

Marxist, XXXV, 1, January–March 2019

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## Remembering Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

The massacre which gave deep shock to the people of Punjab and created reverberations in the country took place on April 13, 1919 at a public meeting which was organized at Jallianwala Bagh in defiance of official proclamation banning such gatherings. About twenty thousand persons were present at the meeting. They included some people belonging to the surrounding countryside who had come to Amritsar on that day in connection with the Baisakhi festival. Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer went along with soldiers to Jallianwala Bagh where the meeting was being held. Immediately after his arrival, Dyer ordered his troops to fire. No warning was given, nor was the crowd asked to disperse.

The firing continued for ten minutes; in all 1650 rounds were fired. Dyer ordered fire to be focused where crowd was thickest including the exits. He gave orders to stop firing only when his ammunition was virtually exhausted. According to an official account, 379 persons were killed and 1200 wounded. However the official figure is very much on the lower side; the number of casualties was actually much higher. The massacre invoked sharp criticism both in England and India. For instance Winston Churchill who later became the Prime Minister in England called it 'a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation.' In fact, such kind of responses indicate that even those who believed that the British government in India was based on justice were shocked and disturbed.

In India, a large number of people felt that it was a gruesome event unparalleled in history. The anguish caused by the massacre, and what the grim event signified to the people in India was best reflected in Mahatma Gandhi's reaction when he wrote: 'We do not want to punish Dyer. We have no desire for revenge. We want to change system that produced Dyer.' The massacre deeply influenced subsequent course of anti-imperialist struggle in the country and contributed in its own way to the strengthening of the forces which posed a challenge to the British rule in India.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Our object here is not limited to fixing the responsibility for the massacre on any individual or merely to rest with condemnation of the firing but to make an attempt to understand the precise nature of the social phenomenon of which this particular event formed a part. My purpose is primarily to attend to the issues involved in Jallianwala Bagh massacre when viewed as a part of the larger historical process taking place in the society and politics of Punjab, as also in the larger domain of the anti-colonial struggle at the all India level.

The year 1919 indeed was a landmark in modern Indian history. It saw the rise of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics and the advent of mass struggle under his leadership which brought a major transformation in Indian national movement. He launched the first all India anti-colonial struggle known as Rowlatt Satyagraha on April 6, 1919. This was spread in different parts of India but Punjab as its major centre. It was during the course of this agitation, that the tragic incident of Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place. The history of Rowlatt Satyagraha may, however, be traced from 1917 when the government of India had appointed a committee headed by Justice Sydney Rowlatt to investigate 'revolutionary crime' in the country and make recommendation for its suppression. On the recommendation of this committee, the government presented two bills in the Imperial Legislative Council for suppression of 'seditious' and 'revolutionary activities.' The Imperial Council despite strong opposition by its Indian members passed the first bill which was named as Anarchical and Revolutionary Crime

Act. The new legislation was enacted by the state with a view to curtailing civil liberties of the common people. The act indeed appeared draconian since it now authorized the police to search or arrest any Indian without warrant or confine suspects without trial for renewable period of two years. Further, it laid down the trial of offenders by three high court judges *in camera* with no jury or right to appeal. It was natural for the common people to detest the government's attempt to strengthen the hands of the police 'considering its notoriety everywhere as petty oppressor.' Mahatma Gandhi described the Act as a 'national wrong' since it was going to empower the government to take away from the Indian people their 'God-given rights'. In other words, Gandhi challenged the new legislation on moral ground stating that the government through Rowlatt legislation was attempting to impose arbitrary checks on the civil liberties of the Indian people. In order to protest against it, he formed a Satyagraha Sabha and its members were asked to sign the pledge that they would refuse '*civilly to obey*' the Rowlatt Act. On March 26, Gandhi decided to broaden the movement by calling upon the country men to observe a day of *hartal* demonstrating their opposition against the new legislation. He asked the Indian people 'to undergo a 24 hour fast to put them to right moral frame of mind and demonstrate the strength of their feelings on the matter.' The *hartal* was originally fixed for March 30, but later on it was postponed to April 6. This agitation soon turned into a major mass movement against the British rule with the Punjab as one of its major centres.

