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57. The Making of a Popular Base for the Quit India Movement the Impact of the Pacific War on the People and the Colonial State in India 1941-42)
Sudheshna Bhattacharya, Kolkata 683

58. Nation Building in North-East India: Role of the National Movement (The Assam Case)
Sagar Boruah, AM-10465 695

59. Pabbar Bhai — A Revolutionary from the Marginalised Section of Society
Mahendra Pratap, Varanasi, LM-872 and
Sumitra Gupta, Varanasi, LM-1242 704

60. Proscription on Poetry of National Movement (With Special Reference to the Poetry of Garimella Satyanarayana)
A. Bobbili & R. Bhaskar Rao 713

61. The Arya Samaj and the Indian National Movement
Sumitra Gupta, Varanasi 722

62. Muslims and Rowlatt Act Satyagraha
Abul Fazl, Vaniyambadi, Tamil Nadu, AM-17238 733

63. "Hindu Muslim Unity" As a Nationalist Watchword: Legacy of the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22)"
P.K. Shukla, New Delhi, LM-621 741

64. Lala Lajpat Rai — The Precursor of the Idea of Pakistan or for Solving the Communal Tangle?
Shiv Kumar Gupta 751

65. Muslim Politics in Madras in 1930 & 40s: The Rise of Muslim League and Related Developments
S.M. Mohamed Koya, Calicut, AM-12431 757

66. 'Bagla Bhagats' or 'Desh Bhagats'? The Congress Programme of Contacting the Muslim Masses in the Punjab 1937-38
Chanda Chatterjee, Santiniketan, AM-10892 762

67. The Communist Party and the Communal Question
Habib Manzer, Aligarh, AM-18257 768

68. 'Was Sardar Patel Communal?': An Exercise in Historical Demistification
Bhupendra Yadav, Rohtak, LM-736 778

69. Partitioned Localities, Fractured Identities: A Historical Reconstruction
Gurpreet Maini 791

70. The Mahatma and Partition: The Neo – Imperial Approach
Bishwa Mohan Pandey 805

71. Congress Socialist Party's Separation from the Congress (1946-48) — A Socialist Point of View
Narendra Kumar Singh AM-15393 & *Anand Prakash Singh*, AM-15115 819

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MUSLIMS AND THE ROWLATT ACT SATYAGRAHA

D. Abul Fazal

The Rowlatt Act Satyagraha was an epoch making event in the history of Indian national movement and in the career of Gandhi. Here began the transformations: the transformation of the Indian national movement from an elite to a mass movement and the transformation of Gandhi from a 'peripheral figure' in the politics of nationalism in to a national figure. Muslims, who had been aggrieved over the Khilafat issue and its uncertain future, participated in the movement in large numbers, became the cause of the violence that erupted and the excitement that was caused thereof and of the tremendous impact of the movement. The above transformations would not have been possible but for the Muslim participation and the movement would not have gained a mass base. Historical works on the history of the movement do not give adequate importance to this factor. Hence this paper.

The year 1919 constitutes an important landmark in the history of British India. It witnessed the development of Pan-Islamism as a force in Indian politics and the emergence of Gandhi as a major political leader in India.[1]

The growth of Pan-Islamic around the world in the early decades of the 20th Century was because of the repeated onslaughts of the European powers against Turkey and Khilafat. Britain was a party to these onslaughts. In India therefore Pan-Islamic was anti-British in character. The anti-British feelings of the Muslims of India got aggravated when the partition of Bengal was annulled and subsequently when British declared war against Turkey. Of course the promises made by Lloyd George the Prime Minister of England, Lord Cromer the Secretary of State, and by Lord Hardinge the Viceroy of India, that no harm would be done to the holy places of Islam "which would remain inviolate" and that the Caliph would be "... a Muslim ... a Muslim of such position as to be independent of any European pressure",[2] consoled the Muslims to some extent. But their anger over the British multiplied manyfold and their anti-British feelings got aggravated when the very same authorities declared, after the surrender of Turkey in November 1918, that Turkey could not escape punishment for its `rash acts' and that it could not be treated on principles different from those applied to the other countries.[3] Hence, the beginning of 1919 witnessed widespread anti-British

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sentiments among Indian Muslims because of the uncertain future of the Khilafat. The introduction of Rowlatt Bills replacing the Defence of India Act[4] which was used extensively against the Muslims, further infuriated them.

