

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: A Story of Insecurity of Power among the British Raj

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Abstract: The following research paper tries to highlight the possible reason behind the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. In the beginning it provides a brief built up the ghastly event. Then the research paper tries to answer the following set of questions: why General Dyer did this heinous act? Was it the demand of situation? Was it a threat to Indians? Was it the fear in the mind of the British Raj? Or it was the insecurity of power among the British Raj? The author tries to support an explanation through different historical records that states it was the fear in the mind of the Britishers and insecurity among them, that forced General Dyer to command this heinous act. In the following paper the author briefly discusses the then existing situations which resulted in mass agitations by the Indians and the fear that gripped the minds of the Britishers as an outcome of those agitations. And how that fear to lose grounds in India triggered British Raj to pose such an act of brutality.

Keywords: Amritsar, Baisakhi, British Raj, Burnt, Communalism, Fear, Jallianwala Bagh, Looted, Massacre, Insecurity, Violence.

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Introduction

The cold-blooded massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, took place on 13 April, 1919 in the heart of Amritsar city, was a very big blot on the British Raj in India. At where this ghastly tragedy took place was an irregular quadrangle, indifferently walled and the back walls of the houses surrounding it enclosed the quadrangle. The entrance to Bagh was too narrow that it had only four and half feet two doors and the main gate of seven and half feet wide (Kashyap, 1973: 11, 19).

It was Sunday as well as the day of Baisakhi which is a very pious day for Sikhs as the Khalsa came into being on this day. And for the Punjabis, the harvest festival of Baisakhi is celebrated with great enthusiasm as the day which marks end of the period of long and arduous labour. To celebrate this joy peasants from all parts of the State assemble in towns and cities. As Amritsar, where the Golden Temple is situated, is a sacred city and the people from all directions had come to visit this holy city to take a dip in the holy tank. There, the people knew that a huge meeting was to be held at Jallianwala Bagh at 4:30 p.m. on the same day as the protest and deportation of Dr. Satyapal to Dharmashala on 9 April, 1919 (Majumdar, 2003: 305). The people including boys, children, some men with infants in

their arms assembled at Jallianwalabagh had no *lathis* as any kind of weapon with them (Chandra, 2010:284-5).

General Dyer with the company of young officers, fifty riflemen, forty Gurkhas armed with their traditional weapons entered the Bagh (Bakshi, 1995: 39). He stationed himself with his troops at the entrance of the Bagh and then without giving any warning ordered the troops to fire. Within no time the numerous volleys of shots began to pierce into the bodies of the people and it continued for about ten minutes till the ammunition was exhausted (Chandra, 1989: 185; 2010:285). The panicked crowd caught like rats in a trap, vainly rushed for the few narrow exits or lying flat on the ground to escape of the rain of bullets. Men began falling, the blood splurging red on their white *dhotis* and *patluns*. In a moment the dead and wounded lay in heaps, and nothing except dead bodies was visible in each and every corner of the Bagh. Even some bodies were lying outside the Bagh as the wounded persons who tried to run, could not survive and fell dead (Bakshi, 1995: 40). Nobody came out of their houses to help the wounded persons because of fear of being shot dead.

There is no exact figure of these people who were killed or wounded in ghastly tragedy. The official figures say that 379 people were killed and over 1200 wounded. According to Swami Shraddhanand, the figure of killed persons was 1500 whereas Madan Mohan Malaviya said that it was 1000. But it is clear that the figure of killed persons was more than 379 as 1650 rounds were fired from very nearby. And like is true about the wounded persons. However, their number could not be properly retained.

Now, the question arises that why General Dyer did this heinous act? Did he try to prove himself? Was it the demand of situation? Was it a threat to Indians? Or was it the fear of losing power in the mind of the British Raj? Yes, it was the fear in the mind of the British Raj, which forced General Dyer to do this heinous act. The fear to leave India for ever. There are various references in our history which indicate towards this fear of the British Raj.

The Existing Situations

Rowlatt Bill, which was passed on 18 March, 1919, was the root cause of the riots in India at that period. The Bill made provision for speedy trial of officers by a Special Court, consisting of three High Court judges. There could be no appeal against the decisions of this court and the provincial government was empowered to search a place and arrest a suspected person without any warrant and keep him in confinement at any place in the country, means 'No Appeal, No Dalil, No Vakil'. There was too disappointment among the Indians for this Bill. Riots were spread in the various parts of India particularly in the Punjab and North-Western Province such as in Lahore, Gujranwala, Kasur and Amritsar. After the arrest and deportation of Dr. Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal of Punjab became angry. Banks like National Bank of India, Chartered Bank and Alliance Bank were looted and burnt. British employees of these banks were beaten to death and burnt with the furniture of the banks. The Religious Society's Book Depot and Hall were burnt. Besides, Miss Sherwood, a mission lady, was caught in the heart of the city, beaten with shoes and sticks till she fell-down-exhausted (Bakshi, 1995: 36). Such were the situations of Amritsar when General Dyer arrived. It was enough to search of a chance to take revenge.