The Punjab was made a part of the British Empire in India after its annexation by the East India Company in 1849. Situated in the North West as the frontier province of the British Empire in India, the Punjab became a buffer between the Gangetic plains and Central Asia. Apart from its position as a frontier province, the Punjab also became crucial for the imperial system of control because the British army made its home in this province since later half of the nineteenth century. Before the outbreak of the First World War, the soldiers from the Punjab constituted three-fifth of the total British army in India. The recruitment was made in maximum number from particular sections of Punjab society which were supposed to be imbued with strong 'martial

traditions.’ Ian Talbot has observed that actually the British policy of drawing recruits from Punjab was based on ‘sound pragmatic grounds’ but it was consciously enshrined in the mythology of martial caste theory’ which maintained that ‘ethnic origins and racial characteristics of the main groups of the Punjabi recruits particularly fitted them for military service.’ In order to ensure regular supply of manpower for recruitment, the government considered it essential to maintain its dominant hold over the rural society. Any attempt to disturb its hegemony was perceived by the British officials as ‘seditious’ activity which needed to be ruthlessly suppressed. Already in this province, since the beginning of the colonial rule, a distinct ideology described as ‘Punjab School Ideology’ was developed which emphasised firm paternal rule by an elite of self-confident administrators who conceived their duty as that of bringing order and prosperity to a contented peasant society.’ Apart from paternalism, it also embodied the necessity of taking firm action against the people, if they ever tried to pose a challenge to the authority of the British rule. In other words, the application of repressive methods whenever necessary constituted a major element of British administration in Punjab.

It is well known that unlike the Presidency cities of Calcutta and Bombay, the growth of political consciousness in the colonial Punjab was much slow and was largely restricted to some urban areas with Lahore as its major nerve centre. This phenomenon, it is generally believed, was largely the result of the conscious efforts made by the colonial government in keeping Punjab politically backward owing to its sensitive position for the Raj as a frontier province and also as a leading supplier of manpower for the British army in India. It was possibly a part of this strategy, that the government had decided not to establish a legislative council in the Punjab as was done in other provinces under the Indian Councils Act of 1861. It was as late as 1897 that, that the government introduced Legislative system in this province, but its Indian members were not to be elected representatives nor they were ‘given right of interpellation’ [an occasion when questions are formally asked as of a government minister in parliament] which was criticized by the nationalist press and the leadership. The rise of nationalism in the Punjab began mainly in

major urban centres with educated middle classes taking the lead. Their ideas of modernity, progress and liberty gradually evolved in the new public sphere that was gradually coming up in urban areas. In Lahore, the establishment of educational institutions and libraries, formation of associations and debating societies (both of mundane and religious nature) and the sharp growth of press and publications were of great significance in shaping the mind of the new middle classes in the Punjab.

As far as press was concerned, the most notable development was the establishment of English newspaper, *The Tribune* by Dayal Singh Majithia at Lahore on February 2, 1881. In its first editorial *The Tribune* wrote about its objective: 'The aim of *The Tribune* will be, as its name imports, fairly and temperate to advocate the cause of the masses. In its columns, we shall seek to represent the public opinion of India, especially of Upper India, and what is more, we shall strive as lies within the compass of our humble abilities, to create and educate such opinion.' *The Tribune* indeed soon became very popular among the educated middle classes and also acquired position of a leading nationalist paper in north India. The new intelligentsia, in fact, living under the colonial rule 'developed a common way of looking at society in part because of common intellectual background, but more because of a common colonial experience'. The Punjabi intellectuals clearly understood that the British as foreign power primarily ruled for their own economic benefit and the interest of India had always remained secondary.

The first political organisation in the Punjab was the branch of India Association at Lahore which was established by Surendranath Banerjee during his visit to this province in 1877. This body was largely supported by Bengali migrants in the Punjab and some local Brahmos like Dayal Singh Majithia. The inaugural session of the Congress which was held at Bombay in 1885 was attended by only two representatives from Punjab – Murli Dhar, a pleader from Ambala and Pandit Shiv Narain Agnihotri, a Brahmo Samajist from Lahore. In the pre-Jallianwala Bagh phase, the annual sessions of the Congress were held at Lahore thrice i.e., in 1893, 1900 and 1909 and each session was widely attended. It may however be added

