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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

107 Years After Jallianwala Bagh: On Memory, Apology, and the Unfinished Business of Colonial Justice

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EDITORIAL SUMMARY

On the 107th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, India continues to await a formal British apology — one that Prime Ministers from Tony Blair to Rishi Sunak have approached but never crossed. The question is not merely diplomatic; it reflects deeper questions about how colonial violence is remembered, whether formal apologies carry weight without accompanying reparations, and what role historical memory should play in contemporary India-UK relations, particularly in the context of the newly concluded FTA.

WHAT HAPPENED, AND WHY IT STILL MATTERS

On April 13, 1919, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer led 90 soldiers into a walled garden in Amritsar where thousands had gathered for Baisakhi — the Punjabi harvest festival and the Sikh new year. They were also there to protest the Rowlatt Act, the colonial legislation that allowed indefinite detention without trial. Dyer ordered his soldiers to fire without warning. Approximately 1,650 rounds were expended in ten minutes. The British Hunter Commission counted 379 dead; Indian records suggest more than 1,000.

The massacre's historical significance lies not in its death toll — colonial violence in India was pervasive — but in its political consequences. It transformed the dominant nationalist position. Before Jallianwala Bagh, the mainstream of Indian political opinion sought constitutional reform within the empire — dominion status, expanded representation, incremental autonomy. After it, that project became untenable for a generation of leaders. Gandhi returned his Boer War medals. Tagore renounced his knighthood. By 1920, the Non-Cooperation Movement was underway — the first truly mass civil disobedience in India's freedom struggle.

THE APOLOGY QUESTION

Britain has never formally apologised for the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. The history of official British responses follows a consistent arc: acknowledgement without apology.

Queen Elizabeth II visited Jallianwala Bagh in 1997 and called it "a distressing example of our history." Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed "deep regret" in 1997 — a formulation carefully calibrated to fall short of apology. Prime Minister David Cameron, visiting in 2013, called the massacre "deeply shameful" but did not apologise. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, when asked in 2019 (the centenary), said Britain should be "deeply, deeply ashamed." Rishi Sunak, as the UK's first Prime Minister of Indian descent, faced particular scrutiny at the centenary-adjacent commemorations but similarly stopped short of apology.

The distinction between "regret," "shame," and "apology" is not semantic — it is legally significant. A formal state apology opens the question of reparations. The British government has consistently refused to reach that threshold with India, Germany's Jewish communities, or other victims of colonial and wartime violence, precisely because legal liability and financial reparation arguments would follow.

MEMORY AS SOFT POWER AND ITS LIMITS

India has used the Jallianwala Bagh commemoration as soft power — a reminder to Britain of the moral debt that underlies bilateral relations. This is legitimate. Historical memory is a tool of diplomacy, and India's leverage is real: the Indian diaspora in the UK (~1.8 million), British public awareness of colonial history (dramatically increased after the Rhodes Must Fall movement and post-pandemic reckoning with imperial statues), and the Jallianwala Bagh's iconic status in the global human rights imagination.

But there are limits to this instrumentalisation. If historical memory is deployed primarily as negotiating leverage — to extract concessions in the FTA, or to demonstrate nationalist credentials domestically — it risks becoming a performance rather than a reckoning. The victims of April 13, 1919 deserve more than to be cited in trade negotiation briefings.

THE DEEPER QUESTION: WHAT WOULD JUSTICE LOOK LIKE?

A formal apology, if it came, would matter. Words from states have symbolic weight: Germany's Willy Brandt kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1970 is one of the most consequential acts of political contrition in modern history. It did not undo the Holocaust; it did something different — it changed the terms on which post-war Germany was received by the world, and by itself.

But an apology without accompanying action is an incomplete act. What should accompany a British apology for Jallianwala Bagh, if it came?

One model is academic and archival: full declassification of British India Office records relating to the massacre, Dyer's orders, and the Hunter Commission's suppressed findings. Britain's National Archives hold material that has never been made fully public. Historical truth is a form of justice.

Another model — contentious but worth raising — is reparative acknowledgement: British support for Jallianwala Bagh memorial expansion, educational curriculum acknowledgement in British schools of Dyer's actions as a crime rather than a controversial military decision, and institutional recognition of the Indian

soldiers (Gurkha and Balochi troops) who were ordered to fire on the crowd and whose complicity in colonial violence is itself an underexamined dimension of the massacre.

COLONIAL HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY RELATIONS

The timing of this debate — 107th anniversary, India-UK FTA implementation imminent — is not coincidental. The FTA represents the most substantive India-UK engagement since the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2021). It is being concluded in a political environment where Britain's post-Brexit identity is still being worked out, and where India's economic weight and strategic significance have substantially increased.

The question is whether India-UK relations are mature enough to hold two things simultaneously: a forward-looking partnership on trade, defence, and technology, and an honest reckoning with the colonial history that undergirds Britain's relationship with India. Japan and South Korea manage this with each other — partnership despite history, not partnership instead of history. There is no reason India and Britain cannot reach a similar equilibrium.

What is required is not that contemporary British people accept personal guilt for the actions of a 1919 colonial officer — moral inheritance is not transmitted that way. What is required is institutional acknowledgement: that the British state ordered, permitted, and for several years defended an act that by any standard — including 1919 standards — was a crime. That is not a large ask. That it remains unmade, 107 years later, says something worth examining.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Modern History	Jallianwala Bagh; Rowlatt Act; Non-Cooperation Movement; Hunter Commission
GS2 — IR	India-UK bilateral; historical memory in diplomacy; apology politics
GS4 — Ethics	Historical responsibility; institutional vs. personal guilt; reparative justice
Mains Keywords	Jallianwala Bagh, Hunter Commission, colonial apology, India-UK relations, Tagore, Non-Cooperation Movement, historical memory, reparative justice

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