

Pakistan, spring of 1919: Centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

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In the late spring of 1919, green meadows in the fertile plains of the Punjab were acquiring a golden hue with the sun's rising radiance. It was the onset of harvest time. A century ago the near-absence of pollution, the air would have been fresh. With mustard yellow pastures in the periphery of the ripening wheat crops and the spring breeze imbued with fragrance of fresh foliage, gave spring its serene and alluring splendour.

For centuries, this was a season of joy and festivity for the tillers who would toil all year around and waited for this season when livelihood from their labour would materialise. It was celebration time. Men, women and children attired in bright dresses were in festive mood. Revellers danced and drank the special local brews, with drums beating and singings lyrics of love and gratification. This festival, called Baisakhi, aimed at rejoicing and anticipating plenteous harvests had been celebrated since times immemorial. In 1919, Punjab's main Baisakhi was to be held at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar on April 13. However, this year the jubilations were not to be. The merriments of the 1919 Baisakhi were drenched in innocent blood in one of the most atrocious massacres by the British imperialists in colonial India.

At the time, India and the Punjab in particular were feverish with political ferment. Spring had brought exhilarating winds of a hope for change from near and afar. Above all, the victorious Russian Revolution in 1917 instilled rousing audacity in the regions youth. The rebellious Ghadar Party and its heroic struggle had inspired courage and daring on a new generation in their struggle against the Raj. Indian soldiers returning from the First World War had brought home first hand news and information of the revolutions that were sweeping across Europe and elsewhere. At the end of war, the prices of rice, wheat, salt and other basic needs had skyrocketed. Likewise, the mass fury against the detentions of political activists was rising. All these factors were adding to the seething resentment amongst the populace.

The wily strategists of the British Imperialism were fully aware of the situation and had started employing more repressive measures to crush any possible uprising. They feared a resurgence of Ghadar-type revolt in Punjab. They were also obsessed by the potential impact of the Russian Revolution on India. As a pre-emptive measure the draconian 'Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919' - or the Rowlatt Act - was imposed in March 1919 by the Imperial Legislative Council.

The rebellious overtones in Punjab were palpable weeks before the day of Baisakhi congregation at Jallianwala. On Sunday April 13, the crowds had started to enter the Bagh's enclave from sunrise. By the afternoon, around 20,000 people had gathered at Jallianwala Bagh. Defiant speeches were delivered against the imperialist atrocities, deportations of revolutionaries, price hike and firing on protestors. There were also large number ordinary villagers who had come to Amritsar for celebrating Baisakhi with all the colours and rituals.

But the colonial authorities assumed another 'mutiny' was imminent and began preparations to crush it with brute force. Additional troops and heavy arsenal were ordered into Amritsar. That morning Colonel Reginald Dyer, who was assigned to lead the "operation", had conducted a march

of his troops through the city, announcing that any gathering would be “dispersed by force of arms if necessary”. The ordinary villagers who had come to celebrate Baisakhi at Jallianwala Bagh in droves from villages and towns far and wide didn’t exactly know what these orders actually meant. The troops made no effort to prevent people from assembling at the venue or to prevent activists from beating drums in the streets to mobilise masses for the meeting.

On reaching the venue, Col Dyer left the armoured cars with machine guns outside the Jallianwala enclave because the gate was too narrow for these to pass. The troops took positions. Still a vast majority did not believe they would be fired upon. There was no warning to disperse. The firing began suddenly and ruthlessly. One thousand six hundred and fifty rounds were fired within minutes, at least 379 persons including children were brutally murdered according to the official reports. Other relatively independent sources estimated over 1,000 deaths, with more than 2,000 wounded.

Such was the paranoia of the British officers that the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, Michael O’Dwyer, was ‘informed’ that, “a Russo-German Bolshevik organisation was behind the Rowlatt protests and was planning another hartal (strike) in which the red flag would be heaved up everywhere at the same time.” This further hyped the paranoia of the colonial administrators who gathered a huge force to be marshalled for crushing the uprising.

After committing the slaughter, Col Dyer defended himself: “I consider this is the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral, and widespread effect... it was my duty to produce...It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd; but one of producing a sufficient moral effect...not only on those present but more specially throughout the Punjab... must fire and inflict maximum injuries, because the British force must command fear, in a ‘native’ population.”

