JALLIANWALA BAGH REVISITED

As we close in on the 103rd anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, SOMEN SENGUPTA recounts the terrible tale of horror at the hands of ruthless General Reginald Dyer on the fateful day

The Jallianwala Bagh has long been converted into a memorial and thousands of people on this day come to pay their respects to the martyred men, women, who were killed on that fateful day. But, lest the future generations forget, here is how the history unfolded:

April 11, 1919: GT Road between Jallandhar to Amritsar

In the womb of darkness, a motor car sped madly to cover 90 km of distance crossing jungles and small villages enroute. Rex, the man travelling on the back seat, was a Brigadier General who was ordered on that night to rush to Amritsar by his boss based at Lahore, the capital of undivided Punjab. Nervousness was writ large on his face.

It was past 9 pm when Rex or Reginald Dyer reached Amritsar station. Dyer rushed to a railway carriage with Miles Irving the Deputy Commissioner to have a brief of the violence that was rocking Amritsar for last three days.

March & April 1919: Punjab in tumult

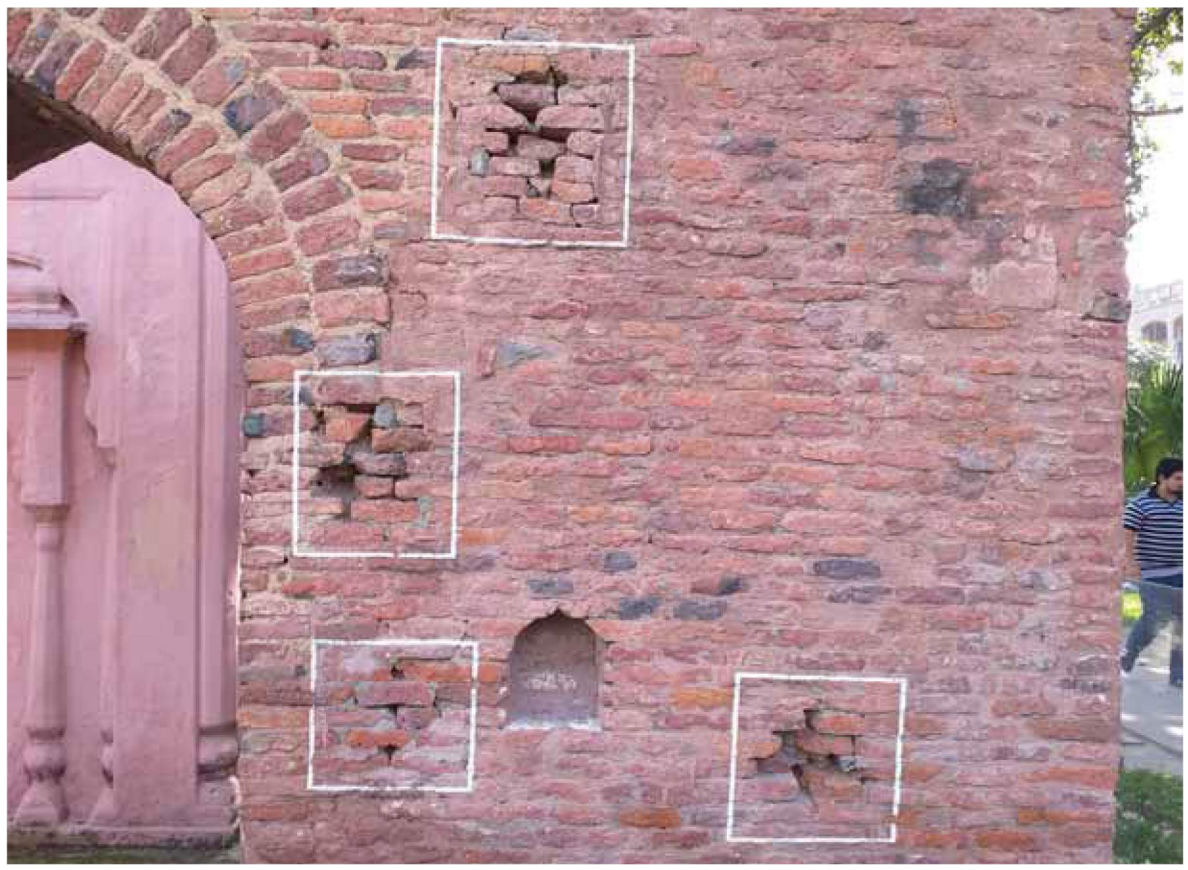
It was the summer of discontent for both Indian and British in April 1919. Leaders of National Congress were almost sure that at the end of 1st World War India will be given a chance to "develop self governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government in India as an integral part of British India". US President Woodrow Wilson's words that this was a war against "autocratic power" and for the sake of "liberation of its people", created a glimmer of hope in the Indians. India supported Great Britain in 1st world war .

