

## **INDIAN MUTINY IN SINGAPORE, 1915: PEOPLE WHO OBSERVED THE SCENE AND PEOPLE WHO HEARD THE NEWS**

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In January 2006 the revised edition of my work on the Indian Mutiny in Singapore of 1915 was published as *The Mutiny in Singapore: War, Anti-War and the War for India's Independence* (New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers). In fact, I sent my manuscripts to the publisher in November 2002, and therefore the views expressed in the book are that of 2002. In these three years, though the main framework of my idea has not changed, I have been thinking of the aspect of the mutiny which I could not fully develop in the book. It has not yet matured, but here I would like to talk about it in a rough sketch. This paper may be read as the postscript to the book.

### **THE WORLD WAR IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT AND THE MUTINY IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

Writing on the Mutiny in Singapore of 1915 has so far focused mainly around the actions of the mutineers, and their leaders in particular. Among the eight companies of the Fifth Light Infantry, A and B Companies started the first attack on the magazine, and the bulk of the non-commissioned officers and men of C and D Companies soon joined the mutineers. The Right Wing of the Infantry was composed of these four companies which revolted, while the Court of Enquiry thought that the great bulk of the Left Wing had not taken any active part in the outbreak. But the behaviour of the men of the Left Wing was also far from satisfactory from the point of the military discipline which was expected in the Indian Army.

As is well known, the Court of Enquiry mentioned as primary causes dissensions among the British officers and dissensions among the Indian

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officers; and, as for the rank and file, the report said that under these circumstances the lower ranks who depended upon these leaders for their rule of conduct and their well being were 'bound to initiate a state of unrest and a readiness for any form of mischief.'<sup>2</sup> The report had to admit that the fact that a state of indiscipline had taken root among the non-commissioned officers and men of the Right Wing was indisputable, but also that the discipline of the Left or Loyal Wing was 'none too good either'. The Court noticed 'lamentable want of initiative and resource shown by all ranks in failing to make any attempt to quell the mutiny', and said, 'Everyone seems to have either run to everyone else for orders, to have concealed themselves, or to have run away'.<sup>3</sup> From this observation the Court came to the conclusion, 'the fact that but few Indian officers, non-commissioned officers and men really stuck to their British officers or rallied round them, even for the protection of the latter, is a severe indictment of their active loyalty to their salt and of their value as fighting men.'<sup>4</sup>

In reality, the Court of Enquiry doubted the value of the men of the Fifth Light Infantry 'as fighting men'. 'Indiscipline' took root even in the Left Wing which did not rise in revolt. However, in the Court's report the men of the Fifth Light Infantry are depicted as those who depend on their leaders for their rule of conduct and their well being. Similarly in the writings on the revolutionary history in India, the rank and file people are depicted so often as the men who respond to the call of leaders for revolt.<sup>5</sup> The fact is that the men of the Infantry had their own idea of the First World War (1914-18). Although the details of this war are beyond the scope of this present paper, members of the Infantry considered the meaning of this European conflict and the meaninglessness of their sacrifice for it. The mutiny in Singapore was an expression of their reluctance to go to the war front, or of their anti-war feeling. Letters written by the men to their home in India on the eve of the outbreak bear witness to their feelings.<sup>6</sup> Those men who did not join the revolt, but were terrified at the scene of the mutiny, and ran away to the jungle, had also shared something common with the men who revolted. This gave the real strength to the mutiny. The conclusion of the report of the Court of Enquiry needs to be interpreted from this standpoint.

While they were under the strong influence of the Ghadar Party movement which called them to rise against the British, the Singapore

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<sup>2</sup> T. R. Sareen, ed., *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, New Delhi: Mouton Publishing House, 1995, I, pp. 37-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> 'Singapore men bhi Bharatiya Swatantra Sangram ka ek Adhyaya likha gaya' (One Chapter of the Indian Freedom Struggle was written in Singapore too), *Rajasthan Patrika*, Jaipur, 6 August 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Kuwejima, *The Mutiny in Singapore*, p. 65.

