

## CHAPTER XXI

### GENERAL DYER AND AMRITSAR

**T**O throw light on happenings in India since 1914 necessitates reference to the Amritsar Affair as well as to the political situation in India, comments on both of which I had hoped to avoid.

I write as a soldier, and look at things from a soldier's point of view. It is true I was on the spot, but the political situation can, and probably will, be described much better by someone with a greater inside knowledge and a far abler pen. In a very able, clear and moderate speech, Lord Sydenham called the attention of the House of Lords to the situation in India.<sup>1</sup> His remarks had evidently been prepared with great care. His statements were concise and logical, while his deductions were unanswered, because many of them were probably unanswerable. Is it any wonder therefore that I desired to omit all reference to this subject?

But as I wrote—and my words were nearly all penned three months before Lord Sydenham's speech—I realised two facts. Firstly, that people have very short memories, especially on subjects that do not interest them. Secondly, that they labour under the disadvantage of obtaining their information in serial form from the newspapers, and so lose all sense of perspective.

Therefore it seemed to me essential that I should describe the conditions prevailing in India during and after the war, especially as regards the Punjab. Further, that I should lead up to the Dyer Case, and give a brief outline of what took place at Amritsar. Finally, that I should

<sup>1</sup> October 25, 1921.

present a bird's-eye view of the situation to-day from a soldier's standpoint.

In 1907-8 there were seditious movements, but I need scarcely refer to these, except to note that they *did* occur. In 1914-16 there were risings in the South-West Punjab, hardly anti-Government, for no Government officers were attacked, nor was any Government property looted. They were dealt with and suppressed, mainly by the armed Police. In 1916 Mrs. Besant hoisted her Home Rule flag in Madras.

During the same period there was the *Ghadr* conspiracy. This was in existence before the War, and composed chiefly of Sikhs in the United States of America, who were in touch with disaffected Sikhs in the Punjab. After the outbreak of war it was financed by German money. A party of Sikhs left India for Canada in the early autumn of 1914. Being refused admission into Canada, they had to return to India, and landed in Calcutta, October, 1914. Failure to search them for arms on disembarkation, and some other mismanagement, led to serious rioting at the railway station of Budge-Budge, near Calcutta, which spread and had to be put down by the military. The aim of the *Ghadr* party was the overthrow of British rule in India.

In the winter of 1918 political agitators were extremely active everywhere, especially at Amritsar, in the Punjab. Every measure of Government, such as attempts to control prices and commandeer stocks for the needs of the Army, or people, at reasonable prices, was seized on for misrepresentation. Then came the publication of the Rowlatt Bill in January, 1919. This was a measure, advised by the Rowlatt Committee, to enable Government to deal with seditious movements more speedily than by ordinary law, and was rendered necessary owing to the Armistice and the approaching lapse of the Defence of India Act (the D.O.R.A. of India). Its introduction gave the extremists the very opportunity they were looking for, namely, an excuse to combine, and to focus their anti-Government agitation on a particular measure.

The Bill was passed in March, 1919, and was a signal for that violent and unprecedented agitation all over India with which Government had been threatened in the native Press and on many a platform. It also led to Gandhi's

passive resistance movement, i.e. non-co-operation with any Government work whatever. This was accompanied by *hartāls* (lit. a strike, i.e. passive resistance as evinced by the closing of all shops, etc.), as decreed by Gandhi, upon dates and in places fixed by him.

The result of all this was the outbreak at Delhi on the 30th March. This, had it been firmly dealt with, might have ended the matter, but the leniency then showed encouraged the party of violence, and it was followed by the April disturbances in Lahore and insurrection and open rebellion at Amritsar and elsewhere.

Seditionists had everything in their favour, for there was a general restlessness during 1919-20. This was mainly the aftermath of the Great War, for unrest was abroad, and India could little expect to be immune. It became a kind of mental disorder, which got on the nerves of the people, making them discontented as well as restless. Nor were their grievances entirely unreasonable, for a great deal of serious economic distress actually existed. Food was very much dearer, the luxuries the better class had become accustomed to were often unprocurable, and the price of clothes was prohibitive.

The people did not understand the reason for all this, and, blaming the Government, as they do in all periods of distress, became most fruitful soil for the seeds of sedition, which agitators of all classes were not slow to take advantage of. Any stick was good enough to beat Government with, and bring it into discredit.

Amongst the more successful movements was their emigration scheme<sup>1</sup> in connection with the Khilāfat<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The emigrants were also called "Muhajirin" (see footnote, page 219). By this term Indians meant to imply that these people were abandoning their country from religious conviction, i.e. "making a flight" from India under a Christian Government to Afghanistan under a Mahomedan power. Probably connected with Mahomet's flight from Mecca, known as the "Hegira."

