



Colonial Crackdown and Nationalist Awakening: The Rowlatt Act in the Madras Presidency

Pooja Kumari¹, Mubashar Bashir Khan²

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Delhi, New Delhi.

² Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu.

* Corresponding Author:

Pooja Kumari

pooja121kumari@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 06 Jan, 2023
Revised 25 Mar, 2023
Accepted 20 May, 2023
Available Online 30 Jun, 2023

ARTICLE ID

CLIO0101002

KEYWORDS

Rowlatt Act, Madras Presidency, British repression, civil disobedience, Satyagraha, colonial resistance, Indian nationalism, press censorship.

ABSTRACT

The study examines the impact of the Rowlatt Act of 1919 on the Madras Presidency and the resulting resistance movements that emerged in southern India. Enacted by the British colonial government, the Rowlatt Act extended wartime emergency measures into peacetime, allowing detention without trial and the suppression of public assembly. Widely perceived as a violation of civil liberties, the Act provoked widespread unrest across India, including intense protests in the Madras Presidency. Through a critical examination of historical records, speeches, newspapers, and government reports, this paper explores how political leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari, S. Satyamurti, and E.V. Ramasamy mobilized public dissent through Satyagraha, hartals, and civil disobedience. The research also highlights the role of local media, student movements, and the working class in the resistance, and documents the British government's harsh retaliatory measures, including censorship, arrests, and police brutality. The study situates Madras as a vital node in the broader nationalist struggle and reveals how colonial repression ultimately catalysed political awakening in the region.



INTRODUCTION

A very divisive piece of legislation, the Rowlatt Act of 1919 let the British authorities in India hold people without trial and forbid public meetings and remarks judged seditious. Indian nationalist leaders, who regarded the Act as a danger to India's pursuit of self-rule and a breach of civil freedoms, greeted it with broad demonstrations and resistance. Consuming much of southern India, the Madras Presidency was one of the main hubs of the Indian nationalist movement. Following the adoption of the Rowlatt Act, the Madras Presidency developed into a hive of anti-British feeling as demonstrations and strikes sprung up all around. The paper will look at how the Rowlatt Act affected the Madras Presidency and how this affected the Indian nationalist movement. It will look at the demonstrations and opposition to the Act that developed as well as the government's forceful repression of dissent. At conclusion, it will examine the Rowlatt Act's legacy and its part in the more general fight for civil freedoms and human rights all around. The course of the First World War threatened the very existence of the British colonies in 1917, and the strength of the Allies was progressively waning. Russia's capacity was much limited by their pulling out from the conflict. The rise of submarine warfare and the fall of France had England now expecting significant help and collaboration from India.

Yet the British faced grave dangers in India. The 1917 report on the "Mesopotamian muddle of 1916" was widely panned upon its release. The British had their reputation tarnished when they lost an Indian contingent due to poor planning. The Ghadar party propagated Ghadar ideology, encouraging Sikh soldiers serving in the British army to rise up in rebellion against the British so that the stigma associated with their support of the Crown during the Mutiny of 1857 would be erased.¹ They were not Sikhs or Punjabis, but rather Indians, as the ideology's democratic and egalitarian framework proclaimed. Their faith was in nationalism, and they sought to create a free and sovereign India. Terrorism incidents involving the British were reported in Bengal, Punjab, and Maharashtra, totaling.² Foreign ties to the Indian terrorist movement were a major concern for the government.³

