

# JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE: 'DEEP REGRET' IS SIMPLY NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Relevant for: Modern India | Topic: National Movement (1919-1939) Era of Mass Nationalism

Though no one was holding their breath, there was some expectation of a British apology on the occasion of the centenary of the horrific Jallianwala Bagh massacre, more so since the demand came this time not from Indians alone but also from a strong contingent of British MPs across political parties. British Prime Minister Theresa May finally came out with: "[We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused.](#)"

Words are important, especially in the heavily-nuanced English language, and those who invented that language certainly know how to use them. One can imagine the careful drafting in Whitehall that would have gone into formulating the Prime Minister's statement. For comparison, in a press conference in Brussels the next day, Ms. May said that she "sincerely regretted" her failure in delivering a Brexit deal so far. "Deeply" is admittedly stronger than "sincerely", but the nature of contrition expressed is identical.

The second aspect of the statement that stands out is its passiveness — "what happened", "the suffering caused". There is no hint of agency here; this could well be the statement of any observer and not of inheritors of the empire that committed the atrocity. The blandness too is disturbing: one would have expected some sympathy for the victims or their descendants and some reference to the brutality of the massacre.

Let us recall "what happened". On April 13, 1919, Baisakhi day, following unrest in Amritsar after protests against the Rowlatt Act, Brigadier General (temporary rank) Reginald Dyer took a strike force of 50 rifles and 40 khukri-wielding Gurkhas into an enclosed ground, Jallianwala Bagh, where a peaceful public meeting of 15,000-20,000 was being held. Immediately and without warning, he ordered fire to be opened on the crowd. The firing of 1,650 rounds was deliberate and targeted, using powerful rifles at virtually pointblank range. The "suffering caused" included several hundred dead and many times more wounded. The officially accepted figure of 379 dead is a gross underestimate. Eyewitness accounts and information collected by Sewa Samiti, a charity organisation point to much higher numbers. Non-Indian writers place the number killed at anything between 500 to 600, with three times that number wounded.

More was to follow after the proclamation, two days after the massacre, of Martial Law in Punjab: the infamous crawling order, the salaam order, public floggings, arbitrary arrests, torture and bombing of civilians by airplanes — all under a veil of strictly enforced censorship.

Let us look next at what was done. After calls for an investigation, including by liberals in Britain, a Disorders Inquiry Committee, soon to be known by the name of its Chairman, Lord Hunter, was set up. In his testimony, Dyer asserted that his intention had been to punish the crowd, to make a "wide impression" and to strike terror not only in Amritsar but throughout Punjab. The committee split along racial lines and submitted a majority and minority report. The majority report of the Hunter Committee, using tactically selective criticism, established Dyer's culpability but let off the Lieutenant Governor, Michael O'Dwyer. The minority report written by the three Indian members was more scathing in its criticism. By then Dyer had become a liability and he was asked to resign his command, after which he left for England. This decision for a quiet discharge was approved by the British Secretary of State, Edwin Montagu, and, after an acrimonious debate, also by the House of Commons. The conservative Lords however took a different tack and rebuked the government for being unjust to the officer. Similar sentiments in

Dyer's favour came from the right-wing press — the *Morning Post* started a fund for him which collected £26,000 — as well as from conservative sections of the public who believed he had saved India for the empire. Rudyard Kipling, who had contributed £10 to the fund put an ambivalent comment on the wreath he sent to Dyer's funeral in 1927: "He did his duty as he saw it."

Now what has already been said: The speech that carried the day in the House of Commons in 1920 was that of Winston Churchill, no fan of Gandhi and his satyagraha. He called Dyer's deed "an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in sinister isolation"; privately he wrote that the "offence amounted to murder, or alternatively manslaughter". Significantly, Churchill, likening the event to "Prussian" tactics of terrorism, said that this was "not the British way of doing things". In other words, he was resorting to British exceptionalism: he was hanging out Dyer to dry as a rogue officer, while saving the larger colonial enterprise as benign.

Dyer was certainly rogue, but he was not alone. He was one of a line of several such — John Nicholson, Frederick Cooper, J.L. Cowan — who resorted to severe disproportionate violence in 1857 and after the 1872 Kuka rebellion; he was also part of the despotic administration led by O'Dwyer (later assassinated by Udham Singh in 1940) which emboldened and then exonerated him. In 2013, then Prime Minister David Cameron quoted the same Churchill epithet of "monstrous", adding that this was a "deeply shameful event in British history" and "we must never forget what happened here." The Queen had earlier termed it as a "distressing example" of past history. Again, general homilies with hands nicely off and no admission of a larger culpability of racialised colonial violence that underpinned imperialism.

Deep regret is all we may get instead of the unequivocal apology that is mandated. The expectation could be that time will add more distance to the massacre, making these calls for apology increasingly an academic exercise. We will no doubt also be advised to forgive and move on. The fact remains that there are many ways to heal a festering wound between nations, as Canada's apology for the Komagata Maru shows; clever drafting is not one of them.

*Navtej Sarna is a writer and former High Commissioner to the U.K. and Ambassador to the U.S. He is a member of the Jallianwala Bagh Centenary Commemoration Committee. The views expressed are personal*

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