<sup>2</sup> The Khilāfat movement was organised by the Mahomedans in India as a protest against the dismemberment of the Turkish Empire. The Mahomedan looks to Turkey and the Sultan of Turkey as the "Khalif," or head of the Mahomedan world, and protector of the Holy Places of Islam, which include Adrianople, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Mecca, Nejj and Bagdad. All of these, prior to 1914, were under the suzerainty, if not under the actual control, of Turkey. Mahomedan Holy Places being now in the hands of the, to them, infidel (Greek or British) is, so they declare, contrary to the tenets

agitation which, engineered with much skill and ingenuity by extremists of all creeds, caused me a great deal of anxiety in the Lahore Division as likely to seriously affect our Mahomedan soldiery.

Speaking briefly, it may be explained, that seizing on the proposed Turkish peace terms as likely ground to afford proof of England's desire to debase a Mahomedan Power, these agitators made deceptive and misleading statements regarding the transfer of the Khilâfat or custody of the Holy Places from the Sultan of Turkey, and persuaded many thousands of Mahomedans, as a protest, to migrate from India to Afghanistan.

They were told that the Amir and the Afghans would receive them with open arms; that the country was one flowing with milk and honey; that they would be given land rent free, and even cottages, cattle and fodder. Backed up, as all these statements were, by doles of money and railway expenses, raised by subscription, many thousands of poor, misguided followers of the Prophet, disposing of their holdings and selling their stock and cattle at a great loss, embarked on this disastrous adventure by special trains to the frontier.

As is well known, they were very soon disillusioned, and finding their welcome in Afghanistan, and the conditions existing there, the very opposite from what they had been led to expect, the majority of those who did not succumb—and many did—hastened to get back to India alive. On return, in a miserable plight, they had immediate and undoubted proof of the paternity and generosity of the Government they had been foolish enough to dishonour and abuse. They were received, like the prodigal son, with feasting and gifts in the shape of restored holdings, fresh cattle, and some money with which to start again. In fact over large areas the counsel of the political agitator was at a discount, while the prestige of and belief in Government became higher than ever before on the North-West Frontier.

My forebodings regarding the danger of this movement, as regards our Mahomedan troops, were no illusion. In September, as the Khilâfat emigration was progressing, I

of their religion. As a matter of fact Indian Mahomedans had never looked to Turkey before. This protest was, therefore, simply a move in the political game.

was called to Multan in connection with uneasiness in the 127th Baluchistan Infantry on this very question, and for which the men were in no way to blame. The battalion had lately returned from service overseas, and about half the men had proceeded on leave to their homes on the North-West Frontier. A large number, however, immediately returned, to report that they could find neither wives, homes, nor relatives, as all had disappeared and emigrated into Afghanistan. Such a state of affairs naturally caused the greatest disquietude.

In the interim, the exigencies of the times necessitated the move of this unit for active service on the frontier, as soon as the leave men had all returned. It was at this juncture that Major Kennedy-Craufurd-Stuart, the O.C., reported the matter, begging for guidance and help. On reaching the regimental lines I noticed large groups of men standing about, and a good many talking excitedly to someone in a car. They would have stopped mine, but, by a piece of good fortune, this someone happened to be an inspecting brigadier from Simla, who was just ahead of me. Thinking he was the divisional commander, the men formed up across the road and, while speaking to him, as his car pulled up, I slipped quietly by.

I was soon closeted with the O.C. and his Subadar Major (senior Indian officer) in the orderly room. I had not met Major Stuart before, but was struck at once with his capacity, and level-headed grasp of the whole situation. His S.M. appeared to me about the best type of a manly, honest, straightforward frontier soldier I had ever come across.

The result of the investigation was a "clear line" wire to Army Headquarters, explaining the facts of the case, with a strong recommendation that the projected move of the unit to the frontier be cancelled and the men given very liberal leave to their homes. [I had information that a great number of the emigrants were returning by batches.] Both were sanctioned and, as this was just what the O.C. wanted, and what the Subadar Major said would make matters quite all right, confidence was restored.

Harking back to the unprecedented agitation on the passing of the Rowlatt Bill (March, 1919), followed by the outbreak at Delhi, it must be noted that the situation everywhere was soon one of extreme tension. The heads

of all local Governments were full of anxiety, for disturbances in various other provinces pointed to a common organisation.

Every revolutionary eruption in India endeavours to establish itself in the Punjab for the following reasons :

- (a) It is the province which is the mainstay of the army.
- (b) Its proximity to the frontier and Afghanistan assists the movement in becoming much more dangerous, and in developing more rapidly than elsewhere.
- (c) The martial and excitable character of the people lends itself more readily to the designs of the political agitator.

The Punjab all along had been effectively dealing with the situation in its midst. Sir Michael O'Dwyer realised long before what was likely to occur. By advice and exhortation he tried to bring home to both Hindu and Mahomedan extremists the vast danger of the path they were treading. At the same time, he encouraged all the loyal elements (the vast majority and including the fighting races who had done so splendidly in the War) to help in maintaining peace and order.

Away from the towns these efforts were entirely successful, but they failed with that section of the *urban* population which had held back during the War and was directly influenced by the extremist platform and the virulent native Press. Even here, however, there were results, for the disturbances were confined to certain towns and areas adjoining them or along the railway influenced by such towns.

