



Beginning of The Gandhi Era: Gandhi & Jallianwala Tragedy

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Gandhi & Jallianwala Tragedy

"And then Gandhi came. He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people's minds"

-JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) came to India from South-Africa during the First World War, in January, 1915, at the bidding of Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Gokhale's thoughts greatly influenced Gandhiji. He regarded Gokhale as his Political Guru. Thus in the beginning Gandhiji was taken to be a follower of and loyal to Gokhale. He had firm belief in the policy of cooperation with the Government. During the World War Gandhiji had fully extended his help and cooperation in the war efforts of the Government for which he was honoured by conferment of the gold medal Kaisar-i-Hind. But Gandhiji entered Indian politics with a bang in 1919 on the question of the Rowlatt Act.

Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Tragedy

War had brought scarcity and famine had gripped the country. Poverty, disease, the repression by bureaucracy, the ordinance rule and the stringent measures adopted by the Government in the matter of recruitment for the army agitated the Indian mind and the people felt dissatisfied with the British rule. Spread of the influence of the extremists and the revolutionaries was thus natural. The Government was aware of it and was afraid that if the power of the revolutionaries was not crushed in time, it could prove disastrous for the British Raj. During the War, the Government had appointed a Committee under the chairmanship of Justice Rowlatt to suggest suitable measures to put down the terrorist activities. On the basis of this Committee's recommendations two bills which came to be known as the Rowlatt Bills or 'Black' Bills were introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council in February, 1919. Despite nation-wide protests and bitter opposition from all the elected members of the Council - four

of them resigned in protest and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya delivered one of the most classic and memorable speeches - the Government rushed through the first Rowlatt Bill on March 18, 1919. It became the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919 and came into operation on March 21, 1919. Under the new law in the name of maintenance of peace, the Government could arrest any person without a warrant and detain him for any length of time without any trial or right to appeal. Thus, the law was a direct attack on the ordinary civil liberties of the people and a clear indication of the autocratic and barbarous tendencies of the British rule in India. Earlier, Gandhiji had warned the British that he would be constrained to start a satyagraha if the Government insisted upon robbing the people of their basic human liberties. The passing of the Rowlatt Bill turned a "war-time and 'recruiting sergeant' of the Empire" into a 'rebel'. Gandhiji lost faith in the British sense of justice and gave a call for a total Hartal all over the country and asked the people to observe April 6 as a national day of mourning against the passage of the Rowlatt Bill. The Hartal proved a great success. It turned out to be an excellent means of mobilising public opinion. The Act was everywhere denounced as 'Black Legislation'. Protest demonstrations were held and huge processions taken out throughout the country. Ruthless repression followed. Many people were killed as a result of police firing on non-violent mobs. Gandhiji was much sought after in various parts of the country. When he tried to visit Amritsar, his entry into Delhi and Punjab was barred. He decided to violate the prohibitory orders and was arrested on April 9. Gandhiji's arrest infuriated the people. The agitation in Ahmedabad took a violent turn. Gandhiji was taken to Bombay and released there. But, meanwhile, both the agitation and its repression had become more intense. There were disturbances at various places. Punjab particularly was in ferment.

On April 10, Dr. Kitchlu and Dr. Satyapal, the two popular Punjab leaders were arrested at Amritsar. The people spontaneously observed Hartal and took out a procession to protest against the arrests. The police resorted to firing on the peaceful procession. Several unarmed innocent persons were shot dead. The people took the dead on their shoulders in a procession through the main streets of Amritsar. In their anger, they set fire to two banks and some other Government buildings and killed some five Englishmen. When the situation seemed to grow out of control, the administration of the city was, in effect, handed over to military authorities under General Dyer on April 11. Even though Martial law was formally declared only on April 15, de facto Martial Law prevailed ever since General Dyer took over charge of the city.

A peaceful public meeting was organised on April 13 - the day of the Vaisakhi festival - at the ground known as the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. Once a garden, the Bagh was now a low waste land. It was enclosed from all sides. While the peaceful meeting was 'in progress, General Dyer ordered his forces consisting of 100 Indian and 50 British soldiers to open fire without giving adequate warning or any opportunity to disperse. In fact, the army was so positioned on the narrow 7 / ft. passage as to block the only escape route. Also, the soldiers were asked to shoot to kill. 1650 rounds were fired in some ten

minutes. The firing stopped only when the ammunition was exhausted. The exact number of the dead would never be known but according to Government reports 379 persons were killed and 1200 were wounded. Those who tried to climb the walls were also shot dead. Many of those who died or lay wounded writhing in agony were children. The dead, the dying and the wounded were left to their fate, completely unattended for the whole night. No arrangements were made by the authorities to relieve the wounded or dispose of the dead. Dyer said, it was not his job. And, Indians if they came back to the Bagh to help the wounded or to seek relatives, risked shooting at sight due to curfew. As a result, even those of the wounded who might have survived died of thirst and for want of medical aid.