that that the social base of the Congress gradually widened in the Punjab mainly in the urban areas. But the rise of anti-colonial consciousness was quite evident from the participation of masses in Swadeshi movement, agrarian movement of 1907 and Ghadar movement. The nationalist activities however in the province were considerably curtailed during the period of World War I largely because of the widespread repression by the Punjab government under its Lieutenant Governor, Michael O'Dwyer, But in 1917, the ban on political activities was lifted at the insistence of Montagu, the Secretary of State. The resurgence of nationalist consciousness was also evident from the fact that the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee extended an invitation to the Congress to hold its next annual session at Amritsar. The Tribune noted with satisfaction this resurgence and commented: 'Happily the tide has now turned as it was bound to turn. During the last few months, a considerable number of Congress Committees have come into existence, ... and above all with readiness and enthusiasm with which the Punjab has invited the next session of the national assembly, this committee ( provincial Congress) appears to have done valuable work.' In other words, there was groundswell of national sentiments in the Punjab, and this was possibly one of the major reasons for massive participation in Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919.

### ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS MOUNT

The economic hardship which the people had suffered during the war also served to heighten their anti-colonial consciousness. The first issue of common concern was the steep rise in the prices of essential commodities in the province. For instance there was 100 per cent price rise in the case of food grains between 1917 and 1919 but the wages of the artisans and workers increased only by 20-25 per cent. It caused deep economic distress to lower middle classes, artisans, workers and other fixed income groups living in the cities. In particular in Amritsar, the artisans including large sections of Kashmiri Muslims and petty shopkeepers, who formed the poorer sections of the urban society were hit hard by the rise in prices. Besides, the professional and commercial middle classes in Punjab also strongly resented war time taxes, and specially

the recent amendments made in the income tax rules. Under the new rules, the tax collectors were empowered house to house survey which was perceived by the middle classes as 'a design on the part of the government to confiscate their property.' The trouble for merchant class was further aggravated because of the slump in piece goods trade. By this, the merchants in Amritsar which was the major centre of piece goods trade in Punjab were seriously affected. Above all Michael O'Dwyer adopted a very hostile attitude towards the urban middle classes. It is generally believed that the growing economic discontent in the province led to the growth of a strong anti-imperialist consciousness which indeed had influenced their decision to participate in the Rowlatt Satyagraha. However, to explain the large scale participation of the urban people as a direct result of economic discontentment would not be correct. As a matter of fact, economic hardships served more the cause of strengthening anti-colonial orientation which gaining strength among the people in Punjab. George Rude who made a study of popular uprising in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe rightly contends that economic conditions would not 'trigger' of a movement. A real link between the social, economic and political factors and an event has to be sought in the formation of 'collective mentalities' or what George Lefebvre calls 'collective frame of mind' at the popular level. Therefore it is important to underline the primary significance of the crucial shifts which had been taking place in the mentalities of the urban people in Punjab during this period.

### HOW ROWLATT WAS PERCEIVED

An important aspect of the agitation was the meaning given to the Rowlatt legislation at the popular level in Punjab. The government always maintained that the new legislation was a temporary measure which aimed at preventing seditious crimes. Moreover in order to remove the fears of the common people, it emphasized that this legislation was primarily directed against the political activists, and was not going to affect ordinary citizens in any manner. But the press and political leadership in Punjab very emphatically pronounced it as a coercive and undemocratic measure which would deprive the people of their civil liberties.

While speaking at public meetings, the leaders often expressed their meaning of Rowlatt legislation in metaphorical language, or recited poems to bring home to the people its unusually draconian character which according to them would make life of the common people miserable. It was natural for the common people to detest the government's attempt to strengthen the hands of the police 'considering its notoriety every where as petty oppressors.' But more important was the apprehension which the people began to develop that the Rowlatt legislation was going to impose restrictions of serious nature in their daily life. However in the official accounts, the popular meanings of Rowlatt legislation were proclaimed as baseless 'rumours' which had no substance in them. But the masses had come to think of these rumours as a true account of the real character of the controversial legislation. In fact the verbal exchanges which took place in Bazaars and social gatherings played an important role in the construction of popular understanding concerning the act. Moreover the popular discourse in the form of rumours contributed in evoking a comradeship response among the masses against those who were considered the oppressors. Finally, the spread of rumours among the economically weaker sections of society including artisans, workers and petty shopkeepers helped in creating a 'bond of community' against the colonial rule.