Gandhi returned to India in January 1915. His satyagrahas in South Africa had won him respect and a popular reputation for saintliness, but this did not give him an entree to the highest Congress circles in India.[5] On the other hand, to many Indian leaders he had looked to be "Queer, Quixotic ... rather an eccentric specimen of an England-returned educated Indian, ... a religious and social reformer, whose energies were likely to be drained off in harmless channels of non-political activity".[6] His ideas and methods did not quite fit in with those of the two dominant groups in the Indian National Congress. No group was willing to have him admitted. The Moderates in the Indian National Congress could not accommodate him, as they were loyalists and constitutionalists. To them Gandhi's satyagraha looked to be as revolutionary as constitutional. The Extremists wanted to expel the British by terrorism and violence if feasible; otherwise by passive resistance, especially the boycott of British goods. Gandhi with his ideas of non-violence and with his view that "let us not embarrass the Government during the war",[7] appeared to them to be remote and odd. Consequently Gandhi stood isolated and was to follow an independent course. He organised three small-scale satyagrahas in 1917-1918 — at Champran, Ahmadabad and Kaira. Encouraged by the success of these small-scale satyagrahas, he wanted to launch a nation-wide satyagraha.[8] It was in these circumstances, when an infuriated Muslim mass and a venture-wishing leader were ready to oppose the British, the Rowlatt Bills were introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council on 6 February 1919.

The Rowlatt bills were to be one more piece of repressive legislation in the armoury of the British repressive Acts in India. Other Acts such as the Seditious Meetings Act (1907), the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1908), the Press Act (1910) and the Defence of India Act (1915), were all much used against the Muslims. For example the Press Act was applied more against Muslim press. Referring to a list of the Muslim papers which were subjected to the operation of the Press Act (1910) the *Desabhaktan* of 25 March 1919 wrote, "What made this? It is nothing but the iniquitous acts of the bureaucracy".[9] The Defence of India Act, a war time exigency measure, was also used against the Muslims to a large extent Abul Kalam Azad, Hasrat Mohani, Zafar Ali Khan were all externed/

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intterned, and the Ali Brothers were put behind the bars at Chhindwara, using this Act. The Rowlatt Bills were introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council to replace this Defence of India Act with the intention of having "a weapon ready to meet the possible Muslim discontent at the conclusions that will be arrived at by the Peace Conference".[10] So the Indian Muslims, who were under great stress over the apprehended dismemberment of the Khilafat and were angry over the Rowlatt Bills extended support to Gandhi, who having understood the magnitude of Muslim opposition to British rule, wanted to make use of it for his own purpose.[11] The beginning of 1919 witnessed an infuriated Muslim mass and a position-loving leader entering into an understanding (Gandhi and Abdul Bari, March 1919). It was an understanding of mutual dependence and help.

Emboldened by this understanding, Gandhi called for satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act, calling the Act not just, 'a stray example of lapse of righteousness and justice' and 'a piece of devilish legislation'.[12] His call for satyagraha brought about opposition from various quarters excepting the Muslims. Of course, politicians of all shades opposed the Rowlatt Bills at the initial stages. N.C. Kelkar, one of Tilak's Chitpavan Brahmin lieutenants suggested passive resistance against the Bills. Similar reaction came from Annie Besant's *New India* too. Jinnah declared that a government which enacted such a law in peacetime forfeited its claim to be called a civilised Government.[13] Sastri warned the Government that they would have no Indian behind them, if they passed the Bills. Every Indian Member of the Council opposed it in the Council. Shafi, who was an unfailing supporter of the Government also opposed the Bills.[14] They all voted against the Bills. In fact in the life of this Council this was the first instance on which all the Indians voted in one way. Still the Bill got through because of official majority in the House.

But once the Bill became law and when Gandhi called for a satyagraha Indian politicians' verbal protest disappeared and their unanimity in opposing the Act disintegrated. Besant was reluctant to follow Gandhi and she warned him in a most solemn manner that any such movement as the one he contemplated would result in the release of forces whose potentialities for evil were quite incalculable.[15] Motilal Nehru could not understand how goal-going could put pressure on the government to withdraw the Bills and was frankly horrified at the thought of any of his family going to prison. Non-official Indian Members of the Imperial Legislative Council (who voted against the Bill) also opposed Gandhi's call for satyagraha.

