

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (Parliamentary Debates on General Dyer) A Centenary Reassessment

Somya

*Ph.D Research Scholar and Assistant Professor of English
Department of English, University of Delhi.*

Abstract: An investigation of the Parliamentary debates on General Dyer might help a researcher uncover the inhumane colonial psyche and offer fresh insights into comprehending the dynamics of colonial brutality in India with greater depth. A reconstruction of the debates that followed in the British Parliament can be one way to situate the massacre in the British Raj's outlook of retribution and their need to repress the growing native discontent. The reprehensible act of brute force to prevent the purported Indian sedition from spreading, and the blatant justification of General Dyer's cold blooded killings in the British Parliamentary Debates can well expose and render a true picture of the Empire's deep rooted racism and colonial prejudice. A reconstruction of the same is perhaps inevitable and revisiting the same might allow us comprehend how no amount of denouncement and censure of General Dyer's idiosyncratic act of can wipe out the excruciating memories of an incident that continues to be viewed as irrational till date, with no rational justification whatsoever of the brutal violence of British imperialism.

Keywords: Parliamentary Debates, General Dyer, Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, colonial brutality

I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed and I consider this is the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral and widespread effect it was my duty to produce, if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand the casualties would be greater in proportion. It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd; but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more specially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity¹.

This was the vicious and alarmingly frank explanation that Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer rendered in April 1919 after his merciless order² to fire into a large crowd of unarmed Indian civilians gathered in Amritsar for a peaceful meeting³, which killed over a 379 unarmed civilians and injured over a thousand. The Amritsar Massacre which remains etched in Indian collective memory was designed to strike terror and was nothing short of a spectacle of colonial violence. Over 1,650 bullets were fired without stop on unarmed civilians at Jallianwala Bagh which bears unequivocal testimony to the colonial atrocity and the imperial fear of the colonized natives. The analysis of this mass slaughter - the dreadful killings of hundreds of innocents - was dealt with after wards in the Parliamentary Debates in both the House of Lords and Commons in Britain. An exploration of these debates might help us uncover the colonial psyche and offer fresh insights into comprehending the dynamics of colonial brutality with greater depth. Hence, a reconstruction of the debates that followed in the Parliament in Britain can be one way to situate the massacre in the British Raj's outlook of retribution and their need to repress the growing native discontent. The unpardonable exercise of brute force to stop the purported Indian sedition from spreading, and the blatant justification of General Dyer's cold blooded killings in the British Parliamentary Debates can well expose the Empire's deep rooted racism and colonial prejudice. A reconstruction of the same is perhaps inevitable and revisiting the same might allow us to see how no amount of denouncement and censure of the idiosyncratic act of General Dyer can wipe out the painful memories of this incident which continues to be seen as irrational till date, with no justification whatsoever of the brutal violence of imperialism.

¹ Brig.-General R.E.H. Dyer to the General Staff, 25 Aug 1919, in Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol III: Amritsar (Calcutta, 1920), 203.

² The Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, was in quite in favour of exemplary terror to silence discontent among Indians against the dysfunctional British rule, especially following the world war. Dyer had purposely selected Gurkha and Baluch soldiers to shoot into the Jallianwala crowd to demonstrate that the British Raj would continue ruthlessly with the divide-and-rule policy to retain their power and subjugate the natives.

³ They were gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919, to protest against a draconian law imposed by the British which allowed internments sans a trial.

It is hard to be objective while drawing conclusions from such a horrific incident that was a cold and callous display of colonial evil. Deciphering the archival grain⁴, one might comprehend the mechanism in which violence worked that ultimately resulted in the mistrust of the colonial state. As the memories of the reprehensible act are revoked on its centenary, it inevitably calls for a public apology by the British. However, the question remains whether or not the British Empire took ample steps to alleviate the suffering and condemn Dyer's actions hundred years back. The British government had established a committee to inquire into the events, and the Hunter Report⁵ included ample evidences on the same.

