

The Rationale And Tactics For The Movement Against Rowlatt Act

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Abstract The British government enacted the Rowlatt Act in 1919, even with dissent from all Indian representatives of the Imperial Legislative Council. This act constituted a breach of human rights and an assault on the Indian nation. The Indian populace termed this act a 'black act.' In this act there was no opportunity for submitting a petition, no possibility of hiring a lawyer, and no chance for an appeal. The British government of 1919 drastically restricted essential civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial. The act permitted the government to detain anyone suspected of terrorist activities for a maximum of two years without trial, to place anyone under preventive detention for an unlimited duration, and to arrest without a warrant. The citizens of India were profoundly infuriated by these laws that infringed on human rights. Indian leaders condemned this oppressive law. M.K Gandhi, a prominent Indian National Congress politician, recognized that the Rowlatt Act was a threat to Indian independence. Gandhi emphasized peaceful protest tactics to oppose the act without resorting to violence. He organized Satyagraha rallies to coordinate the movement and this is known as the Rowlatt Satyagraha. The British authorities responded to the demonstrators with extreme violence, most notably during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, where nonviolent activists were ruthlessly killed, which further bolstered the movement. This incident escalated into a horrific bloodbath. The actions of the British government during the Rowlatt Satyagraha intensified the populace's anti-government feelings and ultimately propelled their aspirations for independence of India. All Indian inhabitants joined this movement together, irrespective of their caste or religion. The movement, which was initially centered in urban areas, attracted people from various socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations to show solidarity against British oppression. This act, which defied British rule, sparked protests with nationwide hartals (strikes). As a result, the Rowlatt Act was annulled in March 1922.

IndexTerms - Black act, Human rights, Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Rowlatt act.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rowlatt Act was the common name for the British government's Anarchy (Anarchical) and Revolutionary Offences Act of 1919. The Imperial Legislative Council enacted the act on 18 March 1919. Despite opposition from every Indian member of the Imperial Legislative Council, the act was approved. In essence, the act extended the emergency provisions implemented during World War I by the Defence of India Act of 1915. The act infringed upon human rights and attacked the Indian nation. Due to its "unjust and restrictive nature," the Indian public labeled the act as a black law. The legislation suspended civil freedoms, severely restricting basic rights such as the right to a fair trial and freedom of expression. The act featured "no documents, no lawyers, and no appeals." It empowered the government to detain anyone suspected of terrorist activities for up to two years without a trial. Moreover, the act permitted the detention of individuals without trial for up to another two years, particularly focusing on political agitators or revolutionaries. Additionally, the law established provisions for indefinite preventive detention and arrest without a warrant. Such administrative detention did not allow for any appeals. Other provisions included trials without a jury for prohibited political activities, namely in camera trials without a jury for treason cases. A camera trial is a court proceeding conducted in secret, behind closed doors, instead of in an open court. In these administrative proceedings, there was no opportunity for appeal. Individuals convicted had to stay on bail post-release and were required to avoid political, religious, or educational activities. The Rowlatt Act also imposed significant restrictions on press freedom. The act granted the government extensive powers to monitor publications, limit public gatherings, and suppress dissent. The public was incensed by the government's laws that infringed upon these human rights. There was widespread opposition to the act, which granted the police extraordinary powers to enforce

restrictions on the public. The purpose of this research paper is to provide an explanation of the rationale and tactics adopted for the Satyagraha movement against the Rowlatt Act.

II. DISCUSSION

As the First World War was nearing its conclusion and the Indian radical movement was gaining momentum and achieving significant successes, the British Indian Government established a sedition committee in 1917, chaired by Justice Sindey Rowlatt, commonly referred to as the Rowlatt Committee. Following the Committee's findings, two bills were presented to the Central Legislature in February 1919. Of these two bills, one was rejected while the other was an expansion of the Defence of Indian Regulation Act of 1915, and the Emergency Criminal Law was enacted during the First World War and its aftermath with the intention of curbing nationalist and revolutionary activities. Gandhi learned about the recently published Rowlatt Committee report through the newspapers and believed that the best response was to mobilize the Satyagraha movement. Consequently, a conference was convened with several leaders, and in February 1919, a Satyagraha oath was drafted and signed by all the attending members.