Long before this imperialist barbarity, Karl Marx wrote of the British rule in India: “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked...” Even before Marx main stalwart and apologist of British colonialism Lord Macaulay had once confessed to this savagery of the British ‘civilised terror’: “And then was seen what we believed to be the most frightful of all spectacles, the strength of civilisation without its mercy” In September 1857, Marx wrote in the New York Tribune: “The outrages committed by the revolted Sepoys in India are indeed appalling, hideous, ineffable - such as one is prepared to meet only in wars of insurrections, of nationalities, of races, and of above all of religion... However... it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England’s own conduct in India... To characterise that rule, it suffices to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy. There is something in human history like retribution, and it is a rule of historic retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself...”

Lord Macaulay was a leading member of the Supreme Council of India between 1834 and 1838, who considered Indian society and languages as pedestrian and inferior. Macaulay divided the world into civilised nations and barbarism, with Britain in his view representing the high point of civilisation. Macaulay was also the main protagonist in abolishing Persian as the official and educational language of India before the British occupation. He was the main architect of the imperial jurisprudence introduced in the colonies. After the revolt of 1857 his jurisprudence imparted for the colonies became known as The 1860 Indian Penal Code. This jurisprudence is still practised as the legal system of India, Pakistan, Singapore, Srilanka, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and other former British colonies.

Macaulay also destroyed the educational and vocational system of learning in the subcontinent

replacing it with western education and creating a native anglicised elite that would be the crucial buffer and support to perpetuate the British colonial rule. He wrote, "I feel... that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, - a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."

Ironically, colonial apologists portray Jallianwala Bagh as a "monstrous" exception to the otherwise benign rule. This brutality is often presented as a one off accidental act committed by one exceptional villain Dyer. Speaking on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the British Parliamentary debate on 8 July 1920, Winston Churchill had said, "That is an episode which appears to me to be without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire. It is an event of an entirely different order from any of those tragical occurrences, which take place when troops are brought into collision with the civil population. It is an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event, which stands in singular and sinister isolation." Churchill's jugglery of words was a futile and deceptive attempt to portray the tyrannical and brutal character of the British Raj as a civilised entity and the Dyer massacre as an exception. The Jallianwala massacre was a product of the systemic racism, superiority complexes and colonial brutality characteristic of the British Raj.

Post-1947, Subcontinent's official historians and elitist representatives present this tragic event from a nationalist perspective rather than the class essence of this struggle. In fact, the oppressed regardless of their religious backgrounds were active in the struggle against the Raj along with its coercive state and system. Secondly, in 1919, the two-nation theory was unheard of amongst the masses.

In Pakistan, the mainstream narratives mention Jallianwala massacre as 'Indianised', Sikh, or foreign event that had nothing to do with the people in western Punjab after its bloody bifurcation in 1947. The mayhem and savagery that this gruesome partition had unleashed repeated the Jallianwala barbarity throughout Punjab, its meadows, hamlets and waterways soaked and flowed with innocent blood. In the last analysis the responsibility of religious genocide, rape and devastation of Punjab lies squarely on the Punjabi ruling classes. These elites had used religion, sectarianism, ethnicity, caste, creed and communal prejudices to whip up hatreds at the behest of the imperial aggressors in their wild lust for having greater gains to wealth and power after the departure of the British. Punjab was cleaved in blood and its toilers particularly women were raped, slaughtered and desecrated in the harrowing religious frenzy that wrecked havoc in this land of five rivers. More than 1.7million perished in this holocaust and more than twenty million uprooted from their ancestral villages and hearths where they had lived for innumerable generations. It was the brutal vengeance of the British imperialists against a people who had dared to challenge the Raj by their valiant struggles from the Ghadar party to Bhagat Singh's HSRA (Hindustan Socialist Revolutionary Association). Several rebellious movements against the British had their origins and roots in Punjab. This targeted brutality was similar to the British Raj's revenge against the chivalrous resistance and fight of Pashtoons against the European occupiers on both sides of the Durand Line and the defiance and revolts against the colonialists in Bengal and others.

In India, nationalists and religious groupings present the Jallianwala tragedy as an attack against their particular political tendency or sect that represents vested interests of some ruling classes section. From the Hindutva chauvinists to the Congress's secular nationalists present it as an episode that was part of their past struggle and ideological heritage. Certain Sikh sects define it as a calamity inflicted upon the Khalsa tradition. If one can cut across historical distortions, the period around 1919, in the wake of a victorious Bolshevik revolution, signifies a vivid and intense epoch of socialist and class struggle in the Subcontinent.

