

ROWLATT AGITATION IN MEERUT

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The Rowlatt Act, 1919 proved to be a turning point in Gandhian politics of Satyagraha and its application on a nationwide scale. On 6 February, 1919 two bills were placed in the Imperial legislative council by the Government of India. These bills were named after Justice Rowlatt. As the world war ended, the special powers acquired by the imperial government expired. The British now needed new laws to suppress so-called 'anarchical crimes'. The rising wave of nationalism and revolutionary tendencies posed threats to the security of the British Empire in India. The Rowlatt Bills were aimed to put down national aspirations. These bills sparked off terrible opposition in India. The popular sentiments were expressed in the pithy slogan : "Na vakil, na apil, nadalil." (*No advocate, no appeal, no plea.*) The war years and subsequent development had created conditions for political struggle to combat the subversive foreign rule. A loose infrastructure for such a struggle was already there in the form of local Congress Committees,¹ home rulers,² bar associations³ emerging Khalifatists etc. Gandhi canalized the fast emerging discontent by calling the nation to oppose 'the devilish act' of Rowlatt through a nationwide Satyagraha against it and thereby created a new fealty to the political nation.⁴

The followers of Islam in India were opposed to the British attitude against Turkey and considered Britain as one of the greatest enemies of Islam. The supporters of Islam, especially the fundamentalist Muslim community, were so annoyed with Britain that they started to cooperate with the Hindu nationalists and the Congress. The revolutionaries, such as Obedullah, Barakatullah and Hyder Raza, joined hands with staunch Hindu revolutionaries. They also made an effort to inspire Muslim states to attack India.

This disposition of the revolutionaries, of the Home Rule League and supporters of Islam could be seen in 1918 when the Congress and Muslim League sessions were held simultaneously in Delhi. The supporters of the Home Rule League took over the Congress meetings but Annie Besant was anxious to cool it down. We find an indication of this thing from her advice that she rendered to the young supporters of home rule to control their activities. However, her voice was suppressed by the supporters

of home rule under the leadership of C.R. Das.⁵

Britain was asked to keep its word that it made at the time of war. The plan for Montford Reforms was in the offing, but its insufficiency could be gauged certainly. The end of the war was quite troublesome for Muslims, because they feared that Britain and its allies might dismember the great Otoman empire, whose rulers were both temporal and spiritual head, the Khalifa, of the Muslim world.

Despite reasoning and speeches of Gandhi, the Viceroy did not free Ali brothers. The British policy was very stringent during the 4-year period of the war, sometimes very inciting too. India had contributed a large sum of money and troops in the hope that they would get freedom, democracy and rights. But all their hopes were dashed to pieces. What did India ultimately get? No even an inch of area was given to India. What India got in return of the war was economic insolvency, wooden feet for the handicapped people, widows and orphans, and hollow admiration, and few Victoria Crosses for enormous sacrifices in the World War. The unpolitical and autocratic attitude of the government dissatisfied and ashamed the people in the greatest measure.

Evaluating the psychological condition of Indians, James Meston has rightly stated that a vague feeling pervaded everywhere that something unique was about to occur at the end of the War, they would get gifts and concessions and India would be rewarded at the political level.⁶ What Indians got to the contrary were Rowlatt bills which were described by Gandhi as unjust and contrary to the principles of justice and independence, on which the security of the whole Indian community and state depended.⁷ Gandhiji's heart rent with a sentiment and he expressed his resolve in its opposition.

Gandhi was in the process of starting the disobedience movement against the Rowlatt Bill that took the form of Act after it was passed into a law. He proposed for a nationwide strike on 30 March, 1919, and then changed it to 6 April. The day of the strike was to be observed as the day of dishonor and prayer.⁸ The satyagrahis (followers of Satyagraha) called on to observe a 24 hour fast on this day and to organize public meetings in all parts of the country where the government would be asked to take back the black law.⁹

The Congress organization at Meerut convened a meeting to oppose the Rowlatt bills. It was convened in February 1919 under the chairmanship of Pt. Sitaram. The bills were severely criticized and the government was impressed upon to take them back. The meeting ended with the passage of

unanimous resolution which read :

"That this meeting strongly condemns the provisions of the Criminal Emergency Powers Bill and the Indian Law Amendment Bill, which, if passed into law, will infringe seriously with the rights and liberties of the people and which constituted a menace even to all legitimate public activities and urges that they be withdrawn or at least may not be proceeded with any further for the present"¹⁰