In Punjab the protests against the Rowlatt Act started much before the movement was formally launched by Gandhi. For instance, mass meetings were held at Amritsar on March 23, 29 and 30, with 'crowds of up to 45,000 people'. It is significant that Gandhi could not visit Punjab before or during the course of agitation. In other words, he was not directly involved in the movement and was not able to provide guidance or leadership to the participants in Punjab. The activities of the Satyagraha Sabha formed by Gandhi did not receive much favourable response in Punjab, and not more than a dozen people in this province signed the Satyagraha pledge. Above all, Gandhi, as Ravinder Kumar writes, enjoyed a very 'little power in Indian politics when he issued call for hartal on April 6, 1919'. Yet as is well known Gandhi's appeal evoked massive response from the urban people in Amritsar and in other cities of Punjab. What actually proved decisive was the



popular perception of Gandhi's charisma and strength. By this time he already carried an image of a 'saviour' or 'messiah' for the common masses which indeed deeply influenced the movement led by him. Sumit Sarkar has rightly observed: '... varied sections of the Indian people seem to have fashioned their own images of Gandhi, particularly in earlier days when he was still to most people a distant, vaguely-glimpsed or heard of tale of a holy man with miracle working powers.' This deified image of Gandhi had already captured the popular imagination in Punjab well before the commencement of Rowlatt agitation. It is important to mention that at the meetings organized to protest against the Rowlatt bills, the slogan such as 'Gandhi Ki Jai' was invariably raised with enthusiasm by the crowd. Many a time, mass processions in the cities of Punjab were headed by Gandhi's portrait. Moreover, the common people invariably described Gandhi in religious metaphors like 'Rishi and Wali' and was often compared to the 'coming of Christ to the coming of Muhammad to the coming of Krishna.' In one of the meetings, Maulivi Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din, a local leader remarked that Gandhi was ready to take 'the sufferings and afflictions of the enemy (government) on his own head.' Further it was believed that Gandhi's infinite reserves of spiritual strength would eventually break the power of the bureaucracy and his new device of Satyagraha would ultimately relieve the people of the burden with which they were threatened.' They were perhaps convinced that Gandhi being their leader, there was no need to fear the colonial government. In short, Gandhi's defied image and the popular perception of his charisma further proved very effective in undermining the hegemony of the British rule and in exposing its legitimacy and moral authority.

### THE SATYAGRAHA

The Satyagraha started with *hartal* which was observed on both the days i.e., March 30 and April 6 in major cities of Punjab in a peaceful manner. However in Amritsar the local people got agitated when they came to know that their leaders, Saifuddin Kitchlew and Satya Pal were arrested and deported to Dharmasala by the government. Besides they were further upset by the news of the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi at the Palwal railway station. In

protest, shops were immediately closed in old Amritsar city and people started moving in large number towards the Civil Lines where the British officials and their families lived. It needs to be underscored here that the masses at this stage were absolutely peaceful and their activities were not determined by any instinct of hooliganism. But when they were forcefully prevented by the police at two of the bridges separating the civil lines from the city, they started stoning the policemen. The police on the other side immediately resorted to firing and, as a result, ten persons were killed and the number of those wounded were larger. It was only after this incident of police firing and killing of their compatriots on April 10, the participants began to see all Britishers as their oppressors and the government offices and buildings assumed for them the character of symbols of the 'oppressive' colonial state. At this stage they assaulted Miss Sherwood, manager of the City Missionary school, simply because she happened to be an English woman. While assaulting her, some persons shouted '*Maro Angrez*' (A Britsher Kill her). Similarly, when they attacked Banks and other government offices in Amritsar, they said, '*Sarkari Maal Hai, Loot Lo*' (It is government property take it away). But these incidents by no means reflect endemic motives of loot or criminal instances. Instead the actions were motivated by growing hatred for the British rule and the strengthening of anti-imperial consciousness.

