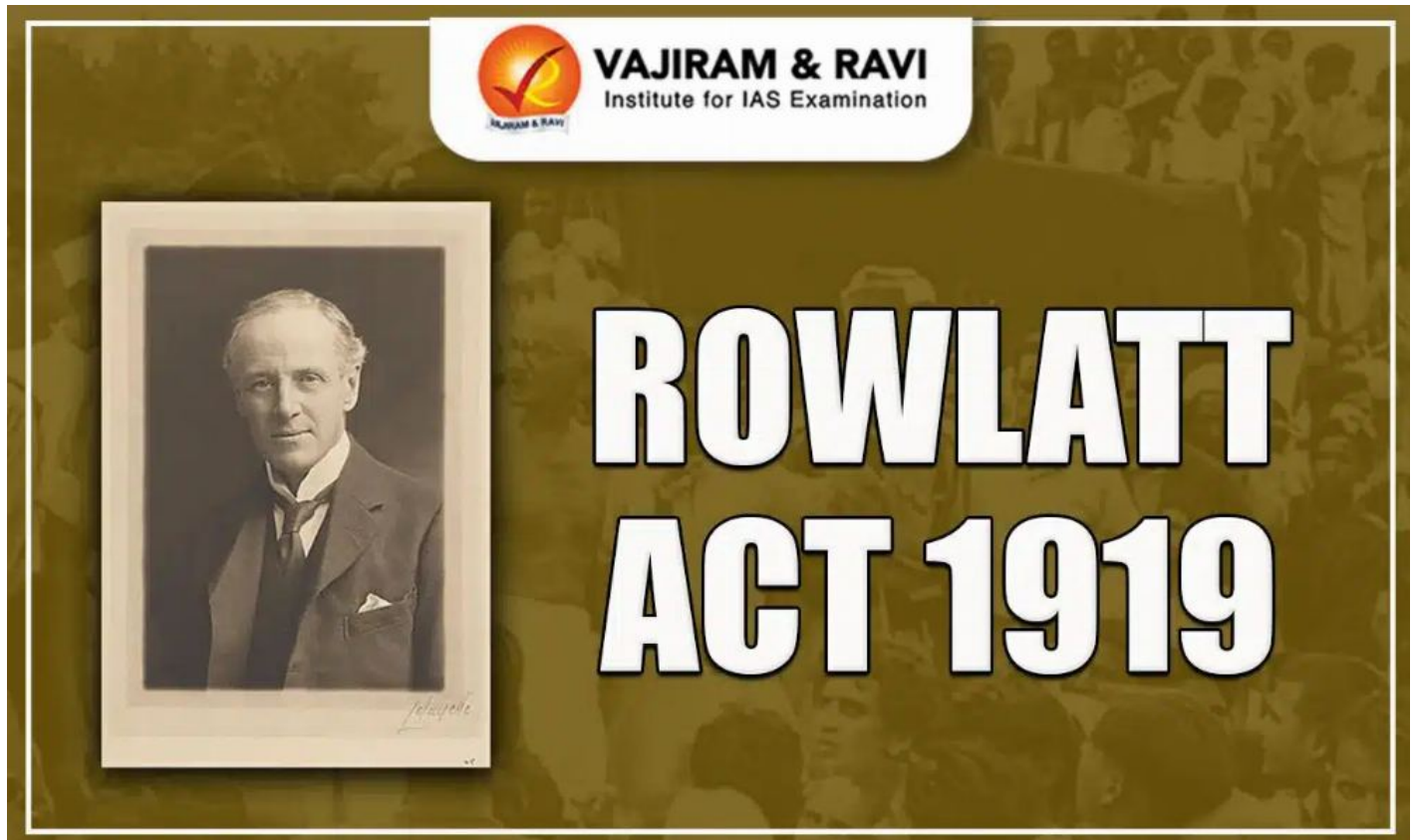


Rowlatt Act 1919, Impact, Features, Satyagraha, UPSC Notes

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The repressive **Rowlatt Act (Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919)** shook the foundations of British imperialism and united millions of Indians across divisions of region, religion, caste and class. The **Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919** marked a major milestone in India's freedom struggle. It was the first large-scale organised application of Mahatma Gandhi's pioneering technique of non-violent civil disobedience on a national level against British repression.