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They issued a manifesto on 2 March stating "... we disapprove of the passive resistance movement... in the best interest of the country".[16] This group included Sir D.E. Wacha, Surendera Nath Bannerjee, T.B. Sapru and Srinivasa Sastri. One cause of their opposition was that they had their eyes on the power which the Reforms promised, however-much they criticised them as inadequate. Of course some of the opposition to Gandhi had a personal and bitter twist.[17] G.S. Khaparde poured scorn on Gandhi's attitude to Western civilization and scientific inventions and said that he did not believe in satyagraha. As a Marathi-speaking follower of Tilak he looked askance at Gandhi's assertion of leadership.[18] Mrs Besant opposed Gandhi throughout, because she believed he was drawing away her followers.[19] In contrast, Muhammed Ali subscribed to satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act which, in his words, was "enacted in the utmost tyrannical manner" ending "the reign of law" and substituting "a reign of terror in its place".[20] Umar Sobhani wanted Gandhi to take some action promptly against the Rowlatt Act.[21] The spokesman of the ulema, the fire-brand Sabhan-ul-Hind Maulvi Ahmed Said of Madrasa-iAminia was keen to start and to intensify the agitation even at the risk of violence.[22] Qazi Abbas Hussain, the editor of Qaum and Arif Hussain Hasvi also suggested the same. Abdul Bari and Fazl-ul-Haq also stood solidly behind Gandhi in organizing satyagraha.

Of course Muslim enthusiasm in opposing the British and their participation in the Rowlatt Act Satyagraha in large numbers, when the Afghan attack on India was round the corner, created a sense of fear and suspicion among the Hindus as to the motives of the Muslims. In order to allay Hindu apprehensions, and to confirm their Pan-Indianism, a statement was issued which gave the assurance that "The Musalmans of India will fight to the last man in resisting any Musalman power that may have designs upon India".[23] Basing his opinion on `Shariat', Abul Kalam Azad said, "If India becomes independent and is ruled by a Government which gave the same liberty to the Musalmans as to other communities, in that case it is the injunction of Islam what Muslims should protect their country from invaders irrespective of whether the invaders are Muslims or even the army of the Caliph himself".[24]

Having decided to launch a satyagraha against Rowlatt Act, Gandhi did not know that to do. While in Madras, one early morning "in the twilight condition between sleep and consciousness" intuitions came to Gandhi to call for a hartal. According to him satyagraha was a process of self-purification. "Let all the people of

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India, therefore, suspend their business on that day and observe the day as one of fasting and prayers", said Gandhi and hurried to add, "The Musalmans may not fast for more than one day; so the duration of the fast should be twenty four hours".[25] For he knew that Muslims constituted a major part of his satyagrahis this time.

Once when the Satyagraha was started, as expected the Muslims participated in it in large numbers and hartal was complete only in Muslim centres. Ordinarily it was decided to hold the satyagraha on 30 March. Subsequently it was changed to 6 April. Because of some mix up in the communication, Delhi observed hartal on 30 March. Delhi had never witnessed a hartal like that before Hindus and Musalmans seemed united like one man.[26] The rest of India observed hartal on 6 April. In Bombay on the scheduled day four-fifths of the shops were shut. In the procession in the city the Musalmans joined in large numbers[27] and the hartal in Bombay was a complete success. In C.P., hartal was observed sparsely in the Marathi speaking belt; in the Hindi speaking districts hartal occurred only at Chhindwara where the Ali brothers were interned. In Madras city shops were closed and 100,000 attended a meeting on the beach. In Bengal the main centres of observance of hartal were Dacca and Calcutta, predominantly Muslim centres. In Bihar hartal was observed at Patna, Muzaffarpur, Chapra, Mongyr and Gaya, again predominantly Muslim centres. In UP, a province notorious for communal strife, demonstrations were held in large towns, meetings were well attended, shops were shut and public transport came to a standstill. In the Punjab, as in UP, the hartal was universal in all the large towns. Further north in Jammu, Kashmir and Northwest Frontier Province most educated Indians, both Hindus and Muslims, evidently feel strongly in favour of Gandhi.[28] Leaders in Punjab and Delhi wanted Gandhi to visit the places to promote satyagraha. On 8 April, Gandhi left Bombay for Delhi. The Central Government placed restrictions on him confining him to the Bombay Presidency. On 9 April, Gandhi was removed from the train at Palwa and sent back to Bombay where he was set free. However news had spread about Gandhi's arrest and it brought about violence in Bombay, Ahmedabad and in Punjab. The worst occurrences of violence were in Amritsar where the news about Gandhi's arrest coincided with the arrest of two politicians, Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal.[29] Distressed over the eruption of violence, Gandhi called off the Civil Disobedience on 18 April.

