

Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh massacre

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Manifest Pedagogy

As has been repeated many times in the pedagogy section of history, events which have a centenary have taken centre stage in both prelims and mains. The year 1919 is very prominent in the History of India for the Rowlatt Act, Jallian Wala Bagh massacre, Government of India act 1919, Non-co-operation movement, Khilafat movement.

In news

Hundred years of Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh massacre

Placing it in the syllabus

Modern Indian History

Dimensions

- Rowlatt act provisions
- Rowlatt satyagraha – course
- Jallianwala Bagh massacre
- British response – Hunter commission report
- Indian response – Khilafath and Non-Cooperation Movement

Content

Rowlatt act provisions

The 'Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919,' popularly referred to as the 'Rowlatt Act,' was enacted by the British to discourage Indians from rising against them by

suppressing revolutionary groups and depriving Indians of their right to personal expression and liberty.

On basis of the report of the **S.A.T. Rowlatt committee**, it replaced the **Defence of India Act** (1915) instituted during the First World War with a permanent law that gave the British more power over Indians. Following are the main provisions of the act:

- The 'Rowlatt Act' envisaged the **arrest and deportation** of any person on mere suspicion of **sedition** and revolt.
- It allowed the declaration of possession of treasonable literature as a punishable offence.
- Allowed the British to **imprison protestors without a trial** of those arrested.
- It also provided for the **press to be controlled** even more strictly.
- **Arrest without warrant: It** gave sweeping powers to the police to search premises and arrest anyone merely on suspicion without needing a warrant.
- It also gave the police the right to **indefinitely detain suspects without trying** them and to **conduct in-camera trials** for forbidden political acts without any jury.
- **Denied right to information to the undertrials** regarding the identity of their accusers as well as the nature of the evidence presented against them for their alleged crimes.
- It mentioned the **trial of those arrested by special tribunals** established for that purpose
- It made the convicts to **deposit securities** and prohibited them from participating in political, religious, or educational activities.

Rowlatt satyagraha – course

- The '**Rowlatt Act**' was strongly opposed by all the **Indian leaders** who felt that it was extremely repressive and the Indian public too was extremely angry and resentful.

- **Mahatma Gandhi, in particular, was a very strong critic** of the proposed legislation as he felt that punishing a group of people for a crime committed by just one or a few was morally incorrect.
- Instead of the constitutional opposition to the Act, **Gandhi organized for the first time a 'hartal'** for the masses **to suspend all business** and instead gather in public spaces to **fast and pray** to demonstrate peacefully their opposition to the law with civil disobedience.
- However, as the movement came to be known, the 'Rowlatt Satyagraha' it left the British totally unmoved as they did not see the peaceful 'hartal' as a threat.

Jallianwala Bagh massacre

Background:

- As the **Rowlatt Act became law in March 1919**, the protests became more vocal and aggressive, especially in Punjab, where rail, telegraph and communication systems were disrupted.
- Two of the most visible faces of the protests and **champions of the 'Satyagraha' movement; Dr. Satya Pal and Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew were taken into custody** by the police and secretly transported away. Protesters against the arrests who gathered at the residence of the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar to demand their release were fired upon by the police.
- The leaders of the 'hartal' in Amritsar met on 12 April 1919 to pass resolutions against the Rowlatt Act and to protest the arrests of Satya Pal and Kitchlew. They also decided that a public protest meeting would be held the following day at Jallianwala Bagh.

The Massacre

- In the morning of 13 April 1919, the day of the **traditional festival of 'Baisakhi'**, the acting military

commander, Colonel Reginald Dyer, anticipating further agitation and violence announced several restrictions on the movement and assembly of people. As expected people gathered there to celebrate the festival.

- Colonel Dyer arrived with his troops at Jallianwala Bagh, sealed off the sole exit, and ordered **indiscriminate firing on the peaceful and unarmed crowd without any warning**. It led to the death of around a thousand people.

British response – Hunter commission report

- The massacre of Jallianwala Bagh was followed by the setting up of a **non – official committee of inquiry by Congress**. Until Congress set up such a committee, the British government did not initiate such an inquiry.
- The government later set up a **Disorders Inquiry Committee led by Lord William Hunter**, Senator of the Scottish College of Justice.
- The Hunter Commission, although it condemned most of the decisions taken by General Dyer, it **agreed with the imposition of the martial law in Punjab**.
- It also **criticized Gandhi's method of Satyagraha** and held Gandhi partially responsible for the situation of “deteriorated” law and order.
- The result was the **Dyer, relieved of his command**, was sent to England.

Indian response – Khilafath and Non-cooperation movement

- The Hunter commission hurt **Gandhi and he returned the Kaiser-I-Hind Gold medal**. Even he came to the conclusion that the blatant action of inhumanity cannot be remedied through conventional political methods. This also resulted in **Indian National Congress and Gandhiji joining hands with Kilafath leaders** which revived Hindu-Muslim unity. Further, **Gandhi launched the nationwide campaign for Non-cooperation** with the **aim of achieving**

full swaraj.

- **Gandhi withdrew the nations co-operation from the British Government and thereby shook the countries administrative setup.**
- Launching of the Non-Cooperation Movement marked new awakening in the Indian Independence Movement. This movement was a great success as it gave millions of Indians massive encouragement.