Gandhi understood that the existing organization could not effectively lead a non-violent movement, so he established the Satyagraha Sabha, involving many prominent figures from the Kheda campaign, although some members of the Sabha began to disagree with Gandhi's non-violent approach. Gandhi was invited to Madras, and despite his illness, he traveled alongside Mahadev Desai to meet Rajgopalachari and K.R. Lyengar. During a small gathering of leaders, Gandhi elaborated on the implications of the bill. As discussions on the bill progressed, news arrived that it had been enacted. Despite considerable opposition, the Rowlatt Act, also known as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crime Act of 1919, was enacted by the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi on March 21, 1919. This act granted the Viceroy's Government extraordinary powers to detain political activists without trial, arrest suspected terrorists without warrants, and imprison them for up to two years. A special panel of three High Court judges was established to ensure quick trials for these offenses, and there was no court of appeal above this panel. The panel could accept evidence that was not admissible under the Indian Evidence Act of 1872. The government was also empowered to prevent newspapers from reporting or publishing news. Additionally, the defendant was not entitled to be informed about the charges or the evidence presented during the trial. Those who were convicted were mandated to remain on bail after their release and had to refrain from participating in political, religious, or educational pursuits. Essentially, this act aimed to suppress the growing nationalist movements in the country. Among other Indian leaders, Mahatma Gandhi expressed serious concern about the Act and staunchly criticized it. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a member of the All-India Muslim League, resigned from the Imperial Legislative Council in protest of the Act.

This legislation that compelled the government to enforce harsh measures irritated numerous Indian leaders and the general populace. In response, Gandhi decided to organize a nationwide strike, utilizing fasting and prayer as his chosen methods. The original date for the strike was set for March 30, 1919, but it was later postponed to April 6, 1919. Meanwhile, cities such as Delhi, Lahore, and Amritsar observed a strike on March 30, 1919, due to a delay in receiving the announcement to suspend the strike until April 6. In Delhi, Swami Shradhdhanandaji, a Hindu monk, addressed a crowd at Jumma Masjid, and this hartal became a significant example of Hindu-Muslim solidarity. As the procession moved toward the railway station, police opened fire, resulting in numerous casualties. This led to a dire situation in Delhi. Without hesitation, Shradhdhanandaji reached out to Gandhi to request his presence in Delhi. Gandhi responded by stating that he would head to Delhi immediately after the April 6 celebrations in Bombay. The events in Delhi were mirrored in Lahore and Amritsar. Dr. Satyapal and Dr. Kichlew from Amritsar sent messages to Gandhi urging him to visit, and Gandhi subsequently arranged to go to Amritsar after his time in Delhi. He departed from Madras and began his journey to Bombay in order to participate in the strike on April 6. The strike was observed throughout India, halting all forms of trade and commerce. Additionally, fasting, prayer, and public gatherings opposing the black act were held. The hartal in Bombay was indeed a resounding success, fostering unity among Hindus and Muslims. At that moment, thorough arrangements were made to initiate civil disobedience, and specific matters were discussed regarding this. Gandhi selected the books *Hind Swaraj* and *Sarvodaya* as the simplest means to promote civil disobedience through their printing and sale, resulting in a sufficient number of copies produced.

On the evening of April 7, 1919, Gandhi departed for Delhi and Amritsar. By April 8, upon reaching Mathura, he learned of the likelihood of his arrest. Just before arriving at the train station in Palwal, he was served with a written order prohibiting him from entering the Punjab border. Upon arrival at Palwal, he was taken into police custody and transported to Bombay, where he was subsequently released. A friend of Gandhi informed him that the public was furious about his arrest. Umar Subani and Anusuabehn relayed that the residents of Pydhuni had grown restless and extremely agitated, urging him to visit Pydhuni without delay. Upon reaching Pydhuni, he witnessed a large crowd that erupted in joy at his presence. The crowd quickly formed a procession, chanting “Vande Mataram” and “Allaho Akbar.” As the procession moved from Abdur Rahaman Street toward Crawford Market, it encountered an obstruction preventing further movement toward the fort. The densely packed march broke through the police lines, prompting the mounted police to be ordered to disperse the gathering. The police charged the crowd, causing their horses to trample the people.

The event deeply troubled Gandhi. He met with Commissioner Mr. Griffith and recounted the scene he had observed. Mr. Griffith remarked that people, by their inherent nature, do not grasp the discipline of peace. To this, Gandhi responded that people are naturally peaceful and not violent. He also mentioned that if he truly believed his teachings were ineffective for the people, he would choose to halt civil disobedience. Mr. Griffith then informed him that unrest was occurring in both Ahmadabad and Amritsar. Gandhi had no response regarding Amritsar since he had never visited there. However, he was genuinely taken aback by the news of the disturbances in Ahmadabad. Gandhi expressed a desire to hold a meeting to urge the people toward peaceful behavior, and thus a gathering was arranged on the Chaupati sands where he elaborated on the principles of non-violence and the boundaries of Satyagraha.