However, violence, though condemnable, caused excitement and brought more and more converts to the movement. In Delhi, on 30 March, when station officials failed to eject a crowd which went to

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the station to stop sweet sellers doing business, the police and army opened fire and ten people were killed. On hearing this Gandhi hastened to state "if any Delhi people had indulged in violence this was inconsistent with the Satyagraha pledge". At the same time he shot off telegrammes to leading politicians expressing the hope that this `tragedy' would steel the hearts of satyagrahis and convert the waverers to the cause".[30] As expected, the support for a radical course of action gained momentum at a rapid pace; the flames of revolt rose high and every funeral of police victims occasioned more deaths.[31] This happened in Bombay, Punjab and in Ahmadabad.

The Muslims' anti-British feelings were such that they indulged in actions which were not customary for them. In the procession that was organized on 6 April at Bombay, the Muslims joined in large numbers. They took Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu to a mosque nearby and persuaded them to deliver speeches.[32] 4 April was a red-letter day in Delhi, the first Friday after the discriminate shooting, a day on which congregational prayers were to be offered in the great Jama Masjid. The Muslims issued a notice inviting the public to join the Memorial Meeting. They invited the Hindus to come to the Masjid to join in the Memorial Meeting. Normally non-Muslims are not allowed in a mosque during *namaz*. So Swami Shraddhanand was hesitant to go to the mosque. He was 'lovingly picked up' from his ashram by Muslim volunteers.[33] He was taken inside the mosque. Maulvi Abdul Majeed was addressing the 30,000 strong *namazees*. He stopped his lecture and requested Swami Shraddhanand to climb the pulpit. On his hesitating to do so Swami Shraddhanand was persuaded to climb the pulpit. Then, the Maulvi announced, "you have heard, what the Quran says about the blood of the martyrs. Swami Shraddhanand will now tell you that the Holy Veda ... inculcates the same teaching".[34] Shraddhánand from the pulpit of the Jama Masjid recited the vedic verse which preached the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God, and thrice repeated "Om Shanti, Ameen" and all the *namazees* followed him.[35] It was perhaps the first time in the history of the world that a non-Muslim was invited to speak to the audience in the mosque from the pulpit. This was followed by Hindu Sadhus addressing the Muslims from the pulpits in masjids and Muslim divines addressing the mixed audience in Hindu temples in all parts of the country.

Muslim personalities played an important role in the Rowlatt Act Satyagraha. M.A. Ansari was the epicentre of Rowlatt Act Satyagraha at Delhi. He was the chief lieutenant of Gandhi, the first president of the Satyagraha Sabha and the first to take the satyagraha

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vow.[36] His house was the venue of many momenteous meetings. He influenced Ajmal Khan, Hasrat Mohani, Asaf Ali, Abdur Rahman, Arif Hussain Hasvi and Shuaib Qureshi to join the Rowlatt Act Satyagraha. His yeomen service during the months of February to April proved crucial in ensuring popular enthusiasm. The role of Ajmal Khan was no less important. His word had become law in Delhi during the satyagraha.[37] Abdul Bari, the spiritual preceptor of Ansari and the pir of Ali Brothers was an important adherent of the Gandhian movement. His understanding with Gandhi and his presence in the movement brought more and more converts to the movement. Hasan Imam was a great personality in Bihar. He persuaded other local politicians like Mazharul Haq, S. Sinha, P.N. Sinha and Rajendra Prasad to decide to take part in the satyagraha.[38] Hasan Iamam's great personal influence in Patna made the satyagraha celebrations successful there.[39] Umar Sobhani was one Gandhi's main props in Bombay.[40] In Bengal Fazl-ul-Haq was Gandhi's lieutinant Saifuddin Kitchlew played an important role in organizing hartal in Punjab. It was his arrest with Dr Satyapal that brought about the tragic Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

Not only Muslim leaders but even the Muslim masses took active part in the movement. The uncertainty over the future of Turkey, the hub of their Caliph, was an emotional issue for the Muslims that touched their sentiments. Muslim artisans, merchants, mill-workers and weavers took part in the hartals braving the onslaughts of the authorities — lathi charges, bullets, imprisonment, loss of property etc. — and became the cause of the Delhi and Ahmedabad violence and of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre which caused resentment among the masses and brought more and more of them to the movement making the movement more mass based and Gandhi the leader of all.

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