Mutiny was independently planned by Indian officers and men of the Fifth Light Infantry on the basis of their daily consciousness of the war and freedom.<sup>7</sup>

In this connection I would like to refer to the meaning of the impact of the Singapore Mutiny on the peasant uprising in Kelantan of 1915.<sup>8</sup> Ban Kah Choon had discussed this theme in his book on the Special Branch operations in Singapore.<sup>9</sup> W. E. Pepys, who was sent out to Pasir Puteh as ‘a sort of Political Officer to the Malay State Guides’, recalls that, in comparison with what was going on in Europe, it was ‘a storm in a tea cup or barely that’, though he also admitted that it did not mean that they had been living uninfluenced by the news of the war.<sup>10</sup> In fact the peasants in Kelantan were seriously affected by the war and particularly the decrease in their earnings caused by the fall in the price of copra, one of their staples, and the closing down of various European-owned coconut estates. In this situation the new land law that tried to tax according to acreage rather than the amount of produce, and was not properly explained, proved to be what Governor of the Straits Settlements Arthur Young called the ‘last straw’.<sup>11</sup>

What is to be noted here is the fact that not only the world economy affected the peasants in Kelantan, but also the sense of distance towards the war felt by the men of the Fifth Light Infantry and their actions influenced the people’s perception of the war and the uprising in Kelantan. Ban Kah Choon cites a part of the report by William Maxwell, acting colonial secretary to the government of the Straits Settlements as the first ‘intelligent evaluation that is subtly aware of the fuller dimension of a security threat’ on the side of the government:

Though there was no evidence of any German, Turkish or Indian seditionist influence, the Kelantan people have for some months past undoubtedly believed that Great Britain had faced defeat in the European war. Therefore when the Singapore mutiny broke out in February, wild stories spread through Kelantan of the massacre of Europeans and the successes of the mutineers. It was commonly believed that all European troops and all British battleships had left the

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<sup>7</sup> Sho Kuwajima, ‘Indian Mutiny in Singapore (1915)’, *Khuda Bakhsh Library Journal*, No. 138, Oct.-Dec., 2004, pp. 25-37.

<sup>8</sup> As for the peasant uprising in Kelantan, see Cheah Boon Kheng, ‘Hunting Down the Rebels in Kelantan, 1915: The Sultan’s “Double Game”’, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 68, 2, 1995, pp. 9-32.

<sup>9</sup> Ban Kah Choon, *Absent History: The Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore 1915-1942*, Singapore: SNP Media Asia, 2001, pp. 46-53. Also, see Kuwajima, *The Mutiny in Singapore*, pp. 144-7.

<sup>10</sup> W. E. Pepys, ‘Kelantan during World War I’, *Malaya in History*, 6, 1, 1960, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ban, *Absent History*, p. 52.

East for Europe. So firmly did the Kelantan Malays believe in British impotence in the Straits Settlements that, when the British men-of-war were on their way to Kelantan, the news was received with incredibility even in the highest circles.<sup>12</sup>

Although it is true that the 'wild stories' spread in Kelantan, unless the people in Kelantan and the men of the Fifth Light Infantry had something in common in their perception of the European war, the mutiny in Singapore could not have encouraged the peasants in Kelantan to rise in revolt against the British on such a scale as it did. It was their critical view of the European war that forced sacrifice on their lives without their agreement that was shared by the people in Singapore and Malaya as well as throughout the world. In this sense the peasant uprising in Kelantan of 1915 was not a storm in a tea cup, but in the *world cup*. As was the Indian Mutiny in Singapore.

## THE JAPANESE COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION AND ITS RESPONSE TO THE MUTINY

*Japan Chronicle*, an English daily newspaper edited by Robert Young, wrote on 24 February 1915 that the Japanese navy declared that the mutiny had been completely suppressed and order was restored. The paper reported that a dozen or more British soldiers and civilians were killed during the mutiny, but there were no Japanese casualties.

The report on the Indian Mutiny sent by Fujii Minoru, Japanese Consul in Singapore, is an important official document which was written from the side of the Japanese government.<sup>13</sup> Fujii's report records that, while the Japanese co-operated with the British in the suppression of the mutiny, Tsuchiya, the commander of the Third Squadron instructed his men not to kill or wound the Indian mutineers intentionally but called for their surrender.

Fujii returned to Japan on 15 August 1916 after his two years' duty in Singapore.<sup>14</sup> On his return Fujii mentioned two remarkable changes in the Japanese community in Singapore during that period. First there was the development of the Japanese rubber industry in Johore and the steady growth of the Japanese middle class in Singapore. The second was the change in the composition of the Japanese residents. According to Fujii's observation, the number of women had decreased to 700 to 800 out of about 3000 Japanese

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

<sup>13</sup> Foreign Ministry of Japan, ed., *Nihon Gaiko Monzyo* (Documents of Japanese Foreign Policy), *Taisho Yonen*, 3, 2, 1915; Tokyo, 1969, pp. 1194-1207. Nishimura Takeshiro, a long resident Japanese medical doctor in Singapore wrote that Fujii assumed office as Japanese Consul of Singapore in August 1913. See below.

