



Mains Practice Question

Q. “It was like a hungry man, expecting bread, being offered stones”. Examine the given statement in light of the Rowlatt Act imposed by the British government in 1919, along with its impact. (250 words)

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Approach:

- Briefly introduce the Rowlatt Act of 1919.
- Mention impacts of Rowlatt Act
- Give conclusions.

Introduction

- The given statement is in the context of the Rowlatt Act (Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919) imposed by the British Government in India in March 1919.
- Earlier, In 1918, Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State, and Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, produced their scheme of constitutional reforms (famously called Montagu-Chelmsford reforms) which led to the enactment of the Government of India Act of 1919.

Body

- Indian nationalists had, however, were no longer willing to be satisfied with the shadow of political power. The Indian National Congress met in a special session at Bombay in August 1918 under the president-ship of Hasan Imam to consider the reform proposals. It condemned them as “disappointing and unsatisfactory” and demanded effective self- government instead.
- Instead of addressing the demands of the nationalists, the British government armed itself with more far-reaching powers, which went against the accepted principles of rule of law, to be able to suppress those nationalists who would refuse to be satisfied with the official reforms.
- In March 1919 it passed the Rowlatt Act even though every single Indian member of the Central Legislative Council opposed it. It was enacted during the First World War in order to control public unrest and root out conspiracy based on the recommendations of Sedition Committee chaired by Sir Sidney Rowlatt.
- This Act authorized the government to imprison any person without trial and conviction in a court of law. The Act thus also enabled the government to suspend the right of Habeas Corpus which had been the foundation of civil liberties in Britain.
- The Rowlatt Act came like a sudden blow. To the people of India, promised extension of democracy during the War, the government step appeared to be a cruel joke. It was like a hungry man, expecting bread, being offered stones. Instead of democratic progress had come further restriction of civil liberties. Unrest spread in the country and a powerful agitation against the Act arose under the able leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who called it a Black Act.

Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act:

- Gandhi on 26 February issued an 'open letter' to all the Indians urging them to join the satyagraha. He decided to launch a nationwide movement, starting with a general strike or Hartal on 6 April.
- The government had no prior experience of handling such wide-spread mass agitation. To avoid

- trouble they arrested Gandhi, but that provoked mob fury in cities like Delhi, Bombay, Ahmedabad.
- Gandhi's trusted volunteers could not control this mass violence and were themselves swayed by it. The government response was varied, In Bombay, the response was restrained, while in Punjab, Sir Michael O'Dwyer unleashed a 'reign of terror'.
 - The worst violent incident was the massacre of Jallianwalla bagh in Amritsar on 13 April, where General Dyer opened fire on a peaceful gathering of satyagrahis, killing 379 people, in a bid to break their morale.

Limitations of the Satyagraha:

- It failed to secure its only aim, i.e., the repeal of the Rowlatt Act.
- The whole of India was not affected and the movement was more effective in the cities than in the rural areas and here again the strength of the movement was due more to local grievances, like price rise or scarcity of basic commodities, than to protest against the Rowlatt Bills, about which there was very little popular awareness.
- It also lapsed into violence, although it was meant to be non-violent.
- Gandhiji admitted to having committed a Himalayan blunder by offering the weapon of satyagraha to a people insufficiently trained in the discipline of non-violence.
- Gandhiji was overwhelmed by the atmosphere of total violence and withdrew the movement on April 18, 1919.

Significance of the Rowlatt Satyagraha:

- It was the first nationwide mass strike, marking the beginning of a transformation of Indian nationalist politics from being the politics of some restricted classes to becoming the politics of the masses.
- Gandhiji during his extensive tours in many parts of India made personal contact with local leaders, through which his messages spread. However, local leaders failed to control mass emotions once these were aroused.
- It gave a crucial lesson to Gandhiji about limitations in inculcating the concept of Satyagraha in the masses during a mass movement. Gandhiji used the lessons learned in the subsequent movements.
- The failure of anti-Rowlatt Act agitation made Gandhiji realize the need for an impersonal political organization such as Congress.

Conclusion

- Rowlatt Act and the subsequent violence, especially the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre is one of the darkest moments in modern Indian history and is a specimen of the barbarism of the colonial regime in India.