Addressing the enduring distress of the massacre, one wonders if revisiting the debates would resolve the issue, but it also goes without saying that the sacrifice of thousands at Jallianwala Bagh did not go in vain. The incident did certainly shame the British and fuelled Indian efforts for complete independence. The perverted and insidious ways of colonial justice were such that General Dyer, the main perpetrator of the grave crime, was never convicted and so, got away easily with genocide. However, the then Commander-in-Chief in India had recommended Dyer's retirement, and the issue was brought before the Army Council for review, which was further accepted both by the Council and the British Cabinet. In the Parliamentary debate around the case, Winston Churchill, the secretary of state for War at the time, vehemently condemned Dyer's act as "an episode...without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire ... an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation".⁶ Churchill pointed out that "Frightfulness [was] not a remedy known to the British pharmacopoeia" and that Indians were "...citizens of [their] own common Empire."⁷ On July 8, 1920, in the House of Commons, Churchill further added that "...the crowd was neither armed nor attacking" and hence, General Dyer's claims to have been confronted by a revolutionary Indian army were unfounded. He exhorted the audience to not yield to "Bolshevism" or "terrorism" as the British Empire was capable of showing "pity and help" even in the most adverse of times, and so General Dyer's case was an aberration as "such ideas [were] absolutely foreign to the British way of doing business."⁸ Thus, even while holding Dyer culpable, Churchill plainly emphasized that the atrocity was 'un-British' in nature or not of British responsibility, and the crime was to be solely attributed to Reginald Dyer.

The Empire's need to detach itself from the violence was explained by citing its belief in longstanding ideals of civility, justice and kindness towards the defaulters. However, such a myth cleverly sought to bury the historical reality and attempted to conceal the inherent brutality perpetrated by the hegemonic British codes. Churchill's condemnation of the incident only preserved the constructed image of the empire, essential for its persistence⁹. Herbert Asquith, in the House of Commons claimed that "there [had] never been such an incident in the whole annals of Anglo-Indian history nor...in the history of Empire from its very inception down to the present day... It is one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history".¹⁰ By highlighting the incident's singularity, both Churchill and Asquith denounced the event, and yet protected and vindicated the 'benevolent'

⁴ The massacre promotes an insightful perceptive of both the past and present by interrelating them.

⁵ In 1919, an inquiry committee was set up under the chairmanship of Lord William Hunter which popularly came to be known as the Hunter Commission. The Hunter Committee that involved both British and Indian members condemned Dyer's actions terming it a 'misconception of duty' and so, he was eventually dismissed from the army. The reception that he got on his return in 1920 to UK, however, brought out the social and political anxieties of post-war Britain clearly. A conservative newspaper by the name of *The Morning Post* came out in full support of Dyer and funds were collected for the 'gallant' soldier whom many Brits considered as a hero undeservedly conspired against and betrayed by some British liberal politicians.

⁶ Winston Churchill quoted in Lachlan Cranswick (2008) Winston Churchill's Amritsar Massacre Speech - July 8th, 1920, U.K. House of Commons. Available at <http://lachlan.bluehaze.com.au/churchill/am-text.htm> (Accessed: 13 April 2019).

⁷ Speech in the House of Commons, July 8, 1920 "Amritsar" (<http://lachlan.bluehaze.com.au/churchill/am-text.htm>)

⁸ See, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1920/jul/08/army-council-and-general-dyer>

⁹ That Churchill's analysis of Jallianwala Bagh did not reflect any real guilt with respect to the lost innocent Indian lives, is evident from his attitude towards Indians during the second World War wherein he diverted the food stocks away from India that left millions starving.

¹⁰ Herbert Asquith, quoted in Lachlan Cranswick (2008) Winston Churchill's Amritsar Massacre Speech - July 8th, 1920, U.K. House of Commons. Available at <http://lachlan.bluehaze.com.au/churchill/am-text.htm> (Accessed: 13 April 2019).

image of the empire.¹¹ Nevertheless, the colonial guilt could neither be obscured nor marginalized since violence was being continually utilized by the Empire out of anxiety as a strategy to uphold their continued rule in the colony.

