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Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: An Example of Benevolent Despotism

DR. Moni

Social Science faculty, Department of History, University of Delhi, Delhi-110007.

Abstract– Today our country India stands in the series of developed countries. And we have achieved this journey from developing to developed category by breaking many shackles. Those chains also included the chains of slavery, to break which we had to make millions of sacrifices, which today we can only imagine. We started these shackles by gaining our freedom from colonial rule, and this freedom was no less than the price to be paid for something very precious. For this independence, we not only lost millions of our countrymen but also lost cultural and economic resources. Today in the 21st century, as we celebrate the completion of 75 years of India's independence on one hand, we also remember and pay our tribute to those brave patriots, famous events, freedom fighters, nationalists, litterateurs, organizations etc., who brought this joy and happiness through their incomparable contribution on the other. They are the ones that made the fortunate possibility to celebrate the country's independence. These sacrifices remain embedded in our memory and allow us to resonate proudly as Indian. And always keep reminding our present and future generations why the country in which we live is called great as compared to other countries. The Indian independence movement was not the name of just one person, event or organization but was an amalgamation of different events at every level across India. And we can see an example of this in the case of Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In fact, the purpose of writing this article is also to show that incidents such as this have played crucial roles in awakening the national consciousness among the people of India to fight for freedom. Therefore, this article will mainly discuss and analysed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Keywords- History, Independence, Massacre, Movement, Rowlett Act, Satyagraha.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many efforts were made for Indian independence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Movements and struggles played a very important role in these efforts. The emergence of modern forms of national consciousness and political affiliation in various parts of the country began mainly in the latter half of the nineteenth century but expanded rapidly in the twentieth century.

The colonial rule in India was such a rule, which have always maintained its apparatus to establish dominance over the Indian society by keeping it under its control.

Which was an attack by the colonial rule to impose capitalist worldviews on the Indian culture in the name of 'modernisation' and 'civilization'. Due to their exploitative capitalist policies at the initial phase of their arrival, the tolerance of the farmers continued to weaken, and who began being agitated by the imperious pull towards maltreatment. But the farmers were not an inert, fatalistic, and passive group but a powerful class who were aware gradually yet surely of their dignified rights, because of which the colonial rule was always in fear of losing power. According to Prof. Sumit Sarkar, people started emphasizing on the decisive role of nationalist ideology and leadership. As a result, this began to shape the journey of discontentment of the colonial rulers.¹ What is interesting to note here is that most of the movements that erupted in various parts of the country and its subcontinent were largely local and scattered.

The narrative of these movements brought forth in history by these groups shows that 'failure' of public movements and initiatives in colonial India was 'the historical failure of the nation to primarily come into its own and stand on its own ground'². In this context, we must try to understand the diversity of class, caste, religion, gender, region, age – the 'collective mentality' amidst multifractality and the complexity of the inter-relationships of these various elements. In fact, movements, rebellions, and many violent conflicts continued during the British rule in India where multiple ranges of rural population participated at different level.

As a result of these movements and rebellions, the British rule have always attempted to suppress them that could pose grave threat to their colonial domination and often rendered to creating fear and intimidation towards the colonized. A suitably remarkable example of which is also seen in the incident of Jallianwala Bagh massacre. While on one hand, this incident reminds us of the sacrifice of the innocent people, on the other hand it also shows the unforgettable wounds of the cruelty and autocracy of the British rule.

It has been a century since the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, but Punjab is still yet to recover from the traumatic experience. The measure of violence inflicted upon the colonized has therefore taken a generational turn made alive through stories which still echo in both writings and rhetoric.



The story of this thus became a perfect example of the British imperial forces' miscalculation of the impact of those bullets fired for ten minutes at those peaceful unarmed crowd inside a community park with one narrow exit that would ring through remaining years since the firing in history. Yet, the true horror of the event itself and the volatile atmosphere in Punjab at the time have often remained neglected and ignored to be remembered in its true sense.

What was the catalyst for the events of that day and how did it become a turning point in India's struggle for independence? Why did the British feel the need to impose martial law on Amritsar, which had shown little inclination for violence, despite provocation? These are the questions that have been dealt in this article. To shed forth a clearer understanding of the event, the paper has made a sequential division of the Jallianwala Bagh incident into three parts, thus discussed accordingly.

The first part describes the background of this incident. In the second part, the nature of the unfolding event of the massacre is examined. And finally, the consequences as well as the impacts of this incident are explored.

II. BACKGROUND OF JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE

The First World War had ended in 1918. And the Indians had high expectations from the British government that in return for their devotion to the state, the British government would liberate them. But the British government believed that after the war there would be an increase in terrorist and violent incidents. In order to prevent such incidents and further any possible mass protests or gathering, a commission was constituted under the chairmanship of Judge Sir Sydney Rowlett in place of the Defence of India Act, which came to be known as the Rowlett Act.³ The provisions of this Act included arresting anyone based on suspicion, punishing and prosecuting them as well as removing those who create obstacles in the process, etc.

