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Jallianwala Bagh at 107: The Massacre That Changed India's Freedom Struggle

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HISTORY & CULTURE**POLITY**

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WHY IN NEWS

April 13, 2026 marks the **107th anniversary** of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (April 13, 1919) — the single most consequential act of colonial violence in modern Indian history. The day coincides with **Baisakhi**, the Punjabi harvest festival and the founding anniversary of the Sikh Khalsa Panth (1699), making it a day of simultaneous mourning and celebration across India.

WHAT HAPPENED ON APRIL 13, 1919

The Gathering

Thousands of people had assembled at **Jallianwala Bagh** — a walled garden in Amritsar — for Baisakhi celebrations and to peacefully protest the detention of two nationalist leaders: **Dr Satyapal** and **Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew**, arrested under the repressive **Rowlatt Act (1919)**.

The Rowlatt Act empowered the colonial government to imprison any person suspected of “revolutionary activities” without trial. Its passage (despite unanimous Indian legislative opposition) had already triggered the **Satyagraha movement** across Punjab.

The Order to Fire

Brigadier-General **Reginald Dyer** arrived at Jallianwala Bagh with 90 troops (mainly Gurkha and Balochi soldiers) and 2 armoured cars. Without issuing any order to disperse, Dyer ordered his soldiers to open fire directly into the crowd.

Key facts:

- **~1,650 rounds** fired in approximately 10 minutes
- All exits were blocked or narrow — the bagh (garden) had only one main entrance
- Firing continued until ammunition was nearly exhausted
- Dyer left without providing any medical assistance to the wounded

Casualties — The Contested Count

SOURCE	DEATHS
British (Hunter Commission)	379
Congress Party investigation	1,000+
Indian National Archives estimate	500–600+
Wounded	1,200+

The discrepancy exists because the British count only included bodies recovered; many wounded were carried away by families. The well in the garden (where some jumped to escape the shooting) yielded additional bodies.

WHY JALLIANWALA BAGH CHANGED EVERYTHING

Before April 13, 1919, the dominant Indian nationalist position was **constitutional reform within the British Empire** — requesting greater representation, dominion status, or **incremental** autonomy. After Jallianwala Bagh, the political calculus shifted permanently.

Immediate Responses

Rabindranath Tagore: India's first Nobel Laureate **renounced his knighthood** on May 30, 1919, writing to the Viceroy: *"I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of my countrymen who for their so-called insignificance are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings."*

Gandhi: Returned his Boer War and Zulu Campaign medals. Declared that cooperation with the British government was a crime against humanity. By 1920, launched the **Non-Cooperation Movement**.

Hunter Commission (1920): The British inquiry censured Dyer but declined to criminally prosecute him. Dyer was forced to resign from the Army. The House of Lords passed a motion approving his actions — further outraging Indian opinion.

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)

The massacre directly triggered Gandhi's mass civil disobedience:

- Boycott of British goods, courts, schools, legislative councils
- Return of titles and honours (Tagore being the most prominent example)
- First truly mass participation movement in India's freedom struggle
- Ended after the Chauri Chaura incident (February 1922), when a police station was burned and Gandhi suspended the movement

THE ROWLATT ACT — ROOT CAUSE

The **Rowlatt Act (Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919)** — often called the “Black Act” — was the immediate trigger:

FEATURE	DETAIL
Year	1919 — passed by Imperial Legislative Council
Purpose	Counter “seditious” activity post-World War I
Powers	Indefinite detention without trial; restricted jury trials
Opposition	All Indian members of the Imperial Legislative Council voted against — passed regardless
Gandhi’s response	Called for Satyagraha; April 6, 1919 was observed as a hartaal (general strike)

BAISAKHI — THE FESTIVAL THAT BECAME A MASSACRE SITE

Baisakhi (Vaisakhi) is one of India’s most important harvest festivals, observed on April 13 annually (April 14 in leap years).

Multiple Significance of Baisakhi

DIMENSION	DETAIL
Agricultural	Marks the rabi (wheat) harvest; beginning of the new agricultural year in Punjab
Religious (Sikh)	1699: Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa Panth at Anandpur Sahib on Baisakhi
Solar calendar	First day of the solar year in several regional traditions
Regional parallels	Vishu (Kerala), Bihu (Assam), Puthandu (Tamil Nadu), Ugadi (Karnataka/AP) — all celebrate the solar new year around April 13–14

Founding of the Khalsa Panth (1699)

On Baisakhi 1699, **Guru Gobind Singh** — the 10th and last human Sikh Guru — founded the **Khalsa** (meaning “the pure” or “belonging to the sovereign”) at Anandpur Sahib by:

- 1 Requesting five volunteers willing to offer their heads — the **Panj Pyare** (Five Beloved Ones): Daya Singh, Dharam Singh, Himmat Singh, Mohkam Singh, Sahib Singh
- 2 Initiating them through the **Amrit Sanchar** ceremony (also called **Khande di Pahul** — “rite of the double-edged sword”), in which **Amrit** (nectar of sugar-water stirred with a khanda) is administered

- 3 Instituting the **Five Ks (Panj Kakars)**: Kesh (uncut hair), Kanga (comb), Kara (steel bangle), Kachera (undergarment), Kirpan (sword)

HISTORICAL MONUMENTS — JALLIANWALA BAGH TODAY

The Jallianwala Bagh was acquired by the **Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Trust** (constituted under the Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Act, 1951) and developed as a national memorial in Amritsar, Punjab.

Key sites within the memorial:

- **The Martyrs' Well:** Where fleeing civilians jumped to their deaths
- **Bullet marks on walls:** Preserved as evidence of the massacre
- **The Flame of Liberty:** Eternal flame at the memorial
- **The Gallery:** Documenting the massacre and the freedom struggle

The Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Act, 1951 is the legal basis for its administration. The Trust is chaired by the Prime Minister.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Modern History	Rowlatt Act 1919; Jallianwala Bagh; Non-Cooperation Movement 1920–22; role of Tagore
GS1 — Art & Culture	Baisakhi; Khalsa Panth founding (1699); Five Ks; Guru Gobind Singh
GS2 — Polity	Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Act 1951
Prelims	Date: April 13, 1919; Brigadier-General Dyer; rounds fired (~1,650); British casualty count (379); Hunter Commission; Tagore's act; Non-Cooperation start year (1920)
Interview	“Could Jallianwala Bagh have been avoided? What does it reveal about colonial administration's view of Indian political agency?”

*Date: **April 13, 1919** | Location: Amritsar, Punjab | Commander: **Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer** | Rounds fired: **~1,650** in **~10 minutes** | British (Hunter Commission): **379 dead** | Indian estimates: **1,000+** | Trigger: Rowlatt Act 1919; arrest of Satyapal + Kitchlew | Consequence: **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)** | **Tagore renounced knighthood** (May 30, 1919) | Memorial: Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Act, 1951 | **Baisakhi 1699**: Guru Gobind Singh founded **Khalsa Panth** at Anandpur Sahib | Panj Pyare; Panj Kakars | GS1: Modern Indian History, Art & Culture*

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