The killings of Europeans and destruction of official property on April 10 was viewed by the masses as their victory over the government. According to Miles Erwing, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, 'the people . . . thought for some reason or the other that the arm of the government was paralyzed. The inaction of the police when National Bank was burned lent some colour to the belief... that the government could do nothing.' It was commonly believed that in the Amritsar city, except Kotwali the government had practically lost its control. Later Irwing in his statement before the Hunter Committee also conceded this fact saying, 'it was freely said that it might be the raj of Sarkar outside, but inside the city it was *Hindu-Musalman ki Hakumat* (Government might be ruling outside, but inside the city, it was rule of Hindus and Muslims.) In similar vein, the people were

also found saying, '*Hun Sada Raj Ho Gaya* (now it is our rule). All this made the British government believe that it had lost its hegemonic control and authority over the masses in the city. This erosion of the ideological hegemony of the colonial rule was perceived by the British officials as 'dangerous' and therefore they began to describe the Rowlatt agitation as a 'rebellion' against the state. In such a situation, the primary issue for the government was to restore 'order' and ensure safety of Europeans residing in Amritsar. It was with this purpose that Dyer along with a big contingent of soldiers was sent to Amritsar on April 11. He took over the control of the city from the civil authorities and along with his soldiers marched around the city. A proclamation was made stating that all meetings and gatherings were hereby prohibited and were to be dispersed under military law. But the urban masses were now hardly overawed by the repressive machinery of the colonial state. On the contrary, their morale was further boosted when from the neighbouring towns of Lahore and Kasur, news trickled to them informing that the mass agitation in these cities too had seriously undermined the authority of the colonial state. In such conditions the attitude of the masses became all the more 'defiant.'

By now they seemed to have developed a firm belief that threat given by Dyer of dispersing the public gatherings by use of military force was merely a 'bluff'. Therefore some local people decided to organize a public meeting on April 13 at Jallianwala Bagh defying the prohibitory orders. The urban masses responded to the call of meeting and the common people assembled at the Bagh without any prominent leader amidst them. Majority of them who were deeply imbued with deep anti-colonial consciousness did not even bother when Dyer entered the Bagh and they continued with their meeting without showing any signs of fear or weakness. Even when soldiers started firing, the people attending the meeting initially did not bother and some of them from crowd said that the bullets were simply blank (Phukian). But within minutes hundreds of persons were found lying on the ground, killed or wounded.

TO SUPPRESS AND INSTIL FEAR AMONG INDIANS

The role of General Dyer and the policy of the British government have been discussed in a number of writings. However it is necessary to briefly mention two points. First the challenge to the colonial state by the Rowlatt agitation in Amritsar, Lahore and other cities since late March had considerably undermined its influence and authority in Punjab. It was because of this reason that the meeting held at Jallianwala Bagh was described by the Secretary, government of India, 'as direct defiance and challenge to its authority.' But the important issue in the British attitude towards Indians was the syndrome of 'repression'. In fact the dangerous potential that the Satyagraha form of agitation had for the British Raj, impelled the dominant section of the British officials to adopt the British policy of ruthless repression as the only visible response to the situation. Dyer's action at the Jallianwala Bagh was to some extent in consonance with the existing framework of Imperial control in Punjab. It may be mentioned here that the system of administration in Punjab since its annexation by the British embodied not only the paternalistic approach, but also the application of force, if necessary, against those elements who dared to undermine the hegemony of the colonial rule. In the past, the Punjab government had once blown over 66 Kukas by guns for their alleged involvement in anti-government activities.

In other words, application of force (i.e., repression) against the 'rebels' was considered justified for the restoration of 'order' and 'peace' in the province. That is why a large number of Englishmen in Punjab and the official press approved Dyer's use of military force on civilians, since, according to them it restored order and normalcy in the province. Secondly, it is significant to mention that after the Revolt of 1857, the notion, of 'repression' as an effective preventive measure became a prominent feature of the thinking of British officials. The spectre of 1857 haunted the British officials so much that they feared that there might be cases of assault on British people living in India and attack on government property suddenly and unpredictable at any moment of time. It was on account of this fear that, some of the Englishmen after the incidents of April 10 had shifted their families to a safer place. The Revolt of 1857 was remembered by the British ruling classes for the use of excessive force, as the only effective measure

in a situation of such an uprising. In other words, if the Revolt of 1857 suppressed with use of brutal force, there was a rationale for adopting the same in any situation of feared uprising. This compulsive logic of taking resort to repression to deal with what was perceived as mass uprising was not recorded as part of the policy followed in India.