In July 1920, General Dyer was censured and had to retire. However, reactions in Britain to the massacre were quite mixed. Many condemned the act; especially the majority in the House of Commons¹² but umpteen members in the House of Lords vindicated Dyer's actions and presented him a sword adorned with the motto 'Saviour of the Punjab'. A very substantial majority in the House of Lords did not perceive the mass execution as an aberration and hence, tried to justify Dyer's grave, indefensible act as Dyer had himself pointed out that it was his horrible sense of 'duty' that led to the killings. Ben Spoor during the debate on Dyer contended that "Amritsar was not an isolated event any more than General Dyer was an isolated officer".¹³ Thus, the violence could not be perceived as fundamentally new and an un-British development but as a prime representation of colonial carnage and as signifying the crystallization of hegemonic British brutality. This ultimately alluded to the Indian discontent and thereby led to the upsurge of national movement and independence.

Edwin Montagu, the then Secretary of State for India, while opening the debate in the House of Commons, admitted that Dyer's service was marred by a deep blunder. Montagu made it clear to his audience that his main purpose was to seek the endorsement of the decision against General Dyer.¹⁴ While openly condemning his act, Montagu asserted that the justification of the massacre was impossible as,

"Once you are entitled to have regard neither to the intentions nor to the conduct of a particular gathering, and to shoot and to go on shooting, with all the horrors that were here involved, in order to teach somebody else a lesson, you are embarking on terrorism, to which there is no end". [Official Report, *Commons*, 8/7/1920]

He further added that "when you pass an order that all Indians, whoever they may be, must crawl past a particular place ... must forcibly or voluntarily salaam any officer of His Majesty the King, you are enforcing racial humiliation."¹⁵

Along with Churchill's refrained and opportunistic censure in the Parliament, came the blatant adulation for Dyer's actions which highlighted the pathology of the entire system. It was so debated in the British Parliament that the butcher of the innocent Indians was not given a fair and proper trial and thus, was heralded as a hero. Viscount Finlay, in the House of Lords, defended Dyer claiming that injustice was done to a very distinguished and deserving officer, and that the case was one of a nature which, in its effects in the future, may be deleterious to the efficiency of their public service. Moreover, the massacre was inevitable in the light of destruction of social order by the Indians. Finlay asserted "there is no human calamity at all comparable with the destruction of social order..." and that the British were committed to "making India one of the great free, self governing communities of the British Empire."¹⁶ He vociferously expressed his view that they "ought [to] make every possible allowance for the difficulties of [Dyer's] position...nothing can relieve him of the duty of exercising his judgment, of acting not only with vigour but with sense, and of keeping, even in moments of the gravest crisis, within the well-recognized limits of justice and humanity." Moreover, "...the crowd which General Dyer attacked, and which he had every right in the world to disperse, might not have been dispersed

¹¹ Such perceptions of Amritsar tragedy's singularity have been quite popular in the English historiography. Even while it remains the decisive moment wherein the Indians lost their trust in the British rule, it must be read as the biggest embarrassment in the history of British Empire in India.

¹² Mr. Montagu, Mr. Palmer, Colonel Wedgewood, Commander Kentworthy, Sir E. Carson, Secretary of State of war (Mr. Churchill), Mr. Bottomley, Commander Bellairs, Lieut- Colonel Croft, Sir W. Joynson – Hicks , Mr. Donald , Sir. W Davison, Lieut. Colonel Croft, Mr. Asquith, Mr. Spoor, Mr. Palmer, Sir Charles Oman, Earl Winterton, The Deputy Chairman, Lieut- General Sir Aylmer Hunterweston, Lieut-Colonel James, Mr. Mills , Mr. Bennett, Brigadier – General Surtees, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Hilton Young, Sir C. Oman, Mr. Rupert Gwynne , Viscount Wolmer , Mr. Clyner , Major General Sir J Davidson, Mr. Bonar Law, Mr. A Parkinson, were the main debaters in the House of Commons.

¹³ For Spoor, see Hansard, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxx, col. 1739.

¹⁴ It had already been approved by the Cabinet, the Hunter Committee, and the Commander in Chief in India and the Army Council.

