



## Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

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(This editorial is based on the article '[Deep Regret is Simply Not Good Enough](#)' which appeared in 'The Hindu' on 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2019. The article talks about Jallianwala Bagh Massacre which will soon be completing 100 years of its occurrence.)

Jallianwala Bagh's importance lies not in the numbers killed but in what preceded it and in what followed. **The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, better known as the Rowlatt Act, came into force a month before the massacre in Jallianwala Bagh.** It shocked most Indians who had expected to be rewarded, not punished, for willingly fighting alongside the British in the First World War.

A long due formal British apology came on the occasion of the centenary of the horrific Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but the question however remains - Is It Enough?

### Run up to the event

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During **World War I (1914-18)** the British government of India enacted a series of repressive emergency powers that were intended to combat subversive activities. By the war's end, expectations were high among the Indian populace that those measures would be eased and that India would be given more political autonomy.

The **Montagu-Chelmsford Report**, presented to the British Parliament in 1918, did in fact recommend limited local self-government. Instead, however, the government of India passed what became known as the **Rowlatt Acts** in early 1919, which essentially extended the repressive wartime measures.

The acts were met by widespread anger and discontent among Indians, notably in the Punjab region. Gandhi in early April called for a one-day general strike throughout the country. In Amritsar the news that prominent Indian leaders had been arrested and banished from that city resulted in mass protests.

The arrest and banishing of Saifudeen Kitchlew and Satya Pal sparked protests on April 10, in which soldiers fired upon civilians, buildings were looted and burned, and angry mobs killed several foreign nationals and severely beat a Christian missionary.

A force of several dozen troops commanded by Brig. Gen. Reginald Edward Harry Dyer was given the task of restoring order. Among the measures taken was a ban on public gatherings.

## The Massacre

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On April 13, 1919, Baisakhi day, following unrest in Amritsar after protests against the Rowlatt Act, Brigadier General (temporary rank) Reginald Dyer took a strike force of 50 rifles and 40 khukri-wielding Gurkhas into an enclosed ground, Jallianwala Bagh, where a peaceful public meeting of 15,000-20,000 was being held.

Immediately and without warning, he ordered fire to be opened on the crowd. The firing of 1,650 rounds was deliberate and targeted, using powerful rifles at virtually point blank range. The firing resulted in death of several hundreds of people and many times more were wounded.

Atrocity however did not stop at it, several repressive measures followed after the brutal killing such as the **infamous crawling order, the salaam order, public floggings, arbitrary arrests, torture and bombing of civilians by airplanes — all under a veil of strictly enforced censorship.**

## A history of evasion

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The massacre, followed by the praising and rewarding of its perpetrator, General Dyer, by the British public, removed all illusions about benign British rule in the country. It also marked the start of a liberation struggle like no other under Mahatma Gandhi; Rabindranath Tagore troubled by the incident renounced his Knighthood and questioned the morality of the British government and failure of rulers to act.

After calls for an investigation, including by liberals in Britain, a **Disorders Inquiry Committee, under Chairmanship of Lord Hunter**, was set up. The committee selectively criticised Dyer but let off the Lieutenant Governor, Michael O'Dwyer.

The conservative Lords however took a different tack and criticised the government for being unjust to the officer. Similar sentiments in Dyer's favour came from the right-wing press — the Morning Post started a fund for him which collected £26,000 — as well as from conservative sections of the public who believed he had saved India for the empire.

Rudyard Kipling, a famous writer too supported Dyer by putting an ambivalent comment on the wreath he sent to Dyer's funeral in 1927: "He did his duty as he saw it."

Many people having ties with colonial history have called the incident an isolated one which had nothing to do with British rule and an exception. Winston Churchill who criticised the incident too quoted that it was not the British way of doing things and tried to save the larger colonial enterprise from being called as inherently repressive.

While there remains little doubt that Dyer was indeed wrong, British government cannot be exonerated from the atrocities it committed during the colonial era, as the incident was not an isolated one and he was one of a line of several such — John Nicholson, Frederick Cooper, J.L. Cowan — who resorted to severe disproportionate violence in 1857 and after the 1872 Kuka rebellion.

## Way Forward: Healing a wound

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Any British government can ill-afford to apologise for the glory days of its country's history. After all, incidents such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre are a frequent adjunct to a system as repressive as the British Raj and admitting blame can also have legal and financial consequences.

While apologising in Parliament can be called symbolic, in a court of law, it is admitting a liability. Recent, British apology therefore can best be called symbolic which only addresses the concerns of its MPs and not those who actually suffered.

There is little doubt that an incident like this can best be healed with time but there are many ways to heal a wound between nations. Mere words are certainly not one of them.

### **Rowlatt Act, 1919**

- The act was officially known as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919 and was passed in March 1919 by the Imperial Legislative Council.
- The act was passed as per recommendations of the Rowlatt Committee chaired by a judge, Sir Sidney Rowlatt.
- This act authorized the government to imprison for a maximum period of two years, without trial, any person suspected of terrorism.
- The act provided a speedy trial of the offenses by a special cell that consisted of 3 High Court Judges. There was no court of appeal above that panel.
- This panel could also accept the evidences which were not even acceptable in the Indian Evidences Act.
- It also placed severe restrictions on the freedom of the press.
- The act was widely condemned by Indian leaders and the public. The bills came to be known as 'black bills'.

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