However, this 'unrecorded' way of dealing with crisis continued to form a major part of the thinking of officials working in India till the second decade of the twentieth century. This offers better explanation of the brutal use of force made by Dyer at Jallianwala Bagh, than all references to his abnormal psychology which looms large in the liberal versions of the colonialist apologia for what happened at Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919.

#### HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY: A THREAT TO THE BRITISHERS

Another important aspect was the Hindu-Muslim unity which manifested in many ways during the course of Rowlatt Satyagraha in the Punjab. In almost all the protest meetings and demonstrations that were organised against the government, the masses often raised slogans 'Hindu-Muslim Ki Jai' symbolising presence of inter-faith harmony among them. Rambhuj Dutt Choudhary, a nationalist leader from Lahore at one of the meetings stressed upon that the 'Hindu-Muslim unity is the supreme need of the hour' The incident of Ram Navami of April 9 in Amritsar is well known when large number of Muslims participated in it as a national festival and fraternised with Hindus. Both the Hindus and Muslims expressed unity between the two communities by sharing same water vessels. In Lahore, moreover, Swami Shradhanand addressed a meeting of the protestors held at a mosque without any protest by the Muslims on religious grounds. Besides, it is important to note that when on April 11 the protestors took over the control of the old Amritsar city (except Kotwali,), they were found saying that there was 'Hindu-Musalaman Ki Hukumat' (government of the Hindus and Muslims) in the city. This strong presence of Hindu-Muslim unity during the course of agitation in a way reflected the legacy of the shared past of

the common people belonging to different religious faiths who till late nineteenth century, amicably 'lived together separately'.

Equally important was the fact that the dominant form of consciousness at this juncture in the Punjab was nationalist and communitarian at the same time Gandhi recorded with deep satisfaction in his autobiography that 'the Hindus and Musalmans seemed united as one man' during the course of Rowlatt Satyagraha. In a similar vein, the Congress Punjab Inquiry Committee appointed to look into the atrocities committed in Punjab, praised the fraternisation between the communities that was evident during the course of the agitation. Later, Swami Shradhanand described the unity of Hindus and Muslims witnessed on Ram Navami day as a 'veritable confluence of Ganga and Yamuna.' Lajpat Rai after his return from abroad stated at a public meeting that 'the year 1919 would be remembered... for the fact that the Hindus and Mohammedans had united.' He continued, 'the Hindus and the Mohammedans were the inheritors of this common land, they belonged to one race, one country, the same sky was above and same sun over them' Lajpat Rai confident that 'the Hindu-Muslim entente has come to stay'. Of course there seems to be an element of romanticisation of the manifestation of the Hindu Muslim unity in the accounts given by the nationalist leadership, but as a social phenomenon it was an inevitable consequence of the communitarian – nationalist perspective which had gained ascendancy at this point of time in the Punjab. But on the other hand the government tried to give an entirely different view of the Hindu –Muslim fraternity and belittled its significance. The Hunter Committee appointed by the government to look into the Punjab 'disturbances' reported that this was purely a temporary phenomenon and the efforts towards the unity had been made simply in 'political interest' that is to oppose the British government and had no lasting significance being a purely expedient move.

Likewise, the upper class leadership in each community which had not gone through the experience of communitarian-nationalist consciousness was also of the opinion that communitarian unity manifested during the agitation was not real and was politically

motivated expedient measure to oppose the government. For instance Raja Narendra Nath, a leader of the Punjab Hindu Sabha described this manifestation of unity as 'superficial'. In a similar vein, the two Muslim upper class leaders, Mian Mohammad Shafi and Malik Umar Hayat Khan Tiwana contended that this unity was a temporary phenomenon because there were permanent differences between the people of two communities. Since these upper class leaders did not share the communitarian-nationalist perspective, they were not prepared to accept that the Hindus and Muslims would genuinely join hands in the nationalist struggle when its anti-imperialist character gained a sharper edge and became visibly consistent. They shared the official perspective of the colonial regime based on wresting concessions and gains from the colonial state by putting special stress on the distinct position of their community as fundamentally opposed to each other.