Situation before the Rowlatt Bill

Between 1905 CE i.e., the partition of Bengal till 1918 CE, India saw various colours of politics. With the partition of Bengal in 1905 CE, the British Government succeeded to divide Indian people on the

communalism basis. Formation of Muslim League in 1906 CE was the result of this policy. Another success of this policy was the split of Indian National Congress as Moderates and Extremists in 1907 CE. But this success did not remain for a long time. During the World War I the both successes came to an end when under the Lucknow Pact 1916 in December the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League shared the same stage, and both the Extremists and Moderates reunited.

On 25 September, 1915, Mrs. Annie Besant founded Home Rule League in Adyar, Madras and Bal Gangadhar Tilak also established Home Rule League on 28 April, 1916 at Balgaun. Through these Home Rule Leagues, the Home Rule Movement was spread in the whole India. It was a warning to the British Raj that they must have left India for Indians one day. Their policy 'Divide and Rule' seemed failed here. Therefore, they did not fulfill the promises which were made during the World War I with Hindus and Muhammadans. Instead of this they imposed the Rowlatt Bill on them.

Not only these incidents but there are many other evidences which indicate towards their fear. From the beginning of nineteenth century, the fear of the British Raj can be traced through their various activities. In 1821 CE, when a British officer wrote in the *Asiatic Journal*, "Divide et Impera should be the motto of our Indian administration, whether political, civil or military." Lt. John Coke, Lord Elphinstone, Sir John Strachey also had similar opinions.

This policy also pursued during the mutiny of 1857. Sir John Seeley wrote, "You see the mutiny was in a great measure put down by turning the races of India against each other. So long as this can be done, the Government of India from England is possible, and there is nothing miraculous about it. But... if the state of things should alter, if by any chance the population should be welded into a single nationality, then I do not say we ought to begin to fear our dominion; I say we ought to cease at once to hope it (Majumdar, 2007: 321). These evidences show that how much the British Raj feared by the unity of Indians.

The British Government continued this policy till the partition of India as India and Pakistan on 15 August, 1947. But during the World War I, Indians began reunite and this created a wave of fear in the British Government which resulted as the Rowlatt Act. The Act was opposed in various parts of India. As more the Hindu- Muslim were being suppressed by the British Government, the unity between them was going to more and more stronger. It could be seen clearly during the disturbances in Delhi, Lahore and many other places when both the communities were shouting '*Hindu-Muslim ki jai*'. The Punjab government officials treated these people as heinous crimes amounting to open rebellion and waging a war against the king (Bakshi, 1995: 124). "In the Punjab, on the *Ram-Navami*'s occasion on 9th April, 1919 CE, it was decided that Muslims and Hindus would celebrate this occasion together as the National solidarity day. At those days there were *Hindu pāni maṭakā* and *Muslimāna pāni maṭakā*. But during the *Rāma-Navami shobhā-yātra*, people broke these *maṭakās* and decided to drink *Swādhīnatā pāni*" and Basir led this procession of *Rāma-Navami*". This awareness for freedom did not remain inside India but awoke the entire Asia for freedom. This also created fear in the mind of the British Government. One another incident again discloses their fear. Dr. Prashant says that for the permission for Martial Law, the British Government in India sent a wireless message to London. But Russia knew about this message and propagated that the English power became weak in India. These facts also indicate about the fear of British Raj that if situation did not keep under the control, then very soon the British Raj in India should be ceased very soon. Therefore, the British Government desired to suppress the voice of people. These were the situations that Jallianwala Bagh tragedy was

happened. After this massacre, the Government continued its terror in Jallianwala Bagh. People were flogged openly.

General Dyer, at the Jallianwala Bagh, not prior, neither during and after the firing, was faced any kind of violence or reaction from the side of unarmed people. After this all he thought that these elements were bent upon overthrowing the British Raj, and unless stringent measures were adopted, there could be no peace in the region (Bakshi, 1995: 148).

From these all incidents it appears that General Dyer feared at that moment. It was not only a fear for violence that Europeans were attacked by the mob; but it was also the fear of unity of Indians which could force the British Government to leave India forever and the broke down of imperialism.

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