Apart from recruiting lakhs of soldiers, Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi openly announced their support for Raj. Such was his enthusiasm that he even tried to send people from Ranchi to Mesopotamia for installing railway track for the sake of British Army's logistics. All expectation ended in frustration when instead of gaining any governing authority Indians got Rowlatt Act that was passed on March 21, 1919. The act gave Government an extraordinary power to quell sedition.

On April 9, Gandhi was prevented to enter Punjab and was arrested from Palwal near Delhi while two local leaders Dr Satyapal and Dr Saifuddin Kichlu were arrested. Next morning, they were deported to Dharamshala and that created an uncontrollable mob fury that turned destructive. Dyer got a vivid report from Irving, who on April 8 itself requested military support from Lahore.

April 10, 1919: A mob on rampage

The violence erupted in Amritsar after the killing of nearly 30 Indians on April 10 by police firing when they tried to cross Hall Gate Bridge to enter civil lines. It finally turned violent and destructive. From railway station to missionary school everything went on a rampage. Banks with European employees were set on fire after looting the cash. Telegraph posts were uprooted and Queen Victoria's statue was vandalised. Five Europeans were killed including 3 banks managers and one Railway employee.



Photographs :Virendar Singh Rana

April 12, 1919: A bleeding city & an antagonistic general

Dyer made several rounds of the city with Irving seeing charred banks, school, church and disturbing posters like "Kill & to be killed" or "Conquer the English Monkeys with bravery". Meanwhile news of similar vandalism started reaching from other parts of Punjab. At 10 am, news came that a mission hospital was attacked at Atari. Dyer, who belonged to a generation that had grown up by hearing gory outcome of violence on Europeans during 1857, was convinced that the greatest calamity since the mutiny was here.

April 13, 1919: 1650 bullets & an unarmed festive mob

Early morning, Dyer scaled the city and his men went on reading proclamation with drum beats. The proclamation was candid and gave a clear message of what rulers expected from Indians — to bring the city into order. No one was allowed to leave home without a pass, or go out on the street after 8 pm. No procession was allowed. Any gathering of four men was to be considered unlawful assembly.

> BRITISH BRUTALITY IN PUNJAB DURING THAT ERA WAS MORE OF FEAR OF ANOTHER MUTINY, IN WHICH SHADOW OF RUSSIAN SUPPORT WAS SEEN. HISTORIANS LATER PROVED THIS FEAR IRRATIONAL

While traveling in the town, Dyer faced jeers and hostile remarks from the public. By 1.30 pm, Dyer was back in his office. It is unclear as to when Dyer heard of a huge mob that had gathered at a place near Golden temple. But, he is said to have sprung immediately into action. With 25 Gurkhas and 25 Baluchi soldiers, all armed with .303 Lee Enfield, he rushed to a dusty wasteland of 7 acres — a closed enclave surrounded by walls from three side and open on one with narrow passage lined up with unimpressive brick walls. The place we know of today as Jallianwala Bagh — in two armoured cars.

