

# Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: History and Politics

Dr Priya Khanna Chadha

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Goswami Ganesh Dutta SanatanDharm College, Chandigarh (India)

## 1. Introduction

The Sikh religion founded by Sri Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and nourished by the nine other Gurus is the rich "The Legacy of Punjab". The very word Sikh is derived from the Sanskrit word "Sisya" which means a "disciple" or "learner". Sri Guru Granth Sahib which is regarded as the most sacred book talks about various kinds of values, beliefs and practices among its followers. The Sikh religion has been contributing towards society by various collective ventures and welfare activities inspired by Sikh religious tradition of VandChchka (sharing) and Seva (service). These practices of devotion and surrender have contributed to the economic development of Punjab during colonial and post colonial period. Over the span of 160 years that is from the middle of 19th century till the first of 21st century, Sikhs have a long and continuous tradition of getting engaged in identity and culture politics. They have become ethno-cultural identity not only in Punjab but society at the large.

## 2. Jallianwala Bagh Massacre:

JallianwalaBagh Massacre is one of the most heartless massacres by Britishers in India. On April 13, 1919, a day which happened to be 'Baisakhi' one of Punjab's most famous religious festivals turned out to be the most heartless massacres by Britishers in India. Thousands of innocent unarmed people were killed ruthlessly which reflects the sign of communal amity in the country. Brigadier General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer had circulated a proclamation throughout the city read: "Any procession or gathering of four persons, (or more) will be treated as an unlawful assembly and dispersed by force of arms, if necessary. (Cavendish, R., 2009). The Jallianwala massacre or Amritsar massacres turned out to be a turning point in India's freedom

JallianwalaBagh in the holy city of Amritsar is a public garden spread across 6-7 acres which is memorized as one of the deadliest attacks in the history of the India and world by the British Indian Army. A large number of gathering of about 20,000-25,000 were gathered at the public garden JallianwalaBagh which is located in the northern region of India in the popular city of Amritsar to take resolutions against the Rowlatt Act that provided for stricter control of the press, arrests without warrant and indefinite detention without trial. But they could not understand and predict what the Britishers had in their plans. The gatherings consist of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Baisakhi and pilgrims who had visited Golden Temple and had gone to the Bagh on the way back. The auspicious occasion was turned into a horrifying scene which has left marks on the nation for decades to come. Brigadier – General Dyer, ordered the British Indian Army soldiers and Gurkha troops to shoot and kill. The forces were placed in

front of the only entrance of the garden and shot until the British armed forces ran out of ammunition. Bose, P; & Lyons L; 1999 mentioned that the forces used about 1650 rounds of ammunition which killed 379 civilians and wounded about 1136. Lot of the victim jumped into the well in a dying struggle to save their lives from the armed troops.

The whole nation was left stunned by command of General Dyer on innocent people as all of them were not protesters some of them were Baisakhi pilgrims. The JallianwalaBagh Massacre or Amritsar Massacre is considered one of the major turning point to fight for India's freedom and became source of controversies between the British officials and the Indian nationalists. Churchill announced that the massacre was 'an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation'. General Dyer(2011) appealed the commission for investigation the massacre and said that that he acted according to the rule of law, by having the "minimum force" policy of public-order.

Churchill declared that the massacre was 'an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation'. Dyer, standing before the commission charged of investigating the massacre, declared that he acted according to the rule of law, by engaging more precisely the "minimum force" policy of public-order (Doyle, 2011).

Amritsar Massacre or "JallianwalaBagh massacre", as it took place in on the 13th of April 1919 in JallianwalaBagh garden in Amritsar, a city located in the north of India. General Reginald Edward Dyer had announced before 13 April that "any processions or gatherings of four men will be looked upon and treated as an unlawful assembly and dispersed by force of arms if necessary" (Cavendish, R., 2009). In the enclosed compound were about 5000 to 20 000 Indians according to different sources (Bose, P., & Lyons, L., 1999) They were in fact protesting peacefully against the "Rowlatt act" concerning the right of appeal for the people involved in seditious activities. Dyer placed the military vehicles in front of the only door of the garden and ordered the shooting of all the unarmed civilians. The shooting lasted until the British armed men ran out of ammunition. In fact, the military used approximately 1650 rounds of ammunition, killing 379 civilians and wounding 1136 others (Bose, P., & Lyons, L., 1999).