To appeal to Indians, the British presented some reform suggestions under what Lord Mantague of the House of Commons called the "August Offer of 1917". In December 1917, the British established a "seditious committee," also known as the "Rowlatt Committee," from the name of Justice Sydney Rowlatt of the King's Bench Division of His Majesty's High Court of Justice. Strangely almost simultaneously with the recent reform proposals for the devolution of power to Indians, the Rowlatt Committee was appointed to draft legislation to liquidate revolutionary movements; Sir Basilcott, Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court; Diwari Bahadur C. V. Kumaraswamy Sastri; Member of the Revenue Board of Uthar Pradesh; Advocate, Calcutta High Court;⁴ The committee's report consisted of 17 chapters with 152 foolscap pages, two appendices with case summaries on sedition. It formally arrived to the government on April 15, 1918. exactly one week later the government got the Montagu-Chelmsford Report. Following the publication of the Montagu-Chelmsford Report on July 16, 1918, the Rowlatt Report was published on July 19, 1918, thereby parading the suggested grant of self-government.⁵ It is impossible for the Government of India under Chelmsford to have imposed this discriminatory legislation at a worse moment.⁶ This served to aggravate already strong resistance to the Reforms plans. The Rowlatt Act utterly discouraged the intellectual elite of India from endorsing the Reforms program. The Rowlatt Committee decided unanimously. Though on a quite small group of young men, this book "lurid light" on the revolutionary conspiratorial activity in India It devoted a lot of time to talking about the sedition movement and its consequences for India and beyond. 311 crimes were listed from 1906 till the Report was turned in. Of 1038 charged, only 64 were found guilty.⁷ Many activists connected to the King's adversaries who had gotten financial backing from them were revealed as well as their secret plans to start aggressive operations in India. Included were fascinating specifics on the German schemes, the finding of papers on Russian revolutionary techniques connected to Turkey, the Ghadr Revolutionary group in California, and much more. One whole chapter focused about German schemes in India. Germany was accused of producing anti-British material employing Indian workers and running a plot supported and sponsored by the Germans to set off an Indian revolution. The Committee maintained that Germany's ultimate objective was to take over India at British Empire's cost.

Gandhi battled furiously to prevent the Rowlatt report from publication. He travelled great distances to inspire support. He used Sathyagraha, a nonviolent kind of resistance already successful in South Africa, as a strategy while facing the British. Seven Gandhi's view is that "as the North Pole is different from the South Pole, so too is Sathyagraha from passive resistance. Regarding reaching one's objectives, the former is seen as the strongest weapon available; the later is considered as the weapon of the weak as it does not forbid the use of physical force or violence. In Sathyagraha, one harms oneself to show one's point of view instead of harming one's opponent. Confident that the Rowlatt law would be carried despite strong opposition, Gandhi went up to the Central Legislature—the only one he ever visited—during the discussion on it. Against the measure, all Indian legislators urged the government to postpone its approval for six months, until the conclusion of the current parliamentary session, therefore postponing Mohamad's honesty, V. S. Srinivasa Sastri's oratory, oracle, oracle, All of Jinnah's merciless reasoning turned up useless. With an inherent majority of officials with 35 votes in favour and 22 against, the "Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919," often known as "Rowlatt Act," was enacted by a council on March 18, 1919.⁸

Disheartened, Gandhi criticised the Act's provisions as "unjust, subversive of the principles of liberty and destructive of the elementary rights of the citizens." To get the government to repeal the Act, he organised a nationwide movement called the "Sathyagraha Sabha," whose members swore to defy the law and risk arrest if necessary.⁹

Reaction in the Madras Presidency on the Rowlatt Act

The committee was clearly uncomfortable about revolutionary atrocities in the Presidency of Madras. Once a calm area, it was starting to use the same deadly strategies as the other provinces. There being no native revolutionary movement in Madras, hence the results were analysed with respect to the Presidency. Bengal and Bombay revolutionaries were lured to it as it was undeveloped territory. This presidency most epitomised the revolutionary four-pronged strategy: distribution of subversive texts; recruitment of gullible young for political reasons; encouragement of violence and murder; and appeal to foreign help. Though it had only a little influence in every one of these schemes, it was sufficient to damage the nation's otherwise perfect record of law and order as well as its great loyalty reputation. Direct causes of the disturbance and criminality that tarnished the good reputation of the Presidency between 1907 and 1910 were Bipin Chandra Pal's activities in Madras in 1907 and the revolutionary planning in Pondicherry and Paris. Pal's "evil work" began with presentations on the popular subjects of Swaraj, Swadeshi, and the boycott. Following April 1907 city tours on the East Coast, he saw one of the earliest outcomes of his work: a student strike at the Government college in Rajahmundry. The knowledge that the British government was built on maya, or illusion, boosted the fresh revolutionary movement, Pal stated in his Madras address on May 2, 1907.¹⁰