However, brutal suppression of protests, especially the **Jallianwala Bagh massacre**, led to the Rowlatt satyagraha reaching its peak, marking a turning point in India's struggle for Independence.

Rowlatt Act Background

The seeds of the Rowlatt Act were sown in 1915 when the repressive **Defense of India Act** was imposed to curb anti-colonial activities during World War I.

- **Sedition Committee:** While the Defense of India Act was meant to be a temporary wartime measure, a committee (called Sedition Committee) headed by British judge **Sydney Rowlatt** recommended the

continuation of such suppressive powers.

- It can be considered as an instrument of British **Carrot** (GOI Act, 1919) and **Stick** (Rowlatt Act) policy.
- Based on the Rowlatt Committee's report, the Rowlatt Act was passed hurriedly in March 1919 amid vehement protests by Indian members of the **Imperial Legislative Council**.
- **Betrayal of the promise:** This curtailment of civil liberties was seen as a betrayal by the British, who had promised **political reforms** after the War in exchange for India's support and resources. Instead, they chose to further tighten their grip with the repressive new law. Indians from all walks of life were outraged, setting the stage for widespread agitations across the country.

Rowlatt Act 1919 Features

The British government was concerned about the threat of terrorism and revolutionary activity, and the Rowlatt Act was seen as a way to suppress these threats. The Rowlatt Act had a number of features that were widely criticized by Indians.

- The draconian Act suspended basic civil liberties.
- It enabled **detention without trial for up to 2 years** of purported political agitators.
- No appeal was allowed against such administrative detention.
- It authorised **camera trials without juries** for sedition cases, severely compromising judicial transparency and fairness.
- **Tighter censorship**, control of extremist publications and restrictions on public gatherings were introduced.

Start of the Rowlatt Satyagraha

Against this backdrop, Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to the nation to come together in disciplined protests against this unjust law. He urged Indians to peacefully show united opposition through Hartals, economic boycotts and non-cooperation. The first major public protest was organised on March 30, 1919, and came to be known as the **Rowlatt Satyagraha**.

Course of the Rowlatt Satyagraha

Gandhi undertook tours across the country to establish new **Satyagraha Sabhas**, mobilise support and spread awareness about Satyagraha based on non-violence. For the first time, Gandhi brought **techniques of mass protest** to build nationwide pressure against unjust British actions.

- **Satyagraha sabha as an organisational step:** Gandhi set up the first Satyagraha Sabha in **Bombay**, which was followed by the formation of Satyagraha committees in Delhi, Allahabad, Gujarat and other places.
 - Gandhi did not yet have full organisational support (Indian National Congress or any political organisation), but the Home Rule Leagues and his own **Satyagraha Sabhas** and **Committees** provided the base.
- **Supported by:** Rajendra Prasad, J.B. Kripalani, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajagopalachari, **Jawaharlal Nehru**, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. M. A. Ansari, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlu, Dr. Satyapal, Swami Shraddhananda, Hasan Imam, etc.

- **The extent of participation: The call received an enthusiastic response beyond expectations, energising the people and awakening national consciousness.**
- Work came to a standstill, shops closed down, transport was affected, and massive yet peaceful rallies were taken out in cities across India. Students boycotted schools and colleges.
- Gandhi's ability to unite diverse classes and communities towards a common cause was unparalleled.
- The protest strike saw unprecedented unity, with people across faiths participating in disciplined civil disobedience.
- Together, these nationwide strikes demonstrated the collective antipathy towards repressive policies, forcing the administration to take note.
- **Himalayan Blunder:**
- There were some instances of violence. One of the violent events made the pretext of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.
- **Saddened by the Massacre and the changing nature of the movement as violent, Gandhi called off the Rowlatt satyagraha, stating it as a "Himalayan Blunder". He said that, first, he had to teach the methods of satyagraha to the Indian masses.**

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

As part of Mahatma Gandhi's Rowlatt satyagraha, peaceful anti-Rowlatt meetings were held in Amritsar too.