On 27 February, 1919, the Congress convened a public meeting for the people of Meerut with the support of followers of Islam under the aegis of Muslim League and District Congress Committee. The meeting was convened at Town Hall. The hall was full to the capacity. The sentiments of opposition bordering on hatred were at the peak. An eye witness account wrote about the meeting : "It bubbled with enthusiasm and, the hall was full to overflowing, and the assembly represented men of almost all classes."¹¹ The meeting was chaired by Lala Madhusadan Dayal, and the other important people who joined the meeting included Rai Saheb, Chaube Chhakkan Lal, Qazi Nazmuddin, Babu Ghasiram, H.B. Mukherjee, Ismail Khan, Shaan Hussain, Babu Ram Kripal Singh, Babu Umrao Singh, N.N. Gangoli, Jaini Rai Saheb, Pt. Sitaram, Raghuvar Dayla, Seth Gopinath and Dr. Murari Lal Goyal.¹² The meeting adopted two resolutions, the first was moved by Sita Ram and second by Shakir Hussain. The resolution ran thus :

"That this public meeting of the citizens of Meerut protests emphatically against the introduction of Rowlatt Bills even as temporary measure in the Imperial legislative council and strongly deprecates the reference of the same or the select committees, and urges the Government of India to drop the Bills altogether."¹³

The second resolution was moved by Raghuvar Dayal and was seconded by Babu Ghasi Ram. The resolution read :

"That the public meeting of the citizens of Meerut, while appreciating the united opposition of the non-official members of the Imperial legislative Council, hopes that they will continue to preserve the same firm attitude of opposition against the placing of the Bills on the statute-book as a permanent or temporary measure."¹⁴

The speaker emphasized upon this fact that if the new bills took the form of a law, then it would force the entire country in the lap of unprecedented revolution. Meerut continued to be the important

centre of revolutionary movement being run under the leadership of Ras Behari Bose. Three important conferences were summoned in Meerut – Meerut Political Conference, UP Industrial Conference and UP Political Conference. Gandhi was opening up the vista for opposition to the Rowlatt bill through disobedience movement, an opportunity that the passing of this bill had given him.

Gandhi convened a Satyagraha council in order to oppose the bills¹⁵. He said that the Satyagraha Sabha was being constituted as a separate organization as all efforts to execute the Satyagraha have been belied through the present institutions.

Gandhi advocated to adopt the disobedience movement in opposing the Rowlatt bills. The only aim of the Satyagraha Sabha was to take back and oppose the Rowlatt bills¹⁶. After the Rowlatt bills were passed into an act, Gandhi considered about a general strike¹⁷. Rajgopalachari and other friends welcomed this view. 30 March, 1919 was fixed as the date for this strike, which was later changed to 6 April. This day of strike was observed as a day of disrespect and prayer.

The outline of the programme was constructed by Gandhiji¹⁸. The Satyagraha was begun with the observance of 24-hour fast on that day.

The outline of the Gandhiji's programmes was taken seriously in the whole of country. On 6 April, 1919 complete strike was observed in each corner of India including towns and villages. Mahatma Gandhi noted with satisfaction and surprise, "This was unique phenomenon."

The secretary to the government of the United Province in Uttar Pradesh intimated the Home Secretary about the observation of strike in all towns of the province. A large number of public meetings were organized, shops were kept shut and vehicles did not ply. The Secretary expressed satisfaction at the peacefulness of the strikes. No unseemly incident was reported from anywhere other than Ghaziabad.

A public meeting was organized in the grounds of Town Hall in the morning which was attended by a large number of people. Such a large number of people was never ever seen in any other political or any other meeting¹⁹.

Sitaram wrote to B.H. Burton, "There was hardly an Indian in Meerut who did not join in the movement in opposition to the Rowlatt Act²⁰. The success of the movement can be gauged from the fact that the students of Meerut took over the responsibility of holding the strike in the Nauchandi Fair. The

Nauchandi Fair is not only the largest fair of northern India for the people of Meerut and surrounding area, but it also symbolized Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. The movement was led by a student of Meerut College, Vishnusharan Dubish. The strike was greatly successful. So successful the strike was that the hawkers who sold eatables (chat, fruits, etc.) did not agree to sell them for a price two times over. The nationalist sentiments spread far and wide and the local officials were so terrified that the district magistrate had to postpone the holding of the Nauchandi darbar to following day²¹.

Passing of the Rowlatt Act was in fact a milestone in uniting the nationalist sentiments. The opposition by extremist and liberal politicians was started all over the country.

The chief secretary of the United Province said that a great ripple has been caused in the Indian empire and United Province as a result of the passing of Rowlatt act. People displayed excitement and meetings were held in all small and large towns for the abolition of the act²².