He visited Madras many times to organise the soldiers and dispatch agents to carry on the propaganda effort. One of his operatives in Madras publicly urged young men to go overseas to acquire bomb building and other harmful tactics before returning to murder 108 Whites on every amavasya (New Moon). He presented a bright image for the whole nation with this revolutionary path. Another Pal agent, Krishnaswamy, urged at a public conference in Karur (Coimbatore District) that the firearms of the local regiment need to be taken and used to murder white people at a Swaraj temple. The Bezwada community brought revived an ancient Telugu newspaper under the new name Swaraj to mark Pal's arrival. Following a scathing article on V.O. Chidambaram Pillai's detention, the publication notably said, "Hello! Tiger Feringhil, you are nasty! The tiny amount of Indian national development is sufficient to dry up the arbitrary Feringhi control. Following Pal's arrival, there was a surge of subversive activities leading to the major March 1908 Tinnevely riot. All government buildings—along with their contents—were destroyed during the incident. Following assistance from revolutionary agents like Madame Cama in Paris, the movement was then focused from the French colony of Pondicherry via Tamil publications. Working closely with that of Madras, the Government of French-India "excise this festering sore of sedition and anarchy in Madras."¹¹

Regarding the Rowlatt Act in the Madras Presidency, views ranged widely. Every Judicite expressed their clear support of the Act. Though they were ostensibly on the side of reform, several

Congressmen referred to as pro-reformers did not campaign to have the legislation revoked. Among this group were members V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, G. A. Natesan, Sir C. P. Ramasamy Iyer, and Sir S. Subramani Iyer. Along with several young leaders like S. Sathiyamurthi Iyer, Thiru Vi. Kalayana Sundaram, Dr. P. Varadarajulu, Rajaji, and E. V. Ramasamy, several other Congressmen—including V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Bharathi, and Subramania Siva—had vocally opposed the Rowlatt Act. After getting an invitation from Kasthri Ranga Iyengar, Gandhi set out 13 days starting in March 1919 to collect support for the sathyagraha across India. He spoke in front of a large public assembly at Marine Beach the same day.¹²

Gandhi founded a Sathyagraha Sabha branch with himself as president in Madras on March 20, 1919. He exhorted the Sathyagrahis to preserve the Sathyagrahi values and accept the Sathyagraha Pledge. Rajaji, Sathiyamoorthi, was the main signatory to that promise. Additionally agreed in Madras was a national hartal against the Rowlatt Act scheduled on one day. The Sathyagrahis assembled for a day of prayer and fasting on March 30, 1919, to protest the Rowlatt Act, often known as Hartal. Every one of the big newspapers handled the story as front-page item. The news was discussed in a March 20, 1919, Marina Beach conference.¹³

The Congress leadership also mandated that no member would disobey anything not approved by the Committee and that any selected press would print any prescribed work that did not advocate violence and that members of the Committee would distribute it so that they would all be liable for punishment should any action be taken. The Congress leadership also sought to provide for the families of those imprisoned who were totally dependent on them. Gandhi journeyed to Tanjore, Trichy, Madurai, Tuticorin, and Nagapattinam—all in the southern provinces of Madras Presidency—despite his sickness to galvanise support for the Sathyagraha. On March 23, 1919, the Sathyagrahis chose a course of action; it was finalised in Madras. The national Hartal was postponed from March 30 to April 1919 in view of unanticipated circumstances. Gandhi already was on his way to Bejwada as of March 30, 1919. Sathiyamoorthy delivered Gandhi's message to the sizable public gathering at Marina Beach the same day.