¹⁵ See, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1920/jul/08/army-council-and-general-dyer>

¹⁶ See, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1920/jul/20/punjab-disturbances-the-case-of-general>

without some bloodshed.” To curb the Indian rebellion, the act was therefore necessary “...to produce a moral impression upon the Punjab.”¹⁷

The Commons voted in favor of the decision to censure Dyer. However, over half of all conservatives voted in support of Dyer strongly led by Sir Edward Carson who was his most passionate advocate. Edward Carson defended Dyer exhorting the audience, “to try to be fair, and to recognize the real position in which the officer [was] placed.” And so, the great principles of liberty which the Empire had laid down needed to be stretched to General Dyer as well as he had curbed Indian “rebellion and anarchy” and had “reconstitute[d] civil order out of chaos produced by a state of rebellion” which was “tantamount to a declaration of war.” He exhorted everyone to put themselves in Dyer’s position as “it saved a bloody outrage in the country.”¹⁸ Hence, it was unjustified to turn him into a scapegoat as there were clear evidences of a conspiracy to overthrow the Raj that also highlighted that the supposed invulnerability of English Empire in Asian colonies was plummeting.

Most of the Labour MPs and Independent Liberals in the Commons voted against General Dyer. Colonel Josiah Hedgewood condemned Dyer’s actions in the strongest terms. He stated that “this incident had divided for all time races, races that might otherwise have loved one another.”¹⁹ However, Sir William Joynson-Hicks affirmed that Dyer merely acted out of self-defense. He argued- “I am prepared to say General Dyer was right. I am convinced there was a real rebellion in the Punjab and that General Dyer saved India.”²⁰ Dyer’s defenders in the Commons claimed that he had only upheld the principle of minimal force as he was the sole person capable of judging best as to what constituted the necessary force. Likewise, Lieutenant Colonel Cuthbert James opined that General Dyer was the only right judge to decide on the amount of force required during that moment. Brigadier General Surtees also supported Dyer out rightly by claiming that the majority of Indians opposed the British presence in India and hence, the only way to remain in power was by force. And so, “Dyer applied that strong hand firmly, courageously, and promptly.”²¹ The M.P. Charles Palmer also agreed to the aforesaid. M.P. Ben Spoor challenged Churchill and Asquith’s opinion of a peaceful and benevolent empire. Spoor suggested that even while Dyer signified the ‘greatest menace to the security of the Empire’, he must not be turned into a scapegoat and the truly accountable people should be exposed and punished. He opined that it was not right to inflict a ruthless judgment on an individual officer.

Post the House of Commons vote to censure Dyer, that is, two weeks later, on the 20th of July; the House of Lords debated the case wherein the conservative opinion emerged triumphant. Dyer, the majority firmly stated, had been treated unjustly. The Scottish born Viscount Sir Robert Finlay had put forward a motion – That this House deplores the conduct of the case of General Dyer as unjust to the officer, and as establishing a precedent dangerous to the preservation of order in the face of rebellion. He clarified that he was not in favor of spreading frightfulness and so was the case with the gallant Dyer. Dyer was right to fire on the rebellious crowd and the government must vindicate him so that the confidence of the soldiers is not lost in the Empire. Lord Amptill agreed to this argument adding that “all persons not associated with the revolutionaries felt profound gratitude towards General Dyer for having saved them from the horrors of bloody anarchy.”²² Lord Finlay emphasized on the fact that Dyer did not receive a fair trial; Lord Sumner claimed that it was Dyer’s duty to put to death the Indian rebels even though they were unarmed. Finlay opined that a mutiny was forthcoming and Dyer had effectively stopped it with a collective and exemplary punishment. Sumner, speaking for the motion, also drew attention of the audience to the tragic misfortune of General Dyer and hence, blatantly supported his shameful deeds. Sumner questioned the *bona fides* of the inquiry against Dyer who he felt was entitled to face a fair trial. Hence, Dyer was projected as a saviour who imposed rationality on the irrational and disorderly crowd at Jallianwala Bagh.