This was the first task undertaken by Gandhi in opposing the British government. In fact, this was the first political action of India.²³ Gandhi utilized this act to inculcate a sentiment for struggle for more freedom. Gandhi wrote to Rabindranath Tagore, "Though this has been guided for opposition to the act alone, yet it is a struggle for freedom for a respectable nation."²⁴

Gandhi now became a symbol of emerging nation and of a new integration. It was never observed before that the people of all castes, religions and beliefs came together and joined in the movement.²⁵

The strike on 6 April, 1919 had been conducted peacefully. However, a wave of excitement was created when Gandhi was arrested on 11 April, 1919 on his way to Delhi, and he was sent to an anonymous place. A strike was started in Delhi once again as soon as the news of his arrests reached there.²⁶

The district officers imposed Section 144 within the municipal limits of the town and a ban was imposed on all processions, public meetings and demonstrations. Despite government ban, the invigorated people of Meerut decided to organize a public meeting in Surajkund, just outside the municipal limits in order to avoid direct confrontation and conflict. Ten to fifteen thousand people joined the meeting and listened to the speeches against the government.²⁷

Although the meeting on 11 April 1919 was conducted outside the municipal limits of Meerut

town, yet the district officials were worried by it. The events of 11 April 1919 gave a serious challenge to the district officials. C.L. Alexander, district magistrate of Meerut thought of pre-empting the meeting. For it, he invited 25-30 leaders of Rowlatt movement to a meeting in Town Hall on 10 April, 1919.²⁸ The district magistrate opened his speech with the remarks that if the agitators gave an assurance that the movement would be suspended, then nothing was required to be said.

When no such assurance was given, the magistrate started to talk ill of the audience. He took cognizance of the events of 27 February and 6 April, and recommended action against those events in harsh words. The organizers of this movement were accused of spreading fear and forcibly shutting shops by fair and foul means. He said that he knew that the speeches were delivered in order to create an excitement in the people's mind. Finishing his speech, he said that he did not want to say so, but it was his duty to maintain peace in the capacity of the district magistrate. He threatened of stern action by the police and military and warned of serious consequences.

For an objectives assessment of Muslims' participation in Rowlatt agitation, and later on in Non-cooperation Movement, it is desirable to recall Muslims' linkage with Turkey, the rural of which was revered as the spiritual head, the Caliph, of the Crescent Worlds. Turkey fought against England in the First World War. England had assured that Turkey's interest will be safeguarded. At the end of the war, the promises held out to Muslims were forgotten. On the contrary the Turkish Empire was dismembered, and its territories were given to European powers. It deepened their anger.

The Muslims of Meerut convened a large assembly at Town Hall on 20 February, 1919²⁹ under the chairmanship of Sheikh Wahiuddin. Numerous resolutions were passed in this assembly, in which the opposition to the relinquished membership of Turkey was registered and the British government was reminded of its promises that it made to Indian Muslims about Khilafat. Dr. M.A. Anasari addressed to the all India Muslim league in 1918. The proposal of the Muslim League was approved and the letter of Agha Khan dispatched to Mr. Walfour, Secretary of State for India, was also supported. The Muslim volcano of anger might burst any time resulting into grave violence. Under the circumstances Mahatma Gandhi considered the Satyagraha as the only remedy in the very fierce situation obtaining in the whole country due to the Khilafat movement,³⁰ He supported the question of Khilafat, and attended the Khilafat council convened in Bombay on 18 September, 1919 and addressed it. A proposal was passed in

this council for the fulfillment of the promises by Britain which were related to the future of Turkey. A decision was taken to observe the Khilafat Day on 17 October, 1919. Gandhi dispatched letters to the press. The Navjivan newspaper emphasized upon the significance of the Khilafat Day. All emphasized that 17 October be observed as a day of fasts and prayers, and anticipated that every Hindu man and woman would observe the Khilafat Day on 17 October³¹, and thus Gandhi made his sacred mark on Hindu-Muslim unity.³² This day was observed as a strike day also. Gandhi, on the basis of his past experiences, advised the people not to take out processions and hold public meetings.³³ The people of the town observed complete strike as per the programme of the Khilafat Day.³⁴

It was decided to open a branch of the Central Khilafat committee in Meerut also. Decision to send representatives to the Khilafat conference to be held in Delhi in November 1919 was also taken. Gandhiji immediately called on Muslims to boycott those conferences until the Muslim demands were met.³⁵ And that the Delhi conference should include the causes of unjust actions undertaken in Punjab. Gandhiji was against joining these two questions.³⁶ He said that the question of the Punjab wrongs could not be undone, only its wounds could be healed. Gandhiji opined that only one question should be taken up at one time. As far as the question of Khilafat was concerned, Gandhiji said, "We can no more wait about it because its decision is obvious and we will have to present our sentiments to the world before the final decision."³⁷

At that time Gandhiji was thinking of such a plan in his mind by which the British government could be compelled to fulfill its promises regarding the Khilafat. Some speakers talked of approving the proposal for boycotting the British clothes, but Gandhiji did not like this idea of boycott. At last, Gandhiji thought out its solution in the form of non-cooperation movement, the multidimensional meaning of which even he could not fully understand.³⁸ He thought that it was an unpaid or inseparable right to not to cooperate, they should not be compelled to keep the government degrees and honours, what is the use of being in the government service when the same government belies us for such great causes as Khilafat. We have no other way out but to not cooperate. So we are eligible to non-cooperate with the government when we have been deceived by the government.³⁹