Following are the events leading to this inhumane event:

- On April 9, 1919, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, **Sir Michael O'Dwyer**, ordered the arrest of local leaders **Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew** and **Dr. Satyapal** in Amritsar. This sparked protests.
- On April 10, demonstrations were held in Amritsar, demanding the release of the two leaders. Troops fired on the peaceful protesters, killing many and inflaming public outrage.
- **On April 13** (Baisakhi festival), over 15,000 people gathered at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar for a public meeting. Most were local residents and pilgrims visiting the Golden Temple.
- **Brigadier General Reginald Dyer** arrived with troops, blocked exit points and ordered indiscriminate firing on the gathering without any warning. The firing continued for 10 minutes, resulting in over 1,000 deaths and 1,500 wounded.
- Two days after the massacre, **Martial Law** was clamped down on five districts - Lahore, Amritsar, Gujranwala, Gujarat and Lyallpore.
- The **declaration of Martial Law** was to empower the Viceroy to direct immediate trial by court-martial of any person involved in the revolutionary activities. As the news of the massacre spread across the nation, **Tagore renounced his Knighthood.**

Hunter Commission

On October 14, 1919, the **Hunter Commission (The Disorders Inquiry Committee)** was set up to investigate the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Dyer defended his excessive actions, claiming that it was necessary to punish defiance and violence.

- **Decision:**

- The Hunter report criticised Brig. General Dyer's actions as unjustified.
- He was forced to resign, but **no serious penalties** were imposed on him and other perpetrators.

This tragedy became a turning point in India's freedom struggle, revealing the brutal and oppressive nature of British rule. It energised the resolve for independence across communities. On **March 13 1940**, at Caxton Hall in London, **Udham Singh**, an Indian freedom fighter, killed Michael O'Dwyer, who had approved Dyer's action and was believed to have been the main planner.

Rowlatt Satyagraha Impact and Significance

Some key impacts of the nationwide agitation against the Rowlatt Act were:

- **Repeal of the Rowlatt Act:**

- By 1920, in the face of unrelenting protests, the British were compelled to repeal the Rowlatt Act.
- While considered belated by many, this partial capitulation to people's demands was seen as a victory for civil liberties. It also emboldened Indians to continue the freedom struggle.

- **Elevation of Gandhi as a mass leader:**

- The Rowlatt Satyagraha established Gandhi's leadership. His ability to cut across barriers of religion, class, caste and region and unite millions of Indians in a common cause was unparalleled.
- Gandhi showed the power of nonviolent civil disobedience in challenging unjust laws.
- He earned the goodwill of Muslims by supporting the Muslim cause of discontent regarding the British treatment of Turkey, which also paved the way for him to eventually become the leader of the converged NCM-Khilafat Movement.

- **Changed nature of freedom struggle:**

- The nationalists realised that constitutional means alone would not persuade the British to relinquish power.
- The Rowlatt Strike shifted the struggle towards **mass agitations** and non-cooperation as viable strategies to put pressure on the colonial authorities.
- It paved the way for Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920.

- **Exposed British repression:**

- The brutal suppression of peaceful protests, especially the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, completely exposed the **authoritarian nature** of British rule.
- It united Indians in their opposition to such excessive use of force and became a turning point in changing perceptions about British rule.

- **International Attention:**

- The foreign press widely reported the repressive British response and the disciplined nationwide strike by Indians.
- It evoked sympathy and support from **liberal groups abroad** while also damaging Britain's international credibility.

The nationwide upsurge against the draconian Rowlatt Act marked a political watershed. Despite violent suppression, it succeeded in consolidating Indian public opinion and boosting the struggle for self-rule under Gandhi's leadership. The event highlighted the moral courage of satyagraha as well as the urgency of dismantling unjust colonial governance and empowering Indian voices. The Rowlatt Satyagraha's reverberations laid the

foundations for gaining swaraj.

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