Viscount Milner asserted that the issue was to be discussed reluctantly, as general Dyer had been treated with injustice. Stating that he wished to approach the matter without bias, he thought that Dyer’s actions were inevitable in order to restore the order and hence vindicated his violent act by claiming that the aim was to “make India one of the great free, self governing communities of the British Empire.” Milner believed that Dyer

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ See, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1920/jul/08/army-council-and-general-dyer>

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² See, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1920/jul/19/punjab-disturbances-the-case-of-general>

had in the moments of gravest crisis acted within “well recognized limits of justice and humanity.”²³ Thus, Milner justified the bloodshed by asserting that the deed was done in order to produce a moral impression upon Punjab for the restoration of social order. He also invoked the violence unleashed by other neighboring European countries like Prussia and Germany, only to point out that the British actions were not as violent in comparison. Thus, he asserted that the case has been exaggerated, and Dyer should be appointed back to his position if required. Such unrepentant defenses in the House of Lords highlighted the apathetic colonial mindset but they did not go unanswered. The Archbishop of Canterbury suggested that if the House of Lords voted in favor of Dyer they would definitely provoke the Indian nationalists. Lord Birkenhead pointed to the flawed Dyer’s judgment as the victims were subjected to “this vile racial humiliation which, [would be] tenacious in the memories and resentment of individuals and peoples than mere violence and blood.”²⁴ Lord Sinha asserted that the “acts flout the standards of propriety and humanity which the inhabitants not only of India but of the civilized world have a right to demand.”²⁵ Some of the Lords felt disgusted with Dyer’s crawling order for the crowd. The conservative Lord Salisbury, a bitter opponent of Indian self-government defended Dyer and pleaded for dropping the case against him as he had the right to fire. Dyer, Salisbury claimed, was only doing his duty and was successful in doing so. Some lords pointed out to the fact that Dyer was systematically deprived of a fair trial and that the Hunter Committee was not selected by fair means, while other Lords argued that Dyer had been turned into a scapegoat and hence, the censure was unreasonable. Mr. Palmer was one such defender. The Finlay’s Resolution was passed with 129 voting for Dyer and 86 against him. This clearly made Dyer feel vindicated in a way.

Thus, the British response to the disturbances in Punjab marked a clear travesty of the British system of justice that they were so eager to uphold and revealed the real face of the empire, which belied the expectations the Indians had from the political reforms brought out by the British. Both the personal culpability of General Dyer and the moral bankruptcy of imperialistic endeavors were laid bare. The failure of the British to issue a formal apology on the same exacerbated their crime and reflected on the colonial atrocities that ravaged the rich Indian social fabric for over 200 years. Hence, the Jallianwala massacre and the trauma it inflicted on the Indian minds beckons us all to give primacy to the issues of human freedom and dignity. Dyer’s justification for his unpardonable behavior and the explanations offered by the defenders in the Parliament betrayed the Empire’s own deep anxieties and their inability to maintain equilibrium in the face of immense opposition from around the world. Comprehending well the aforesaid debates, it is not difficult to ascertain that this massacre encapsulated and highlighted both tyranny and colonial oppression. It is therefore necessary to condemn the horror perpetuated by General Dyer on the Indian sentiments and celebrate the indomitable spirit of all Indians who had fought the British Colonial Raj.

References

- [1]. Alfred Draper, Amritsar: *The Massacre that Ended the Raj*, London: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 1981.
- [2]. House of Lords, *Debate*, “Punjab Disturbances: The Case of General Dyer,” (19–20 July 1920).
- [3]. House of Commons, *Debate*, “Punjab Disturbances. Lord Hunter’s Committee,” (8 July 1920).
- [4]. Ilahi, Shereen. *Imperial Violence and the Path to Independence: India, Ireland and the Crisis of Empire*, New York : I.B. Tauris, 2016.
- [5]. Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.
- [6]. *Parliamentary Papers: Disturbances in the Punjab. Statement by Brig.-General R.E. H. Dyer, C. B., 1920, Appendix C: Report on Operations*, 14 April 1919.
- [7]. Savita Nahrain, *The Historiography of Jallianwala Bagh*, London. 1994.

Links –

- [8]. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1920/jul/20/punjab-disturbances-the-case-of-general>
- [9]. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1920/jul/08/army-council-and-general-dyer>
- [10]. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1920/jul/08/punjab-disturbances>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.