

The Rowlatt Act

Background

After **World War I**, Indians expected rewards for supporting Britain — especially in political reforms. But the **Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms (1919)** introduced a limited system called **Dyarchy**, in which some subjects were given to Indian ministers while real power remained with the British. Indians felt cheated. At the same time, **nationalist and revolutionary movements** were increasing, which worried the British. To suppress them, they formed the **Sedition Committee**, headed by **Justice Rowlatt**, which suggested harsh laws to stop political protests.

What Was the Rowlatt Act?

The **Rowlatt Act (1919)** was passed based on the committee's recommendations. It allowed the British government to **arrest and detain anyone without trial for two years, restrict freedom of speech, and ban public meetings**. Basically, it gave the government **dictatorial powers**, even though the war was over. Indians saw it as a **betrayal**, because the British had earlier promised more self-government and liberty. It was called the “**Black Act**” because it violated basic human rights.

Indian Reaction:

The law united Indians in opposition. Leaders from both the **Congress and Muslim League** condemned it. **Mahatma Gandhi** started a peaceful protest called the **Rowlatt Satyagraha**, encouraging people to hold **hartals (strikes)** and **boycotts**. People came out in large numbers across the country. However, the British responded with violence and arrests, which made the situation worse, especially in **Punjab**.

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre:

The worst outcome of the Rowlatt Act protest was the **Jallianwala Bagh tragedy** in **Amritsar** on **13 April 1919**. A peaceful crowd gathered to protest, unaware of a ban on meetings. **General Dyer** ordered his troops to **fire on the unarmed crowd**, killing and injuring thousands. This act shocked the entire nation. Instead of punishing Dyer, the British tried to justify his cruelty, which broke the remaining trust Indians had in British rule.

Consequences and Importance (1919–1927):

The Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh Massacre became **turning points in India's freedom struggle**. Indians lost all belief in British fairness. Gandhi realized that peaceful cooperation with the British was impossible, so he started the **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920)**. The years following the Act (1919–1927) were marked by **repression from the British** but also **growing unity and determination among Indians**.

This period showed that **reform under British control was an illusion** — true freedom could only come through **national unity and complete independence**.