<sup>14</sup> *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun*, 16 August 1916.

residents. He found a 'positive' trend in the gradual decrease of the women who were inmates of brothels. Earlier in 1911 the total number of Japanese residents in the Singapore Municipality was 1377, consisting of 486 males and 891 females, an inverse ratio in comparison with that of the Chinese and Indians in Singapore.

It was Tsukuda Koji, a correspondent of *Nanyo Shimpoh*, who referred to the impact of the Japanese participation in the suppression of the mutiny on the local image of the Japanese society due to the existence of the brothels. In connection with the advance of the Japanese business group in Singapore during World War I, Tsukuda wrote soon after the mutiny:

We, Japanese raised our social status. Our influence grew in politics, commerce and agriculture. But it is a serious obstacle to the activities of serious-minded Japanese that we are still considered Anishama (patrons?) of the brothels by the native people. It has become our urgent task that we should remove thoroughly their misunderstanding which comes from their view of our professions.<sup>15</sup>

This process was already proceeding in April 1914, and Consul Fujii played a key role in the arrest of three Japanese pimps. Tsukuda mentioned that one of the arrested was a pimp-cum-rubber planter. Therefore he was happy to write that the Japanese, who had been so far 'insulted' by the British and the 'indigenous' people, took arms to assist the British in their need, and won their 'respect.'<sup>16</sup>

The year 1915 marked the coronation ceremony of the Taisho Emperor, and similarly the participation of the Japanese in the suppression of the mutiny provided a chance to demonstrate the unity of Japanese residents in Singapore. These factors together with the entry of Japanese big businesses into Singapore promoted the formation of the Japanese Association on 12 September 1915. It was symbolic that the Commander of the Japanese Volunteer Corps, Reserve Lieutenant Wada Yoshimasa, an owner of the Nisshin Gomu (Rubber) and Reserve Lieutenant Kawakami Seiichi, another rubber planter who also joined the Corps, were selected as the *riji* (office bearers) of the Japanese Association along with representatives from Mitsui Bussan, Otomune, Bank of Taiwan and Nippon Yusen Kaisha.

However, there was continuity as well as change in the Japanese community. Nishimura Takeshiro, who had been practicing medicine in Singapore since 1903, and was also an office-bearer of the Japanese Association, recalls that one of the office-bearers and a doctor, Nakano Kozo was familiar with the old society, while having connection with the

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<sup>15</sup> Tsukuda Koji, *Nanyo yori* (From Nanyang), Singapore: Kohbun Kwan, 1916, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

business group Mitsui.<sup>17</sup> It is also noteworthy that Nishimura was not so optimistic in 1917 about the advancement of the Japanese business people to Singapore. He recorded in his diary that the reputation of Japanese commercial companies was not very good as the Japanese were indifferent to the customs of local society, and neglected their morals as residents of the area.<sup>18</sup> He thought that this was not the way to achieve long term prosperity in the area. It is not surprising that Nishimura, who witnessed the public execution of the Indian mutineers, appreciated their dauntless spirits expressed before their last breath.

The perception of Japanese women, who lived and worked in Singapore, regarding the mutiny, the formation of the Japanese Volunteer Corps and later the Japanese Association is unclear. Were they not among the other Japanese who saw off the Volunteer Corps to the defence areas? The disbandment ceremony of the Volunteers Corps was held on 21 February, and after that a group of interested Japanese residents gave a banquet for the volunteers at Harima Hall.<sup>19</sup> Were these women not among those who thanked the volunteers for their trouble? Even as the closure of brothels in Singapore in 1920 was a historical imperative, it seems that the female workers were the biggest victims of the Indian Mutiny and its aftermath in the Japanese society in Singapore. When they were needed, they were accommodated, and when society found them a nuisance, they were thrown away. There was no voice from these women who composed a substantial part of the Japanese population. Ironically, Japanese female workers suffered as the result of the increase of the 'dignity' of their society in Singapore.

