

## **Jallianwala Bagh: Erasing the Spirit of Sacrifice**

Prem Singh

The beautification/renovation of Jallianwala Bagh Memorial done by the central government through a Gujarat-based private company has come under criticism. It was inaugurated by the Prime Minister on 28<sup>th</sup> August. The details of observations made and objections raised by a range of people – scholars, common citizens, peoples' representatives - from India and abroad have come in the press. Simultaneously the details of the changes made to the massacre site have also come in the public domain. A great deal of anguish has been expressed by the people stating that in the guise of beatification a historical site of sacrifice has been turned into a picnic spot. Some people have expressed their surprise about the mind which can think of beautification of a place like Jallianwala Bagh Memorial.

Before addressing the issue, it would be appropriate to re-iterate certain facts about the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh which took place on April 13, 1919 in order to juxtapose the spirit of sacrifice against the celebratory intent behind the beautification venture. It was the day of Baisakhi festival. Thousands of males, females and children had come to Amritsar from nearby villages and towns. Many of them had camped in Jallianwala Bagh's open ground. There was an atmosphere of tension in Punjab due to the agitation organized to oppose the infamous Rowlatt Act. The public and police forces had clashed in Amritsar for three days prior to the Jallianwala Bagh incident. In the protest against police suppression, on April 10, 5 British people murdered and mischief with Miss Sherwood was reported. The Congress leaders Dr. Satyapal and Saifuddin Kitchlew had been arrested. A public meeting was organized in Jallianwala Bagh in the evening where resolutions were sought to release the arrested leaders and withdraw the Rowlatt Act. General Reginald Edward Dyer (who was called to Amritsar by the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, Michael Francis O'Dwyer) directly ordered the soldiers to open firing on the gathering without any proclamation or warning. There were 15 to 20 thousand Indians present in the meeting. Among them 500 to 1,000 people were killed and thousands were injured. After firing, General Dyer refused to take the injured to the hospital for treatment saying that this was not his duty! Martial Law was not applicable in Amritsar on April 13. The Martial Law was imposed three days after the massacre, in which the British government heavily oppressed the public.

The eyewitnesses, historians, and administrative officials have analyzed the "role" played by General Dyer from various perspectives and angles - starting from Dyer's racial hatred towards Indians to his psychiatric disorder. The British government constituted Hunter Commission for investigation and the Congress also set up its own probe committee. The Army Commission was also set up in England to investigate the role of General Dyer. Dyer's action of direct firing was discussed in England's lower and upper houses also. Although the majority in the Lower House rejected Dyer's action but the majority in the Upper House was in favor of Dyer. The *Morning Post*, a newspaper in England, collected around 30,000 Pounds for Dyer in recognition of his services to the Empire. The British in England and British officials in India mostly acclaimed Dyer as the protector of the 'Raj'.

Jawaharlal Nehru has written in his autobiography that while returning from Lahore to Delhi by train, he himself heard General Dyer telling his military companions that he did precisely what he ought to do on April 13, 1919. General Dyer was returning in the same compartment after giving testimony before the Hunter Commission. General Dyer, in his every testimony and conversation, had justified his action without any sign of regret or remorse. There are indications that he even said that if he had more ammunition and soldiers, he would have taken more strict action. It seems that if Dyer had been able to carry the two armored cars with built-in guns, which could not be taken inside the Jallianwala Bagh due to the narrow road, the scale of the massacre would have been enormous!

Based on Hunter Commission's report and other evidences, General Dyer was removed from his military post and barred from further employment in India. Dyer, who was born in India, returned to England and died on 24 July 1927 from illness. Revolutionary Udham Singh shot and killed Michael O'Dwyer on March 13, 1940 at Caxton Hall in London, as he had pledged just after the massacre. Udham Singh did not run away from the spot. He was arrested and hanged on July 31, 1940. Udham Singh was raised in an orphanage. He was an admirer of Bhagat Singh and a proponent of Hindu-Muslim unity. It is said that while living in the orphanage, he had named himself *Ram Mohammed Singh Azad*. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi returned their titles of 'Knighthood' and 'Kesar-e-Hind'. After this watershed incident, the Indian Independence Movement entered a new phase. After three decades of strong struggle and sacrifices, the country attained Independence.

Needless to say, that in order to preserve the spirit of sacrifice made for freedom, it is necessary to preserve the monuments associated with it. For this, along with imbibing the spirit of sacrifice, latest technology and expertise are needed for the conservation of historical heritage. There is a difference between conservation and beautification. Although the work is intended to preserve and enhance the spirit associated with the monument for generations to come. The beautification would tamper the original character of historical/national monuments and would convert it into a picnic spot. This is what has been done in Jallianwala Bagh Memorial. India's ruling elite - political parties, governments and intelligentsia - which has been in the service of neo-imperialism (*via* neo-liberalism) for the past three decades always plans to destroy the spirit of the struggle and sacrifice made during the freedom movement for the generations to come. It is not without reason. The ruling elite is engaged in selling the sovereignty and resources/assets of the country openly to the corporate houses/MNCs. In order to keep its business going without any opposition, the ruling elite is destroying the spirit of freedom movement that inspired Indians against colonial subjugation so that the very basis of opposition to neo-imperialism can be destroyed.

It can be argued safely that most of the political elite of the country is indulged in this business of misrepresenting, distorting and demeaning the values of freedom movement and sacrifices of known-unknown martyrs. However, the RSS/BJP has its own additional agenda in this campaign: when the spirit of the struggle and sacrifice of the freedom movement would completely be destroyed, it will be freed from the stigma of opposition to the freedom movement; The obstacles in the way of making India a 'Hindu-Rashtra' will also be removed. Therefore, those who are opposing the changes in the original character of Jallianwala Bagh Memorial should also understand and oppose its root cause - the neo-imperialist grip on India.

*The author taught Hindi at Delhi University*