The freedom struggle including Jallianwala Bagh is the legacy of the struggling toilers of the region.

The Raj had incarcerated the two key leaders from Amritsar, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlu and Dr. Satya Pal in 1919. The tragic Baisakhi rally on April 13 was demanding their release. The imperialist repression and the protesters struggles for their release had nothing to do with their religious beliefs. Despite Ghandi's presence, religious identity and prejudices had not started to dominate politics in those stormy events of class struggle.

The decades long liberation struggle in the united India went through different phases. Revolutionary tendencies spearheaded the movement at most militant and courageous episodes of the struggle. Only in the later stages, after the Communist Party of India (CPI), aligned with the Raj on the plea of 'anti-fascism' following the pacts in Yalta, Tehran and Potsdam between Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt and Truman that the Congress and the Muslim League got to the helm of the divided movement from 1940s onwards. Only after the defeat of the 1946 revolution that had been sparked by the sailors revolt, religious reaction came to the fore.

There is another aspect to Jallianwala massacre and mainstream portrayal of such episodes of colonial brutalities. The post-colonial elites have proved equally vicious and ruthless against the teeming millions of the ex-colonial countries. These upstarts have used such incidents of the tyrannous rule of their colonial masters to undermine their own cruelties and despotic rulership and build their 'nationalist', religious' and patriotic image.

In South Africa, Marikina Massacre in August 2012 was no less brutal than the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 under the Apartheid. In 1937, Japanese Army committed the Nanking Massacre or the Rape of Nanjing in China whereby thousands of Chinese were slaughtered while 20,000 to 80,000 women were raped. But in 1989, Chinese troops stormed through Tiananmen Square killing and arresting thousands of protesters. Tiananmen protestors were singing the workers revolutionary Internationale when they were attacked. The regime that ordered this repression was restoring free market economy. The long list of such examples in the former colonial states goes on.

In South Asia, post-colonial states are a continuation of the regime under the Raj in so many ways. The colour, race, religion, ethnicity or gender of the rulers changed but the oppressive character of the exploitative system and capitalist state remained in place.

Despite the democratic pretensions the Indian ruling classes have been ruthless against the oppressed classes. In 1928, on the question of post colonial rulership, Bhagat Singh had lectured his comrades: "We don't want independence! We don't want independence where the English rulers are replaced by the local 'brown' elites. We don't want freedom where this wretched system of exploitation and slavery continues to torment the toiling classes." Twenty years before the so-called independence Bhagat Singh had sensed the danger and started to put up a fight against the rule of Lord Macaulay's "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." This seven-decade rule by this implanted elite has devastated one of the oldest and the richest civilisations in the world.

The Indian state has re-invented many more Rowlatt Acts today. Such laws as TADA and POTA are no less vicious. From Punjab to Manipur and from Tamilnad to Assam the military aggression of the mighty Indian state against those struggling for freedoms were replications of colonial belligerence. Nehru's romanticised vale of Kashmir has been converted into a massive Jallianwala Bagh by the Indian state particularly after the imposition of the Hindutva regime under Narendra Modi. The 'Indian' Dyers have outfoxed their British version. State forces firings on unarmed protestors, landless peasants, Dalits, labourers, religious minorities and others who dare to put up formidable protests have become a norm. The Modi regime has practically a colonial position on Kashmir treating it literally as an occupied territory. Indian democracy is a deception for the poor and a gadget for the rulership of the rich and mighty.

In Pakistan ordinary people suffered innumerable brutalities and repressions, particularly under the Zia military regime, that traumatised the society. Apart from the atrocities perpetuated against the workers and left wing activists, socio-cultural life was poisoned with reaction that continues to destabilise Pakistan as long as the country remains wedded to present system. The slaughter of colony textile mills workers at Multan in 1978 and the genocide of 1983 in Sindh are heinous analogies of the Jallianwala massacre. In the post 1947 period the state's operations in Baluchistan and other regions bet ray a colonial mind-set and aggression. The sufferings of the masses during the so-called democratic regimes never lessened either.

The Jallianwala struggle has yet to achieve victory! The struggle must go forward!

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