The bullet marks are visible on the walls even today and tell the story of the outrage and the sacrifice. Deenbandhu C.F. Andrews described the Jallianwala tragedy as a "cold and calculated murder". A member told the British House of Commons that an example of such 'barbarism' was difficult to be found in the whole world. Even after the gruesome massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar remained under a rule of terror. For weeks "shoot at sight" order was maintained and administered "with the utmost rigour". The people of Punjab were subjected to many inhuman atrocities and indignities during the period. Some of the punishments like the cutting off of the water and electric supply, crawling order, bombing from aeroplanes, machine-gunning of people in groups, promiscuous flogging and whippings were designed not to punish individuals but to terrorise and humiliate a whole population. Strict censorship was imposed. However, as the news of the atrocities gradually trickled out to other parts, a wave of indignation swept the entire nation. In protest, Sir Sankaran Nair resigned from the membership of Viceroy's Executive Council and the Nobel Laureate poet Rabindra Nath Tagore renounced his Knighthood thereby hoping to give "voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen surprised into a dumb anguish of terror".

As a result of tremendous pressure of public opinion, six months after the event, the Hunter Committee was appointed by the Government to enquire into the circumstances of the tragedy. General Dyer admitted before the Committee that he wanted to "shoot well and shoot strong so that I or anybody else should not have to shoot again". The aim of the indiscriminate shooting of innocent men, women and children, as Dyer later admitted, was not to disperse their allegedly unlawful assembly but to strike such a terror in the whole of Punjab and also elsewhere in India as to prevent the recurrence of the defiance of British might anywhere. The Committee tried to whitewash the crime of British officers. Dyer was found guilty only of "an honest but mistaken conception of duty" and of a "grave error of judgement". What was worse, he was praised in the House of Lords and in the British Press as the protector of the Empire and the saviour of India'. Also a sword of honour and a purse of £200 were presented to him.

It is remarkable to note that even after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhiji tried to continue following the path of cooperation and it was due to his efforts that the Congress, acknowledging the 1919 Constitutional reforms in a resolution passed in December 1919 as "inadequate, unsatisfactory and disappointing", became prepared to implement them with the objective of establishing responsible government in the country as soon as possible.

The Congress was, however, deeply concerned at the happenings in Punjab. It appointed a Sub-Committee of its own under the chairmanship of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya to enquire into the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. The Sub-Committee included Gandhiji, C.R. Das, Abbas Tyabji and M.R. Jayakar. Motilal Nehru who was also a member resigned on being elected Congress President. The Sub-Committee interviewed over 1,700 witnesses before submitting its report. According to the conclusion arrived at by the Sub-Committee, the number of casualties was much larger than what was admitted by the official Hunter Committee.

The Committee squarely charged Michael O'Dwyer, "who almost invariably appealed to passion and ignorance rather than to reason" and showed how "serious a responsibility he incurred in misleading both the people and his superiors"¹The Committee came to the conclusion that "the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was a calculated piece of inhumanity towards utterly innocent and unarmed men, including children, and unparalleled for its ferocity in the history of modern British administration."²The Committee demanded payment of compensation to the families of those dead or injured and punishment for the guilty officers. But the Government did not pay any heed to these demands. Instead, its attitude hardened further. The ghastly and repulsive excesses at the Jallianwala Bagh and later during the draconian regime of the martial law administration in Punjab changed the whole tenor of the nationalist movement and the course of Indian history. Gandhiji lost faith in the British fairplay and sense of justice. A basic change took place in his outlook and henceforward he progressively moved from cooperation towards more and more non-cooperation.