For Indians, the "Rowlett Act" was no less than a "black law". This treatment based on suspicion ignited and intensified a feeling of discontentment and animosity in the minds of local people in Punjab. They were convinced that the British Empire was a symbol of satanism and one who loved God could never love the devil.⁴ Articles started being written in newspapers and magazines in protest of this Act. Amrit Bazar Patrika (Calcutta) described it as a grave mistake "which will excite the most extreme tendencies of the peaceful law-abiding public." The New India (Madras) called it "diabolical" while the Punjabi (Lahore) wrote that it was "a brazen attempt by a bureaucracy that has lost its mind over the absolute right to interfere in the freedom of the people".

The Hindu (Madras) wrote, "The Indian public will read the proposed provisions with shame, anger and disgust." And the Bombay Chronicle (Bombay) called it "the extreme form of repression".⁵ Mass movements began to be carried out by public groups and various nationalists.

There was strong opposition to this law at all India level. As a result of all these circumstances, a statement was prepared and there was talk of withdrawing the law because all the principles of justice and freedom were being violated by this law. At this time Gandhiji became an opponent of the imperialist government. He called this act as an 'extreme form of repression' and celebrated 30 March 1919 as 'Satyagraha Day'. Both Hindus and Muslims participated together in the demonstrations.

The protest movement against the Rowlett Act took place in 3 phases. First- the strike of 30th March due to which bullets were fired at the railway station and Chandni Chowk. Second- Arya Samaj leader Swami Shraddha Nand was invited to address the crowd of Muslims gathered at Jama Masjid on 4 April. Third- Due to the ban of Gandhiji's entry, there were continuous strikes from 10th to 18th April.⁶

Thus, seeing the Hindu-Muslim alliance, the British officials began to feel a grave threat to their power. Gandhiji decided to make public relations at all India level, and between March-April he travelled to Delhi, Bombay, Lucknow, and many cities of South India. The movement based on Satyagraha by Gandhiji spread most in Bombay, Gujarat, Sindh etc. In Punjab, widespread unrest started in cities like Amritsar, Lahore, and Gujranwala. Gandhiji wanted to go to Punjab to understand the situation, but he was arrested near Palwal, east of Punjab. His arrest further fuelled the spirit of agitation among the people.⁷

III. JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE

Michael-O'Dwyer held the post of Governor in Punjab. Before 1919, during the Great War, he had become unpopular in Punjab for many instances, such as forced recruitment in the army, making illegal recoveries during the Great War, harsh suppression of disturbances, sharp condemnation of the educated class (Congress investigation report), so on and so forth. It was given great emphasis because it claimed that the educated group "are the natural leaders of the people"⁸ etc.

On the other hand, due to the circumstances of the Great War, the prices of food grains in Punjab increased by 100 percent (double-fold), while the wages of artisans were increased only by 20 to 25 percent.⁹ And the policy of 'no appeal, no lawyer, no argument' he had exercised began to fulfil his dictatorship. This further adversely affected his reputation.

The Rowlett Act served to rub salt on the wounds inflicted by Michael-O-Dyer in Punjab. Many opposition meetings were taking place against the Rowlett Act. And Michael-O-Dwyer was upset with these opposition meetings. In fact, the British authorities felt most threatened by Hindu-Muslim unity. Muslims participated in large numbers in the Ram Navami procession on 9 April. While Muslim leaders like Saifuddin Kitchlew and Satyapal were ordered to leave the city, Gandhiji was banned from entering Delhi and Punjab. Thus, the British administration ordered the expulsion of Kitchlew and Satyapal from Amritsar.

On April 10, the local public surrounded the Deputy Commissioner in protest, but the police opened fire on him. In response to the firing on peaceful protesters, post offices, railway stations, town halls, etc. were attacked. Seeing the deteriorating conditions, military rule was imposed in Amritsar on 11 April and the leadership of military rule was given to General Dyer. General Dyer announced that if any meeting, procession etc. was organized, its consequences would be dire.



Figure 1.

Source: Online.

Traditionally in Punjab, thousands of villagers used to come to Amritsar during the festival of Baisakhi. Even on 13 April 1919, thousands of devotees came to Amritsar, who did not know that prohibition was in force on public meetings. Jallianwala Bagh was traditionally a resting place and promenade where devotees gathered. Meanwhile, some conscious citizens called for a meeting at Jallianwala Bagh to counter Dyer's threats.

