

BOOK REVIEW

The Royal Indian Navy: Trajectories, transformations and the transfer of power, by Kalesh Mohanan, London, Routledge, 2020, 243 pp., Rs 995, ISBN 978-0-367-89638-6 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-429-35522-6 (ebk)

The military history of India has not attracted the attention of Indian scholars in adequate measure. So is the case with Indian maritime history. The trend of studying these histories is now gradually picking up. The Indian Navy appears to have the lead in this regard: the Navy History Division has brought out six volumes of naval history covering the period from 1945 to 2010.¹ However, the contribution from academia, besides a few publications on the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) revolt of 1946, has been rare. The book, *The Royal Indian Navy: Trajectories, Transformations and the Transfer of Power*, is thus a welcome addition to the scholarship on maritime history of India. The author, Kalesh Mohanan, a naval officer, has divided the volume into six chapters and included a number of tables in almost every chapter, making the figures more understandable and comparable.

India had a rich maritime tradition even before the advent of the Europeans. The history of the modern Indian Navy, however, can be traced back to the early seventeenth century when the East India Company felt a need to protect its shipments from local pirates and colonial rivals in Indian coastal regions. Keeping these objectives in view, the Company raised its own “navy”, with the designation “Honorable East Indian Company’s Marine”, in 1612. The East Indian Company’s Marine was subsequently redesignated as “Bombay Marine” in 1686, “His Majesty’s Indian Navy” in 1830, again “Bombay Marine” in 1863, “His Majesty’s Indian Marine” in 1877, “Royal Indian Marine” in 1892, “Royal Indian Navy” in 1934 and the “Indian Navy” in 1950. During this period, the navy participated in several conflicts, including the First and the Second World Wars. Besides transporting hundreds of thousands of men and animals to different operational theatres during the First World War, the force also took part in various minesweeping operations and patrolling duties. Some 90 personnel of the navy were decorated for their gallantry and devotion to duty during the hostilities. The Second World War led to the phenomenal expansion of the navy, both in terms of personnel and vessels. The manpower strength increased fourteenfold from merely 2,000 in 1939 to over 27,000 officers and ratings in 1945. In the post-independence period too, the navy proved its mettle on many occasions in safeguarding the nation.

In the first chapter (‘Introduction’) of the book, Mohanan places the historiography of existing works and explains his research methodology and views on the sources he accessed in writing the book. The author has made use of some rare sources including Chief of Staff’s Committee Report, RIN Log Magazine, Naval Plans Papers, RIN job advertisements, training manuals, official correspondence, and private papers of the senior naval officers, among others. The second chapter (‘Origin and Development of RIN’) captures the crucial phase of the RIN between the two world wars. The next three chapters (‘Manpower and Recruitment’, ‘Expansion of the RIN’, and ‘Post War Plans’) deal in detail with the history of the RIN during the Second World War. In these chapters, the author addresses issues related to manpower mobilisation for war efforts, demobilisation after the war and the RIN episode of February 1946. The final chapter (‘Indigenisation’) describes the post-Partition period and the reconstitution of a new navy. All in all, the book covers the transition of the Indian Navy into an effective combatant force and its expansion and development

during the Second World War and post-Independence period until 1950. The author has studied and analysed a range of sources, including colonial records maintained by archives, museums and libraries in the United Kingdom (UK), which makes for a well-researched volume.

While delving into military developments in the post-First World War period, Mohanan explains that when the defence expenditures were drastically curtailed, it was the RIN (or the Royal Indian Marine, as it was then called) that mainly faced budget cuts. Moreover, between the period 1925 and 1930, not a single executive officer was recruited. The authorities had to reap what they had sowed and this negligence created a significant gap in the chain of seniority, resulting in a lack of experienced officers at the time of need during the Second World War (p. 46). Mohanan further mentions that the British applied the “martial race theory” in the RIN as in the Indian Army. While illustrating his point, he writes that in 1925, some 75 per cent of the ratings were recruited from Punjab and North-West Frontier Provinces (p. 66). It was only during the Second World War that the large manpower requirement provided an opportunity for men from other parts of India to join the navy.

Mohanan details explicitly the RIN episode of February 1946 in the book, terming it the “RIN revolt”. He explains that the colonial rule termed any grievances represented by more than one person as a mutiny, and the British historians endorsed this theory (pp. 148–70). While citing the remarkable point of the RIN February episode, the author reveals that despite movement for a separate country for the Muslims (Pakistan) at its peak, the unity of Hindu–Muslim ratings at RIN was formidable. According to him, the RIN revolt indirectly helped India’s national movement for freedom (p. 168). While addressing the recruitment issues during Second World War, Mohanan aptly divides the war period into two slots. First is the September 1939–December 1941 period, when recruiting was solely carried out by the service itself. Second is January 1942 till the end of the war, the period during which recruitment work was taken over by Inter-Service Recruiting Organisation (p. 72). Centralisation of recruitment for three services found the right solution as men could be placed with the service of their taste and meet the drastic manpower demand of specific services at the time of need.

The book presents an engaging narrative, more specifically in the initial chapters. Mohanan has consulted a wide range of primary sources spread over India and the UK, which underscores the authenticity of the contents. For the fourth chapters, the author claims that some sources have not been defined entirely due to his official obligations. While the book has many strengths, it is not entirely flawless. The reader comes across few repetitions: for example the incidence of hauling down Union Jack and hoisting of Congress and Muslim League flags in February 1946 is mentioned in two successive paragraphs on page 152. Such issues could be taken care of in a new or revised edition at a later stage. Also, the initial chapters of the book are more analytical and the material presented here appears to have been handled with more skill than in the later chapters.

Finally, the publication is a good research work and rich in content. The volume is a welcome addition to the historiography of Indian maritime history. The book will not only prove valuable to the navy and defence personnel, but also to scholars engaged in military studies and the public, in general, to get acquainted with the naval history.

Note

1. Rear Admiral Satyindra Singh, *Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy 1945–1950* (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing, 1986) and *Blue Print to Blue Water: The Indian Navy 1951–1965* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1991); Vice Admiral G.M. Hiranandani, *Transition to*

Triumph: Indian Navy 1965–1975 (New Delhi: Lancer, 1999), *Transition to Eminence: The Indian Navy 1976–1990* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2004) and *Transition to Guardianship: The Indian Navy 1991–2000* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2009); and Vice Admiral Anup Singh, “Blue Waters Ahoy!” *Chronicling the Indian Navy’s History from 2001–10* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2018).

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