Footnotes

1. Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Punjab Sub Committee of the Indian National Congress, p. 7, quoted in Tara Chand, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. 3, p. 483,
2. Ibid, p. 158, quoted in Tara Chand, ibid., p. 484

Gandhi & Khilafat Movement

Besides the Jallianwala tragedy another matter agitating the minds of the people was the question of Khilafat. At the end of the First World War, Indian Muslims were concerned about the fate of the Sultan of Turkey, the Khalifa of the Prophet. During the War, Turkey had fought against the British. The Sultan of Turkey was also regarded as the Khalifa (Caliph) or the religious leader of the Muslims. The Indian Muslims had supported the British war efforts under an assurance that in the event of an Allied victory, Turkey would not be dismembered. The assurance, however, was not honoured and a scheme was prepared for dividing up the Turkish Empire. The news upset and angered the Indian Muslims. Gandhiji sympathised with their cause and saw in the development the possibility of forging the much needed Hindu-Muslim unity to fight the British. A Central Khilafat Committee was formed to plead with the British Government for moderate peace terms with Turkey. A Khilafat conference was convened in November, 1919 at Delhi. Gandhiji presided. It was actually at this conference of the Muslims that Gandhiji for the first time advocated non-cooperation with the British Government in India. He saw, in his own words, "an opportunity of uniting Hindus and Mohammadans as would not arise in a hundred years"¹

The terms of the Treaty of Sevres providing for the dismemberment of Turkey became known in May, 1920. The Arab provinces of the Turkish Empire were to be divided among Britain and France as mandated areas and the Sultan was to become like a prisoner of the High Commissioner of the Allies. This situation was very agonising for the Indian Muslims. Gandhiji advised the Khilafat Committee to launch non-cooperation movement against the Government. The Khilafat Committee accepted Gandhiji's advice. In a strongly worded letter to the Viceroy, Gandhiji said in August, 1920 that Britain had acted in the Khilafat matter "in an unscrupulous, immoral and unjust manner" and had been moving from wrong to wrong in order to defend the immorality. Gandhiji added:

"I can retain neither respect nor affection for such a Government. Your Excellency's light-hearted treatment of official crime, your exoneration of Sir Michael O'Dwyer, Mr. Montagu's Despatch and above all the shameful ignorance of the Punjab events and the callous disregard of the feelings of Indians betrayed by the House of Lords, have filled me with the gravest misgivings regarding the future of the Empire, have estranged me completely from the present Government and have disabled me from rendering, as I have hitherto whole-heartedly rendered my total cooperation... I consider that I would be less than truthful if I did not describe as Satanic a Government which has been guilty of fraud, murder and wanton cruelty which still remains unrepentant and resorts to untruth to cover its guilts"²

It is significant that the Congress had not so far accepted any proposal for a non-cooperation movement. A special session of the All-India Congress Committee was therefore considered necessary. It was held in September, 1920 at Calcutta under the dark shadow of Tilak's death on August 1. Lala

Lajpat Rai presided. It was at this session that the Congress for the first time decided upon a course of non-cooperation with the British Government - direct action against the administration, boycott of the Legislative Councils and launching, of non-cooperation movement. One resolution adopted at the Special session charged the Government of "gross neglect" and failure to protect the innocent Indians from "official callousness" in the tragic events in Punjab and declared that both the Government of India and the British Government had been proved utterly incapable of punishing the guilty officers for their uncivilized and inhuman behaviour and for their inability to protect the helpless and innocent people. The resolution further declared that the only effectual means to vindicate national honour and to prevent a repetition of events like the Jallianwala tragedy in future was the establishment of Swarajya. The resolution concluded that there was no course left open for the people but to follow Gandhiji's policy of progressive non-violent non-cooperation "until the said wrongs are righted and Swarajya is established".

The policy of non-cooperation was confirmed by the Congress at its annual session held at Nagpur in December 1920. The Nagpur Congress had assumed special significance because some basic changes were made in the objective programme and policy of the Congress. Although the Moderates had left Congress in 1918, there were still two streams of thoughts in the organisation. So far the Congress objective had been "attainment of self-government within the British Empire through constitutional methods". Now, while there were leaders in the Congress who wanted to follow the ideals of "British Empire" and "Constitutional methods" the extremist view was keen to sever all relations with the British Empire and justified the use of all possible means for attainment of the objective. Gandhiji found out a mid-way. The Nagpur Congress resolved that Swarajya must be attained within one year by means of "non-violent non-cooperation" with the Government.

Footnotes

1. Mukerjee, op. cit., p. 140
2. Subhash C Kashyap, History of the Freedom Movement (1857-1957), NPH, New Delhi, P-74-75