Reaction in the Tamil Speaking Districts of the Madras Presidency

There were no incidents during the 6 April 1919 Hartal in the Madras Presidency, as had been previously decided. The Madras Government's supplementary reports state that "There were no signs of the morning's rice cake-selling women or the curd-selling nomads from the neighbouring villages. Nearly all of the Mohammadan shop owners decided to close up shop at the same time. Morning seabaths with devotional singing were practised by many people in their communities. At 3:30 p.m., people from all over the city began to converge on the beach, and the number of attendees varied before and after the meeting began. People of different faiths, social classes, and genders (including many working-class women) attended, making this gathering the largest of its kind in Madras' history. There was no disruption of any kind during the meeting, which ended at 7.40 ". The police on patrol threatened the Sathyagraha marchers with sticks and arms, and British soldiers along the road to Madras beach to the west of the Fort threw stones at the protesters. Although the Sathyagrahis continued to sell banned books in defiance of the Rowlatt Act, the law was eventually repealed. The Madras Hartal was a huge success overall. In addition to the local newspapers, official government reports also corroborate this view.

In light of the attack on the Sathyagrahis on April 6, 1919, the Press of Madras Presidency expressed their dismay. They wanted a special committee formed to look into the attack. However, the Punjab Massacre fanned the flames of discontent in Madras. People finally spoke out about the government's atrocities, and the floodgates of public opinion opened. The policy of terrorism, as well as the recklessness, disregard for human life, and the indiscriminate and unjustifiable resort to fire arms and in the shooting of innocent and unarmed citizens, were strongly condemned at a public meeting held in Madras. The horrific events were reported in the media, and the government was blamed for reacting out of fear and alarm.

Under the Press Act of 1910, the government instituted repressive measures against The Hindu, Nationalist, and Desa Bakthan. Publication of the Nationalist was halted after the security

deposit was lost. A "Press Defence Fund" was established by the Committee of Journalist Politicians in response to the government action, which was criticised for being unfair, unjustifiable, arbitrary, and oppressive. Vaidyanathan Ayyar proposed recalling the Viceroy who had lost the support of the people at the Madras Provincial Congress Committee meeting in Trichy. The Viceroy was in Madras, and the Cosmopolitan Club suggested throwing a party for him. The executive council, however, voted against it.

Many young and educated people in Madras Presidency were motivated to join the National Movement as a response to the tragedy in Punjab. Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, and Madan Mohan Malavia were appointed to head up an investigation committee for the Congress Party. The enquiry committee's report, dated 20.2.1920, detailed the heinous atrocities and massacre in Punjab; K. Santhanam served as the committee's secretary. In 1919, the government appointed a committee headed by Lord Hunter after being pressured to do so. There were three Britons and three Indians on this committee. Unfortunately, the report did not receive universal support. British members of the committee, including the committee's president, backed the government's actions, while Indian members criticised them in their report. But the British report was referred to as the "Majority" report (because it had four authors) and the Indian report was referred to as the "Minority" report (3 members).

The Jallianwalabagh massacre was not condemned by Dr. Annie Besant, who had been a vocal critic of the British for the Rowlatt Act. Later, she defended General Dyer's brutality. Even in Madras Presidency, the Justices defended the firing in Punjab. According to Dravidian, a Tamil newspaper, "If the officials who had to use strong method as the only means of quelling disturbances, were not indemnified, it might not be possible to cope with any trouble that should occur in the future."¹⁴ The Madras Presidency Congress, however, has voiced their concern that the officers responsible for the tragedy will be shielded from responsibility by the findings of the commission if the Rowlatt Act, the Press Act, and the Indemnity Bill are allowed to remain in effect.