The Amritsar Massacre is considered as a major turning point that led the British government to consider the possible independence of the Indian State as the massacre became source of controversies between the British officials and the

Indian nationalists. All sources state clearly that the British government condemned the massacre and qualified it as "unbritish". Churchill declared that the massacre was 'an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation'. Dyer, standing before the commission charged of investigating the massacre, declared that he acted according to the rule of law, by engaging more precisely the "minimum force" policy of public-order (Doyle, 2011). Subsequently, he also justified his action by the fact that the Indian nationalists did not obey the orders of British authorities and he did his duty so that riots in future should be avoided. Doyle (2011) mentioned that after the massacre the general was dismissed from his duty as his immoral action which resulted into bloody event was not a way of avoiding the riots and protests. Mahatma Gandhi said that this inhuman accident reflects the imperialism of Colonial rule which is using different coercive means to expand its empire. is totally. The movie "Ghandi" (1982) is on JallianwalaBagh massacre and is directed by Richard Attenborough. It shows that massacre was not in the action plan by British government but it was the sole and personal decision of General Dyer. The commission in the film condemns his brutal act and also that he did not consider the presence of women and children in the gathering. directed by Richard Attenborough. Lloyd (2007) states that two biographies were written about General Dyer, and they both clearly states that the massacre happened because of his bad temperament and personal life. No doubt, the British populace criticized the massacre but however Britain did not apologize for the massacre since 1919.

### 3. Number of Casualties:

The dreadful tragedy has been 100 years old but the data about the casualties is not clear and there has been some lacunae. The horrifying incident of bloodbath in the Bagh was disputed at various forums. The list is of number of people suffered provided by different committee and forums is incomplete. Investigations by various commissions and societies were carried out to know the exact number of casualties. The Government of Punjab and the Hunter Commission disputed on not giving an accurate number of casualties and offering an estimate figure of 200 casualties. Investigation done by Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya revealed that the youngest among the dead was the seventh month old child and about 42 boys whereas the Hunter Commission mentioned that about 337 men died and among infants and children there were 41 boys and a six – week old baby. Indian National Congress estimated that about 1000 was dead and 1, 500 people were injured and SewaSamati quoted a figure 1, 100 were wounded, out of which 192 were badly injured and 379 were dead.

### 4. Aftermath:

The Amritsar Massacre rang the bell in the minds of Indians that Imperial rule is inhuman and brutal. This brought revolution to revolt and end of British India. People living in India and Britain expressed their resentment and called upon

the British for a formal apology. Mahatma Gandhi started a non – cooperation movement whereas Rabindranath Tagore returned his Knighthood, saying, "Such mass murderers aren't worthy of giving any title to anyone." Winston Churchill called Dyer's act "monstrous" in Parliament, and the House of Commons criticized Dyer, although the House of Lords did not, and many others applauded him and his brutal act. Rudyard Kipling said that the dyer performed his duty as he saw fit on the death of Dyer in 1927. On the 50th anniversary in 1977, Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to India expressed her views and named "a difficult episode" and further said that history cannot be rewritten. In 2013, David Cameron during his visit to India and the site, laid a wreath and called it "a shameful event in British history".

The British Sikh Report also known as the BSR, is an annual report which is submitted in Parliament each year about Sikhs in the United Kingdom. The report is one of the largest projects which gives the information about the views and thoughts of Sikhs staying in the United Kingdom. The information further is taken into by government, non government organizations, stakeholders and policy makers.

### 5. Conclusion:

While laying the wreath ay the JallianwalaBagh on the anniversary of the massacre the British High Commissioner to India Dominic Asquith, profoundly mourned the incident which took place a hundred years ago. "The events of JallianwalaBagh 100 years ago today reflect a shameful act in British-Indian history. We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused," Asquith penned in the visitors' book at the monument. While interacting with journalists later, Asquith alleged British Prime Minister Theresa May on Wednesday described the JallianwalaBagh massacre as a "shameful scar" on British Indian history. The British ambassador also urged that his great-grandfather H H Asquith, who was the prime minister of Britain between 1908 and 1916, had stated that JallianwalaBagh disaster as one of the worst scandal.

No doubt, the outrage over JallianwalaBagh was absolutely necessary and is well acceptable but what is less understandable is why Indian state, still continues to advocate and apply colonial –era laws which limit civil liberties in India. There are so many cases where security forces used disproportionate force at unarmed public. Since the time India became free from Colonial rule, the history reflects violence in the country between and within communities where sometimes the state had no role to play and in some cases the state violence was done on the public. In some of the cases the state becomes complicit, there has ben many incidents when one group attacks on another such as in 1983 Bengali Muslims in Nellie was massacred by mobs. The Sikhs were massacre in northern India after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984. In Gujrat in 2002 the mass killings of Muslims and Godhra incident in which 59 Hindu karsevaks were killed reflects that the path to justice and peace has been distressingly slow and power centric in India.

**References**

1. Bose, P., & Lyons, L. (1999). Dyer consequences: The trope of Amritsar, Ireland, and the lessons of the `minimum. *Boundary 2*, 26(2), 199.
2. Cavendish, R. (2009, April). The Amritsar massacre. *History Today*, 59(4), 13.
3. Doyle, M. (2011). Massacre by the book: Amritsar and the rules of public-order policing in Britain and India. *Britain & the World*, 4(2), 247-268.
4. Lloyd, N. (2007). The butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer. *War in History*, 14(1), 118-120.....
5. [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68776181.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68776181.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)