### **THE WITNESS OF A COMMON MAN: ITS MEANING**

Both Consul Fujii's report and the evidence exhibited by the Court of Enquiry carry the witness of a Japanese hair-dresser, Mr Onda who was then working in the German prisoners of war camp. Consul Fujii specially mentioned in the footnote that he had got the details from two Japanese hair-dressers, Imamura and Onda, on the situation which developed in the camp immediately after the attack by the mutineers. The witness was not directly shown in the report. The specific part of the witness report that Fujii wrote in detail, was on the behaviour and actions of some of the German prisoners. The report said, 'Diehn and some Germans did not show any surprise when the mutineers attacked, they swiftly prepared themselves for a journey,

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<sup>17</sup> Nishimura Takeshiro, *Singapore Sanjyugo Nen* (Thirty-five Years in Singapore), Tokyo: Tohsui Sha, 1941, p. 148.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> *Nihon Gaiko Monzyo*, p. 1200.

received arms, immediately went to the office inside the camp and checked their papers'.<sup>20</sup> The related part of the evidence submitted to the Court of Enquiry by Onda is as follows:

About 3.30 P. M. on the 15th February, while I was in the prisoners of war camp I heard some firing so I went out to a higher place to see what was going on. I saw some Bengali soldiers firing on the Englishmen who were hiding in a Chinese house, belonging to the contractor who supplies food to the Germans. After killing some of the English people they came up to the gate of the prisoners' camp. I don't know how many, but about thirteen came into the prisoners' camp. I was standing on the high ground near the 'Emden' house in amongst the German prisoners. After hitting the gatekeeper they took charge of the key from him and thirteen came into the camp and handed over about eighteen rifles to the 'Emden' people. I could not recognize any of them who came in. One of the heads of the 'Emden' people told his people to dress, and so they did. I did not know his name. I knew Mr. Diehn. He was there. He came up and spoke to the head of the 'Emden' men, and then Mr. Diehn came and spoke in Malay to the Bengalis. Then the head of the 'Emden' men came out in uniform with a sabre. After looking for some English people and finding no one the Bengalis went back.<sup>21</sup>

Onda's observation in two places 'proves' that the German prisoners kept very cool attitudes when the mutineers attacked their camp. Though some of them might have really behaved in cool attitudes, it is unimaginable from this observation that the majority of them were not frightened; in fact some of them remarked, 'What is to become of us?'<sup>22</sup> Fujii's report gives an impression that the mutiny was anticipated by the German prisoners of war. On the contrary the conclusion of the report of the Court of Enquiry was cautious to state that 'the correct behaviour of the bulk of the German prisoners of war who assisted the officers and soldiers of the guard, and of the hospital, strengthens the view that any German collusion was confined to a select few'.<sup>23</sup> H. Diehn, a German businessman and a camp leader, was one of them, but even he 'did not know what to do next'.<sup>24</sup> It is probable that Onda tried to adjust himself with the posture of the questioners. However, it is difficult for us to know from this evidence how Onda himself thought

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 1197.

<sup>21</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, I, pp. 231-2.

<sup>22</sup> Kuwajima, *The Mutiny in Singapore*, p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, I, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> R. W. E. Harper and Harry Miller, *Singapore Mutiny*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 64.

about the scene in the camp or the character of the mutiny. A common man neither discloses his opinion easily to officials nor is he expected to do so in many cases. It remains unverifiable if Onda had his view published elsewhere such as in Japanese newspapers.

## **IMPACT OF THE MUTINY ON THE RULERS AND RESIDENTS IN SINGAPORE**

Onda's witness shows us the limitation of official sources in portraying the whole picture of the 1915 Indian Mutiny in Singapore and the thought of the mutineers, those men of the Fifth Light Infantry who did not participate in the revolt, or the people who witnessed the event. From Professor Nicholas Tarling's work on the Singapore Mutiny, I learnt how to use official sources critically.<sup>25</sup> From the careful and critical use of official sources, exploration of new source materials, and taking into consideration the feelings of the rank and file of the Fifth Light Infantry and of residents in Singapore affected by the European war we can come closer to sketching a better picture of the mutiny and refuting the popular perception that the residents in Singapore went about their lives nonchalantly even after the mutiny.