However, it is significant to mention that the above perspective of Hindu-Muslim relations held by upper and middle class collaborators from both the communities did not leave immediately much impact on the thinking of common people especially in the urban areas of the central Punjab. However, it is not denied that this very framework based on the assumption that Hindus and Muslims were essentially 'enemies' of each other did contribute later in widening the gulf between the two communities and at the same time in befuddling the nationalist perspective of a united struggle against the colonial rule in India.

Here it may be mentioned that Dyer in Amritsar and the Punjab government in general even after the gruesome tragedy at Jallianwala Bagh continued with the repressive policy by inflicting number of cruelties on the common people in all those cities which witnessed large scale mass upsurge during the course of agitation. Michael O' Dwyer as Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab later justifies all these crudities and imposition of Martial law on the ground that these measures were necessary to restore law and order and to bring back normalcy or in other words, to reassert its dominant hegemonic authority in the province. Mahatma Gandhi as mentioned in the beginning was deeply hurt by the killing of the innocent people by Dyer. But he was also critical of the

incidents of violence in which Indians were involved. Gandhi's remonstrance was natural, eruption of such incidents in the wake of Rowlatt agitation being contrary to his creed of non-violence. He was compelled to do some introspection about his decision of launching the mass movement and came to the conclusion that it was a 'mistake which seemed to be of Himalayan magnitude.' Moreover, Gandhi was also convinced that 'it was not possible for him to lead a Satyagraha in future if he could not be certain that those who took part were committed to strict non-violence.'

The massacre and subsequent incidents of oppression on the people of Punjab were considered 'unworthy of a civilized administration and symptomatic of the moral degradation of their inventors'. Rabindranath Tagore in protest decided to renounce his knighthood. Jawaharlal Nehru felt deeply hurt by those upper class Englishmen who defended Dyer's action or took part in the events organised in his honour both in India and England. He wrote: This cold blooded approval of that deed shocked me greatly. It seemed absolutely immoral, indecent...I realized more vividly than I have ever done before, how brutal and imperialism was and how it had eaten into the souls of the British upper class.' Bhagat Singh visited Jallianwala Bagh and picked some sand from there. By doing this, he perhaps carried it not only as a symbol of British oppression on peaceful Indians but also of the supreme sacrifice made by them in their struggle against the colonial rule.

### ICON IN INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE

The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy was made an icon in the nationalist discourse in the subsequent course of anti-colonial struggle. This was indeed a legitimate use of this exceptional moment of mass protest against the British regime and to liberate from its hegemonic stranglehold. About this, David Hardiman writes: 'The story of what had happened in the square on April 13, 1919 was told and retold all over India through prose poetry, picture and song that lamented the suffering of Amritsar while exhorting people to stand up and face the machine guns and cannons of the British without being cowed. "Dyer" became a short hand term signifying the brutality of imperial rule in general.' In other words



the incidence came to symbolize that great sacrifice was made by the people for the cause of India's liberation. Here it is also necessary to see how the incident was perceived at the popular level through out the country. The question is enormously difficult since it implies the discerning of sentiments of non-literates who formed the majority of the Indian people at that time. However, it can be said that the tragedy registered in popular consciousness as an example of brutal suppression by the colonial state. Further it was viewed that Gandhi as Mahatma (a deified image ) could alone protect them from such a repressive state. In other words, it was the experience as well as the fear of suppression which not only established a bond of unity but also led the common people to identify themselves with the anti-colonial struggle spearheaded under the leadership of Gandhi. This is how after the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, the elite and popular anti-colonial consciousness converged in India. Indeed it is an important after effect of the massacre, the logic of which was already inherent in the initiative Gandhi had taken to give mass character to the national movement by involving the lower middle class groups as well as peasantry and workers.

What happened at Jallianwala Bagh and in other urban centres of Punjab sharply revealed an important facet of the mass resistance which emerged as a part of the national movement under Gandhi's leadership at that particular stage. The common masses who participated in the movement did not strictly adhere to Gandhi's principle of Satyagraha because their ideas of opposing the British regime did not often tally with Gandhi's perspective. It is evident from the above study that once the fear of the mighty British rule was removed from the minds of the people through the influence of Gandhi's idea of offering resistance to the arbitrary authority of the colonial rule, they quickly experienced a sense of liberation and were filled with a confidence which impelled them to underestimate the power of the regime. This produced in them a strong desire to take on its might and overthrow it with one strong push. This over confidence and impatience made them transgress the limits of the Gandhian idea of resistance, and they did not hesitate to resort to violent means in retaliation against the oppression being carried on by the colonial state.

