some of the space between these accounts with her reading of the Mutiny as part of a wider archaeology of democratic experimentation. However, her account focusses on either events within the navy, such as the poor food, or the connections the mutineers had with events in mainland India as the moment of decolonisation approached. Instead, in this paper, I have shown how, by stretching these accounts to include the maritime and transnational, the Mutiny can be understood as not a singular event, but expanding on Gandhi, as a moment of political experimentation which extends beyond the specific places where the mutiny took place. Instead, seeing the mutiny as the product of clandestine discussions taking place below-decks in the Bay of Bengal, or through RIN's as yet underexplored connections to international communism, allows us to read the multi-scalar, transnational nature of the Mutiny with more nuance.

This has important consequences, not just for the study of this specific Mutiny, but also for our understandings of how maritime, military and naval spaces are productive of differential forms of political consciousness and activity (Abraham, 2015). This is not to say that the

maritime is more or less productive of certain forms of radicalism or other forms of political behaviour. It is to say that the spaces and places of maritime politics are situated and interconnected, with the always transnational spaces of the naval/maritime producing different outcomes and ways of political organising than more 'landed' forms of politics. It is through using a mobile and material sense of the naval/maritime, that a more situated understanding the intersections between the various networks and pathways which were travelled by the ships and men of the RIN becomes clear, and this affords great potential for building on the likes of Gandhi's work and challenging the problematic, often binary, categorisations that continue to frame events like the RIN Mutiny.

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<sup>i</sup> Using the term 'mutiny' is and remains contentious. Many of the sailors at the time referred instead to their activity as a 'strike' against poor pay and conditions rather than a mutiny as a way of attempting to avoid punishment for their actions, whilst other accounts, generally those of a communist or otherwise leftist politics often use terms like 'uprising' or 'rebellion' – for example, see Gourgey, 1996 and Banerjee, 1981 for only two accounts that use differing terms. I have in this paper tended to use 'Mutiny' as it is both the correct technical term for the events of 1946 according to military law, but also as the majority of the academic literature that this paper makes its intervention in continues to use this term as the dominant one – it is also the term that B.C. Dutt uses in his account. This is, it is important to state, not to say that I accept the term 'mutiny' as the only 'correct' term for the events of 1946 – but rather it is a useful signifier of the range of activities that took place.

<sup>ii</sup> It was preceded by a similar force, the Royal Indian Marine, which was reformed into the RIN in 1934.

<sup>iii</sup> A 'Petty Officer' is a non-commissioned rank in British Naval nomenclature, similar to the likes of Corporals or Sergeants in the Army.

<sup>iv</sup> Atta translates into Hindi and Urdu as 'dough', yet generally (and in this case) refers to the flour used to make the varieties of bread common to South Asian food.

<sup>v</sup> See also Greg Denning's classic *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (1992) on the disastrous consequences of mis-speaking for a much more infamous mutiny on HMS Bounty.

<sup>vi</sup> Bhadrakok is a term for a variety of caste and class identities, predominantly from Bengali-speaking parts of India. Most Bhadrakok's were well educated and often came from upper caste groups in society.

<sup>vii</sup> 'Mofussil' is generally used to refer to rural or provincial areas of India.