This garden is surrounded by houses on almost all sides and there is only one narrow path to exit. Someone informed General Dyer that people had gathered in Jallianwala Bagh to protest the Rowlett Act. General Dyer immediately deployed soldiers on the main road of the garden and ordered to open fire without giving any warning. Many unarmed people started running away due to the firing and a stampede broke out.

People started running in mayhem to save themselves. Many women jumped into a nearby well with children. More bullets were fired until the guns ran out of bullets. Many people died due to collapse and stampede amidst the crowd.

Numerous people were injured but were not even taken to the hospitals and were just left lying in the streets around Jallianwala Bagh. Several witnesses and family members or the meagre number of survivors accounted later how they were devoid of any kind of aid owing to the martial law. Some witness statements of relatives state how they went and searched for their relatives among the dead bodies in the dead of night hoping to find them alive¹⁰. As a result, within a few minutes thousands of lives were put to rest forever and hundreds more were scarred for lifetime.



Figure 2.

Source: Online.

IV. RESULTS OF JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE

After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, curfew was imposed in Amritsar and martial law was imposed in Punjab. And the supply of electricity and water to the people was made limited. For General Dyer “producing moral influence” had become more important. Hence the large number of arrests, public and private torture, establishment of special courts, forcing of lawyers to do the work of soldiers, forcing of local people to salute British gentlemen, and in one place where an English woman was humiliated. Forcing each passerby (locals) to crawl away. Apart from this, ban on distribution of free food to the hungry, flogging, making students march under the hot sun, intimidating people etc.

Such horrors became a daily life experience of the people in Punjab. There was widespread reaction to the Amritsar incident all over India. The British government came to be condemned by all sections. Rabindranath Tagore returned the title of 'Knighthood' on 30th May 1919.¹¹ Indian nationalists demanded the British government to immediately recall Michael-O-Dwyer and conduct a comprehensive investigation into the Amritsar incident.

Therefore, the British Government constituted an inquiry committee in October 1919 under the chairmanship of Lord Hunter. This commission submitted its report about five months later in March 1920. However, before submitting the report, the 'Indemnity Bill' was passed so that those guilty could be saved.¹² The committee presented some points in its report and said that-

- i. It was possible for the meeting/crowd in Amritsar to turn into a revolution.
- ii. The gathering at Jallianwala Bagh was well planned.
- iii. It was necessary for the government to impose military rule and open fire to suppress the excesses of the mob.
- iv. General Dyer's mistake was that he fired more bullets than necessary without warning.

Therefore, the committee declared that the Governor of Punjab was innocent and said about General Dyer that Dyer misunderstood his duty and used excessive force, but whatever he did, he did with sincerity. According to government figures, 379 people were killed, but according to unofficial estimates the number was more than a thousand.¹³



Figure 3.

Source: Online.

This report was strongly condemned by the Indian members. And the Indian National Congress, in a separate report, held Michael O' Dwyer directly responsible for the massacre because he incited people to violence to suppress them. The imposition of martial law in Amritsar was unjustified and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was an act of planned brutality, a brutal example of British rule. After this, there was a detailed discussion in the British Parliament also regarding this massacre and Dyer. Churchill described this massacre as a diabolical incident.

Hence, on 23rd March 1920, due to immense pressure, General Dyer was retired.¹⁴ After this massacre, the news of the atrocities of the British government on the people became the main reason for increasing anger in the entire country. Gandhiji initially wanted to broaden the Satyagraha movement, but after accepting his mistake, he withdrew Satyagraha on 18th April and decided not to carry out the movement without proper organizational and ideological preparation.¹⁵ After some time, Gandhiji called for non-cooperation movement.

V. CONCLUSION

In this way, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in line with India's struggles for freedom came to be registered as the first mass movement after the events following the revolt of 1857. On one hand, this incident shows a united front among both Hindu and Muslim and on the other hand, it also shows the danger posed by this unity to the British rule. Which can be gauged from the fact that the British rule considered it right to kill unarmed and innocent people to maintain its dominance. But the cries of Jallianwala Bagh massacre were later heard even in the British Parliament. As a result, the Hunter Committee was formed, and an investigation was conducted. However, nationwide movements for India's independence which were led upfront often failed. After this incident, the Satyagraha movement launched by Gandhiji was called off without any results.

This movement, however, remain important because it was the first nationwide mass movement which lacked central organization and widespread public consciousness.

But still the incident of Jallianwala Bagh massacre played a significant role in the freedom movement. On one hand, this incident helped the nationalists to understand the tyranny hidden behind the benevolence of the British rule, on the other hand it also served to awaken public consciousness. Ultimately, on the one hand, the day of 13th April 1919 is a reminder of the festival of Baisakhi, on the other hand, it reminds us of the sacrifice of innocent lives, who were vanquished to prove the supremacy of the government.

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