Professor C. M. Turnbull writes that immediately after the mutiny:

In order to distinguish mutineers from peaceable citizens, all Indian residents were required to register and obtain passes. This aroused considerable anger, which was exacerbated by the cavalier attitude of some registration officers, who acted as if all Indians were to blame. The *Straits Times* carried a strong government disclaimer that there was any general suspicion of Indians, Muslims or otherwise, and Still (Alexander William Still, editor) followed this up with a forceful pro-Indian editorial, explaining the need for registration but urging that it be carried out as considerately as possible.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, David Petrie, who contributed to the birth of the Criminal Intelligence Department (CID) in Singapore at the end of 1918, advised the new department to concentrate its monitoring on the Indians, the Chinese and the Japanese, and recommended the creation of the Chinese and Japanese sections.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Tarling, 'The Singapore Mutiny, 1915', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 55, 2, 1982, pp 26-59.

<sup>26</sup> C. M. Turnbull, *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times*, Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1995, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Ban, *Absent History*, p. 68.

Nishimura, a Japanese doctor who observed the scene of public execution and was impressed by the 'dauntless spirits' expressed by the mutineers, was one of the leading figures of Japanese society in Singapore who decided to organize the Japanese Volunteers' Corps in the evening of 15 February 1915. This feeling of Nishimura, an eyewitness of the execution, was shared by many people in the city.<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to the 'eye-witness' account of Robert C. D. Bradley, British Adviser to Johore, 'the absolute reliance on the wisdom and strength of British rule' began to shake.<sup>29</sup> The Singapore Indian Mutiny of 1915 was *not* a small episode in the First World War destined to be easily forgotten.

### Postscript

Here I want to record an episode that occurred in a small rural town near Tokyo during the Second World War (1939-45) to explain my idea of war and anti-war which may also facilitate the understanding of the character of the Indian Mutiny in Singapore, 1915.

I entered primary school in April 1941, and completed the course in March 1947. During this period primary school in Japan was named *Kokumin Gakko* (National School). I did not like *Kokumin Gakko*. My reason is as follows.

I did not like the gymnastic sessions which were an important part of the wartime curriculum. I was the least capable in my class on the horizontal bar, and only I could not complete any of the three basic patterns without the help of a teacher. I always incurred ridicule from my classmates, and this humiliation seriously affected my learning in other subjects. When the war ended, I was very relieved to find that there were no longer lessons on the horizontal bar. Instead, we had many more 'free hours'. But, my teacher advised my parents during his 'home visit' to persuade me to give up my wish to study in the middle school which I had been preparing for, because I was not fit. Fortunately the Japanese school system changed radically in April 1947, and middle school education became compulsory.

However, I now feel that only on one day during the war did I live with my full strength. It was on 1 November 1944, the day when American B-29 bombers came to Tokyo on a scouting mission. It was a prelude to later massive bombings in Tokyo and other cities. Our school was at the climax of a sports festival, the main event of the year, when we heard an air-raid alarm. On hearing the alarm, I, along with almost all the other students, was terrified, and left everything as it was, and ran home as fast as I could. The

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<sup>28</sup> Nishimura, *Singapore Sanjyugo Nen*, pp.163-4.

<sup>29</sup> Sareen, *Secret Documents on Singapore Mutiny 1915*, II, p. 797.

next day, our headmaster reproved all of us severely for our indiscipline. But on that day I was really free, and with my own judgment expressed my fear of the air-bombing and my response to the war without any hesitation. It did not matter whether I would be later called *Hi-Kokumin* (anti-national) or not.

After the war I knew that Kiryu Yuyu (1873-1941) wrote in the *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun*, dated 11 August 1933, that anti-air-raid drills were useless, though he was forced to leave the paper soon after due to this critical view.

In 1950, when I was playing with my classmates in the grounds of my high school, I tried to practice on the horizontal bar, and then found that I could do without any difficulty what I failed to do during the war, and surprisingly more than what was expected at that time. On that day the war really ended for me personally, but it was the year when the heated 'cold war' started in Korea.

This turning point in the history of Asia drove me to have a keen interest in the Indian foreign policy which acted against the Peace Treaty signed between Japan and other countries, without the participation of China or Russia, in San Francisco in September 1951, and later played a prominent part in the Korean and Vietnamese armistice in the 1950s. I wanted to find out more about the historical origin of this Indian policy. However, it took some more years for me to understand the meaning of the Japanese policy towards Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. In this process I came across the Indian Mutiny in Singapore of 1915.

And I met Professor Nicholas Tarling. I would like to express my thanks to Professor Tarling for his kind interest in my work on the mutiny since its first appearance in book form, published by myself in 1988.