A gathering of 20,000 people, coming mostly from rural areas had gathered to celebrate Baisakhi the harvest festival of Punjab, and had no clue of what was coming. Mild political speeches were being made to apprise the people of current affairs. Durgadas Vaidya, editor of *Waqt* newspaper was making a speech on the podium. Dyer did exactly that no civilised man would do. He ordered his people take their position and point guns at the crowds. Then suddenly, without giving any warning, he committed the horrific act of madness. He asked his men to pull the trigger on the mob.

A rain of bullets covered innocent people who had no clue why they were being targeted. Panic and confusion prevailed as people tried to cover themselves behind whatever shelter they could find. A stampede ensued, there was blood on the ground and bodies started falling like pack of cards. Horrific screams filled the air. Many tried to cross over a locked gate and others jumped into a well. Dyer ensured that every single bullet found a target. He was done with 379 dead bodies and more than thousand injured. Firing stopped after 10 minutes, but only when Dyer was sure that he had taught Punjab a great lesson.

Leaving the mayhem behind, Dyer returned to his office and announced curfew in the city. Electricity and water lines were cut off. No one was allowed to salvage the bodies of their relatives. It was left to dogs and vultures for the time.

Suppression was so tightly imposed that in next few days, no news of this massacre was reported in any newspaper. It was after few weeks that B G Horniman of *Bombay Chronicle* exposed it in big way and soon Calcutta's *Amrita Bazar Patrika* gave more details of the massacre. The report published in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was read by Lenin in Russia, who expressed his sympathy to Indian people through this paper.

April 14, 1919: An early morning message to Governor General

In Lahore, the sound sleep of Micheal O Dwyer, Governor General of Punjab, was interrupted when British officers from Amritsar knocked his door at 3 am. They were to update him about the firing of the last afternoon and death toll was reported at 200. This is enough to understand that firing at unarmed mob was a collective sin.

The aftermath: Support and brickbats

There was not much protest from elites of Punjab. The wealthiest king of Punjab HH Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala famous for his passion of wine, women, cricket and Rolls Royce cars did not utter a single word in protest of this killing. He rather rendered his full support to Dwyer's servile loyalty. On October 22, 1919, he hosted a gala banquet in honor of Lord Chelmsford, where he took pride in Punjab's supply of soldiers to British army during war and the excellence of English cricket. Needless to say it was supplemented by expensive Scotch whisky, gift, English band and tiger shoots in jungle.

Impossible it may sound, but Dyer attracted huge support both from India and Britain, even though the government of India tried its best to disassociate itself from the massacre. Dyer ,who faced the Hunter commission in Lahore, lost his job with soft degree of castigation though his act was described as "an iconic example of brutality". In India, European community and many organisations collected fund for Dyer. British historians like Brian Bond, Ian Colvin and Arthur Swinson supported Dyer's act.

November 19, 1919: "People would all come back laugh at me"

Seven months after the massacre, Dyer appeared before the investigation committee headed by Lord Hunter. The committee formed with European and Indians never came into agreement, but it clearly stated the act as "unfortunate" and "injudicious", though it approved another 37 cases of firing ordered by Dyer.

Dyer showed no remorse or repent for his act. He clearly said that any other action would make him a fool. He was unshakable in his believe that he saved British rule in India. Dyer lost his job but no benefit of retirement. In England, he got support of MPs from House of Lords. Later 26,317 pounds was amassed for him along with a jeweled sword as a mark of bravery that he shown to save crown of Queen.

British brutality in Punjab during that era was more of fear of another mutiny, in which shadow of Russian support was seen. Historians later proved this fear irrational. This cold blooded imperial ruthlessness did not end British Raj in India but it paved a new path of liberty, from where new age leaders, like Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and Vallabhbhai Patel, overtook and finally broke the shackles of slavery for the nation.