Ali brothers were invited to visit Meerut. They came to Meerut on 14 January, 1920.⁴⁰ According to the Independent, it appeared as if the placed around Ghantaghar and Town Hall had transformed into a veritable sea of human heads.⁴¹ Ali brothers were welcomed in the meeting. They expressed gratitude

to the people of Meerut. They congratulated them for their zeal. Their procession started from Ghanta Ghar, went through Bajaja, Tehsil, Budhana Darwaja⁴² and arrived at the massive grounds of Barfkhan⁴³ where it changed into an assembly. The proceedings of the public meeting were started under the chairmanship of Pt. Sitaram with the singing of Bande Mataram. Ali brothers were presented two letters of greetings, one by the Hindu community and the other by the Muslim community.

Mohammad Ali said that now Meerut was no more a dormant town, it vibrated with the new life force and energy.⁴⁴ Pt. Sitaram encouraged called upon the people to adopt Swadeshi, it would enable to eradicate the hunger of millions of people of India.⁴⁵

H.H. Commilton, Commissioner of Meerut wrote a letter to Pt. Sitaram on 17 January, 1920.⁴⁶ The presence of Pt. Sitaram in the massive assembly of Ali brothers had become a cause of anxiety for him. He was disappointed to know that he not only invited them but also went to Delhi to receive them. The commissioner further said that being an important Hindu politician, it was his brothers were welcomed in the meeting. They expressed gratitude to the people of great responsibility to not take part in the movement and also stop those students and illiterate people who were influences by them.

As soon as district magistrate took his seat, Pt. Sitaram took the stage. He thanked the district magistrate for the solid⁴⁷ advice. He reminded to the guardian if law and order that the events of 27 February peacefully displayed cool-mindedness. He objected to the district magistrate's remark that the leaders had used any force during the strike of 6 April. He said that the whole movement was spontaneous and it was not an outcome of any individual effort. All leaders present there expressed their feelings in a constitutional way, rather than keeping their hearts at fire. This was their supreme duty. Pt. Sitaram clarified : We shall not be able to make our people agree to the provisions of the Rowlatt Act and, if needed, we shall hold public meetings legally. Pt. Sitaram's opposition to the act was in his capacity of an honourable and liberal person. He was not in agreement with the Gandhiji's Satyagraha ideology. It was clear in his speech that he did not know of any person who had taken an oath for Satyagraha or who had ever attempted to violate a law.⁴⁸

Barrister Raghuvar Dayal requested the district magistrate not to stop the right to hold public meetings. After that, Barrister Mohammad Ismail Khan expressed his inability to assure, and emphasized upon assuming systematic and peaceful disposition. The district magistrate threatened to ban the public meetings in future. He also said that the leadership of the movement were deceiving themselves

knowingly.⁴⁹ The district magistrate left the meeting in anger. These threats were not devoid of any essence. The local officers took the steps for suppressing the agitators and their associates. They closed down a reading room in Sadar Bazar, Meerut, because it contributed a large sum of money for buying extremist newspapers.⁵⁰ The local officers had been acquainted with its special role in the movement of Meerut Sewa Samiti. Even the private tourists were not beyond suspicion for local officers. The police watched them closely.⁵¹

All those places in Meerut where people gathered were brought under close watch of the police. The shopkeepers in the town were asked to give their names and their parents' name to the police and they were asked to name the newspapers to which they contributed.⁵² Sitaram, who had contributed Rs. 40,000 to the war relief fund and who was so far appreciated, was not fully kept under official observation.

The services of Sitram as honourable magistrate were ceased, because he had expressed his opposition to the provisions of the Rowlatt bills.⁵³ The advocates too had played an important role in running the Rowlatt movement. So, the district magistrate sent notices against some of them and the names of several advocates had been struck of the government list.⁵⁴ The licenses of some stamp sellers were withdrawn. These steps, however, did not succeed in undermining the enthusiasm of the people for the movement.

The foregoing account leads us to certain inescapable conclusion. The first and the foremost is the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political landscape who shed lusture on impending freedom struggle through adoption of new methods of struggle, what B.G. Tilak had done in Bombay Presidency driving the masses into struggle – Gandhi did it in the entire expanse of Indian territory. By means of Satyagraha he drew into the struggle class and the masses and thereby created a new fealty to the emerging concept of 'Political Nation'. The second place was a defiant attitude of the people towards the Government and its functionaries. No threats could stop the people of Meerut from mass agitation. Thirdly, the Hindu-Muslim solidarity and the resulting struggle of Khilafat and Non-cooperation were put on pedestal.

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