Gandhi's Satyagraha Sabhas, which were constituted especially to organize the Rowlatt agitation, and the Congress as a body, were not organisationally strong enough to provide effective leadership and carry on the movement strictly in accordance with Gandhi's aim and objectives. In such a situation, masses were left to select their own course of action according to their spontaneous perceptions and understanding of the prevailing conditions. They often became turbulent in the sense that they worked under the psychology not merely of exposing the arbitrariness of the authority of the British regime but of immediately overthrowing it.

The divergence between Gandhi's perspective and the mindset which often governed mass upsurge conveyed the message to him that in the absence of an adequate organisational network which could control and provide direction to the people from above, it would not be possible to carry a sustained anti-imperialist struggle with his perspective of non-violent Satyagraha. Later on when Gandhi launched Non-Cooperation movement in 1920, he decided to make use of Congress organisation in an effective manner, and it was mainly for this purpose that the constitution of this all India body was revised in 1920. A large number of local branches of the Congress were formed which became instruments of control from above for the nationalist leadership. They were now able to maintain strong linkages in a vertical manner to the lowest level of society in the villages. The new set up of the Congress proved immensely useful not only in bringing large sections of Indian masses to the fold of anti-imperialist struggle but also in providing a network to control and guide their activities in accordance with their programme laid down at the national level. Gandhi's emphasis on constructive programme for reforms in society which emerged in the concrete form in the twenties also slowly built up an extensive network of supporters at the grassroots level in different parts of the country.

It is an indisputable fact that Gandhi's charismatic leadership proved decisive in making Rowlatt Satyagraha a popular upsurge against the colonial rule. But his mode of mobilizing the masses was at that stage largely emotive in character . it

certainly produced results as large sections of people responded enthusiastically to his appeal. But this enthusiasm could neither gain sufficient momentum nor be sustained for long unless it was linked as it happened in Punjab with deep seated anti-imperialist consciousness which had grown out of the difficulties faced by the common people in their day-to-day material life. The disenchantment of different social classes and groups against the government had finally coalesced here with the sentiments aroused by the Rowlatt agitation. This provided real strength to the movement launched by Gandhi. The strong character of Rowlatt Satyagraha witnessed in Punjab was, in other words, the result of emotive appeal made by Gandhi combining with the strong resentment which existed among the people on account of issues related to their social and economic life. This feature of Rowlatt Satyagraha in Punjab was not a product of deliberate plan but an accidental coalescence of national fervour with the material interests of the people. After 1919, however, Gandhi and the Congress made some efforts to create such a linkage between the anti-imperialist sentiment based on the issue of national dignity and specific material interests of different groups of society. But this linkage as it was visualised and effected, did not prove to be adequately strong.

It is indisputable that the Rowlatt Act Satyagraha and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre proved to be a decisive turning point in the national movements transforming it into a mass movement.

## ENDNOTES

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- 2 Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj* (New Delhi, 1988) p43
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- 26 Speech by Swami Shradhananda at Amritsar Congress Session, 1919 in A M & S G Zaidi, *The Encyclopedia of Indian national Congress* vol. 7, pp456-469
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- 28 Lajpat Rai to J C.Wedgewood, April 26, 1920, in B R Nanda, (ed.) *Collected Works of Lala Lajpat Rai*, vol. 9, New Delh, 2007, p35
- 29 Micheal O'Dwyer, the Lt. Governor of the Punjab and his government believed that the Hindus and Muslims who were essentially opposed to each other as '*warring creeds*' temporarily joined hands or just formed a political alliance against the British during the anti-Rowlatt agitation. The Punjab government made a special reference to this aspect of Hindu-Muslim unity to under line the point that Hind and Muslims had merely cooperated with each other in 1919 for organizing the '*rebellion.*' Evidence of Micheal O' Dwyer in V N Datta (ed.) *New Light on Punjab Disturbances* vol. 1, pp124-233; also See Disorder Enquiry Committee Report, vol. 1, p29
- 30 Home Political File no.1904, Franchise B. April, 1920, NAI
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