Following that, Gandhi made his way towards Ahmadabad. In Ahmadabad, a rumor circulated that Anasuyabehn had also been arrested, leading to chaos among the mill workers. The situation escalated into violence, resulting in the murder of a sergeant. Gandhi was aware of attempts to sabotage the railway tracks near Nadiad station, the killing of a government officer in Viramgam, and the imposition of martial law in Ahmadabad, which caused widespread fear. A police officer was present at the station to escort Gandhi to the furious Commissioner Mr. Pratt, who was in a state of anger. Gandhi spoke to him calmly, expressed his regret for the unrest, and requested permission to hold a public meeting at the Sabarmati Ashram. The permission was granted, and the meeting took place on April 13, 1919. During the meeting, Gandhi addressed the crowd about their misguided actions. As a form of penitence, Gandhi announced a three-day fast for himself and urged the attendees to observe a one-day fast. The martial law was soon lifted. Gandhi encouraged the people to acknowledge their wrongdoings. However, when his proposal was not embraced, Gandhi decided to delay the Satyagraha until the public better understood the principles of peace. Some disagreed with this decision, believing that mass Satyagraha would never be practical if peace were expected everywhere and seen as a prerequisite for initiating Satyagraha, but Gandhi did not concur with their view.

After the meeting in Ahmadabad, Gandhi arrived in Nadiad and observed the actual situation there, discovering that many individuals had been arrested from the Kheda district. He understood that he had made a mistake by urging the people in Kheda to engage in civil disobedience too quickly and inappropriately. At that moment, he referred to it as a “Himalayan miscalculation.” Gandhi recognized that people are more likely to engage in civil disobedience when they willingly and respectfully comply with the state's laws. Gandhi understood that for individuals to be ready for civil disobedience, they must comprehend its profound significance. Therefore, he aimed to assemble a cadre of committed and morally upright volunteers who would genuinely grasp the stringent principles of Satyagraha. Upon arriving in Bombay, Gandhi convened a Satyagraha Sabha, established a group of Satyagrahi volunteers, and sought their assistance in educating the public about the fundamental meaning and importance of Satyagraha. However, this proved to be a challenging task, and progress was slow.

While Gandhi was actively guiding people towards the philosophy of non-violence, the government's approach to deal with lawlessness was fully in effect. During this period, blatant unlawful tyranny was evident in the nation due to the establishment of special tribunals that functioned not as courts of justice, but as instruments of dictatorial governance. On April 10th, leaders in Punjab, Dr. Satyapal and Saifuddin Kitchlew, were taken into custody. On April 13, 1919, a gathering in Amritsar took place to celebrate Baisakhi and voice dissent against the arrests of the two leaders, which led to the infamous Jallianwala Bagh massacre that drew significant attention from both Indian citizens and the global community. The innocent men and women of

Amritsar endured horrific violence. Numerous leaders were imprisoned, martial law was declared in Punjab, and special tribunals were established.

Gandhi was urged to proceed to Punjab as soon as possible without considering the repercussions. However, Gandhi found himself in a quandary. He had previously been instructed not to enter Punjab, and under such circumstances, it appeared to him that defying the order would not be seen as an act of civil disobedience. Accordingly, Gandhi continually sought approval from the viceroy, but was unsuccessful.

On 14 October 1919, due to an order from Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, the British government in India established the Hunter Commission to investigate the actions of the Punjab Government under martial law. The commission consisted of seven members, four of whom were British. Meanwhile, M. K. Gandhi's close friend, Charles Freer Andrews, a priest of the Church of England, educator, and social reformer in India, arrived in Punjab. Mr. Andrews wrote to Gandhi about the dire situation in the region and urged him to come immediately and unite with everyone. At the same time, Mr. Madan Mohan Malaviya sent telegrams to Gandhi requesting his urgent presence in Punjab. Gandhi telegraphed the Viceroy yet again and eventually received permission to go to Punjab after a set period, arriving there in October 1919. When he reached the Lahore railway station, a large crowd of eager people welcomed him with high hopes. Gandhi noted that while all the major leaders in Punjab were imprisoned, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Pandit Motilal Nehru, and Swami Shradhanand were advocating for them. Gandhi, along with others, collectively decided to boycott the Hunter Committee and establish a parallel inquiry committee on behalf of the Congress. In this committee, M.K. Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Deshbandhu Citta Ranjan Das, Mr. Abbas Tyab, and Mr. Mukund Ramrao Jayakar were appointed, largely through the efforts of Pandit Malaviya. During this investigation, Gandhi had the chance to closely observe the villages and the people of Punjab. Being aware of the various atrocities inflicted upon the population, a report was created, and every statement in the report was supported as true. Following this, based on the recommendations of the Repressive Laws Committee, the Rowlatt Act and 22 other laws were repealed in March 1922.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The countrywide movement against the Rowlatt Act had a significant effect. It demonstrated Gandhi's power of nonviolent civil disobedience in opposing the unjust legislation. The international press extensively conveyed the British government's oppressive reaction and the organized nationwide strike by Indians. It generated sympathy and backing from liberal organizations overseas and also harmed Britain's global reputation. The violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrations, especially the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, completely revealed the authoritarian character of British governance. Although the success of the movement seemed belated to many, this partial surrender to the demands of the people was a victory for civil liberties. It also encouraged the Indian people, who were eager to continue their struggle for independence.

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