Mohammadans, Marvaris, and the Raja of Ramnad all gave generously to the "Punjab Relief Fund Committee" that was formed to raise Rs. 2 lakhs for the victims of the tragedy. There was open defiance and vehement criticism of the Government. A Tamil publication titled Sathyagrahi first came out in Madras, India on April 14, 1919. N. Venkatarama Iyer, George Joseph, and Konda Venkata Subbiah served on the editorial board, and S. Kasthuri Ranga Iyengar was the publisher. In open defiance of the Rowlatt Act, it was sold for 1/4 anna despite the fact that it had not been registered with the government. This was a tactic used in the Sathyagraha movement. Books written by freedom fighters that were banned by the British government were also illegally sold to the general public as part of the Sathyagraha programme. One was arrested despite the sales of Gandhi's books Sarvodayam and Indian Swaraj and V. D. Savarkar's Valcano.¹⁵ The government took a novel approach to quelling the unrest in Madras Presidency. The government issued an order mandating that all agents disseminate the true story behind the Rowlatt Act with anyone they come into contact with, and that they do so in confidence. The Madrasah Mohammadans were just as vocal in their criticism of the government. The Madras Presidency became very involved in the mainstream of national politics in response to the Rowlatt Act, Sathyagraha, and the Punjab tragedy.

CONCLUSION

The Rowlatt Act was a controversial law passed by the British government in 1919, aimed at suppressing political dissent and revolution in India. The act gave the British government extensive powers of arrest, detention, and trial without a jury, which were widely seen as a violation of civil liberties. The act had a significant impact on the Madras Presidency, which was a major center of political activity and resistance to British rule. The act led to widespread protests and strikes in Madras, which were met with brutal repression by the British authorities. Many prominent leaders of the Indian independence movement, including Mahatma Gandhi, were arrested and imprisoned under the act. The Rowlatt Act marked a turning point in the Indian independence movement, as it galvanized opposition to British rule and led to the nonviolent civil disobedience campaigns that ultimately brought about independence in 1947. It also highlighted the repressive nature of British rule in India and the importance of civil liberties in any democratic society. The legacy of the Rowlatt Act can still be felt

in India today, as civil liberties continue to be a topic of debate and struggle in the country. It allowed regional leaders to communicate with their national and international counterparts. The regional authorities began to favour Rajaji, Sathiamoorthy, and Kasthuri Ranga Iyengar. Madras came to play a crucial role in shaping not only the future of the country but also in the making of important decisions. The leaders of Madras demonstrated their competence in the planning and execution of struggles and party initiatives. During this time, a lot of young people became involved in the national movement.

REFERENCES

1. SAROJ, D. P., & MEHTA, M. V. (2021). The Impact Of Gandhian Ideology On Indian Constitution. *Ilkogretim Online*, 20(5), 7997-8009, 167.
2. Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., Panikkar, K. N., & Mahajan, S. (2016). *India's struggle for independence*. Penguin UK, 156.
3. Sivagnanam, M. P. (1982). *Viduthalaipporil Tamilagam* (Tamil), Vol. I, Poongodi Publications, 401.
4. Bipin Chandra, *ibid.*, 168.
5. Sundararajan, S. (1989). *March to Freedom in Madras Presidency, 1916-1947*. Madras: Lalitha Publications, 63.
6. Manickavelu, P. (1973). *History of the Nationalist Movement*, (Tamil) Tamilnadu Text Book Society, 80.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Irschick, E. F. (1969). *Politics and social conflict in South India*. Univ of California Press. 79.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Extract from Fortnightly Reports (Confidential) (1914-27) Vol. 71, Tamilnadu Archives, Madras.
12. Fortnightly Report G. 0. 3694, W-1 dated 18 Oct. 1918. Tamilnadu
13. Archives, Madras (1914-27), Vol. 171.
14. Fortnightly Reports, 3rd July 1919, No. 2301-W-1, Tamilnadu Archives, Madras.
15. Pattabi Sitaramiah. (1985). *Gandhi and Gandhism* quoted in B. N. Pande (Ed.) *Concise History of Indian National Congress*, Vikas Publishing House, 13.