It was only the prompt repression of the rebellion by the Punjab Government, and its effects on the military and political situation on the frontier and with Afghanistan, which prevented much more serious outbreaks in other provinces, and averted what might easily have become a regular revolution. Indeed, it is an undoubted fact that the measures taken prevented other serious risings, not only within the province, but outside it. Moreover they restored the internal situation before Government had to meet the more serious crisis, namely, the Afghan War. This came, as I have related elsewhere, early in May, and was precipitated by the Amir's belief that the whole Punjab was in a state of revolt against Government.

When I arrived in Lahore the Punjab was still smoulden-

ing under the supposition that the retribution enacted at Amritsar for cold-blooded murder and arson, followed by unlawful assemblage, was quite unmerited, and that the questions of the Khilāfat<sup>1</sup> and Turkish peace terms were being treated by the British Government in such a way as to insult the feelings of all Mahomedans. When I say, "The Punjab was still smouldering," I should be more correct in saying, "seditionists and evil disposed people in the Punjab." The mass of the population knew little about these matters, and cared less, until worked up by the visits, speeches and propaganda of these ubiquitous undesirables.

Here it is as well to relate, that undoubtedly fostered by the machinations of these people, a new development appeared, one which I had seldom seen a sign of before, and one which gradually increased as the disinclination of Government to take adequate action against such political agitators was more and more evident.

What was in the mind of the authorities we never knew. Lord Chelmsford told the House of Lords, when speaking on Lord Sydenham's debate on 25th October last, that the policy of the Government of India had been to let the non-co-operation movement kill itself. Exactly what Lord Sinha said in 1920, when Under Secretary of State for India, and speaking of Gandhi's agitation.

To us on the spot, both then and later, when Gandhi's policy of non-co-operation<sup>2</sup> progressed, it looked as if they were gambling on the chance of excitement over the elections to the new reform councils<sup>3</sup> absorbing all the attention and activities of these demagogues, to the exclusion of everything else. Be that as it may, the unbridled licence allowed, both on the platform and in the native press, to vilify Government and defame British rule made things very unpleasant.

The Government's plan, if plan it was, was entirely frustrated by the extremists boycotting the elections altogether! It may be permitted perhaps to enquire, *en passant*, what will be the condition of affairs, if these men elect to stand at the next elections, and are returned, as they certainly may be?

The development I refer to was *racial hatred*, quite foreign indeed to the men of the Indian Army, and to the

<sup>1</sup> See footnote 2, page 284. <sup>2</sup> See page 284. <sup>3</sup> See page 295.

humble ryot,<sup>1</sup> but very noticeable elsewhere. It arose from the cunning appeals of the agitator to racial feeling, which is perhaps the strongest sentiment in human nature. Such reference undoubtedly caused a loss of respect for a, so-called, ruling race, which he pictured as paralysed with fear, and afraid to govern. He instanced, as proof, the immunity of the leading members of this band of extremists in their open defiance of all authority. It was a crafty argument, and likely to bear weight even amongst much more intellectual and intelligent audiences than those to which it was presented in the Punjab.

People in England seem quite incapable of understanding that the dumb millions of India were more than content with the British Raj, and that it was only a proportion of the ridiculously small majority of natives educated by us, on Western lines, who were "agin the Government." The "moderates," amongst those educated in this way, are to have their chance, and from what I saw before leaving India they are getting that chance. Moreover the way they have, in some cases, taken it makes the future, *with certain provisos*, more full of hope than pessimists would have one believe. But I must paint the picture as I found it in December, 1919, and January, 1920, after the gaieties were over, and I was able to move about.

Taking the earliest opportunity of visiting Amritsar before Christmas, I was a good deal struck by the sullen demeanour of the inhabitants, and the distinct indication of that racial hatred I have already referred to. As the extremist congress was just about to assemble there for a huge conference, this was not perhaps a matter of wonder. However, with tactful handling of the situation by the civil authorities, and firm action by the military in certain cases of insubordination amongst various classes of followers, there was much less evidence of this feeling later on. At least I thought so, but casual visits, assisted only by reports of junior officers, are not conducive to a very clear perspective.

As regards the Dyer case, I cannot commence better than by quoting from a report I have been privileged to read:

"Briefly the situation was this. On the 13th April, 1919, Amritsar, a city of 160,000 people (with a strong

<sup>1</sup> Indian peasant of the rural population.



leaven of the lawless and desperate element), had been in a state of open rebellion for four days (since the 10th). Five Europeans had been murdered. European ladies had been savagely assaulted, and in one case left for dead (Miss Sherwood). The church and other missionary buildings had been burnt. Two English banks, whose managers had been murdered, had been looted. The railway goods station had been set on fire. The railway passenger station had been attacked and only saved by the timely arrival of a troop train with Gurkhas.

"The Central Telegraph office in the city had been assaulted and damaged, the European telegraph master being only saved by the arrival of Indian troops. The railway stations adjoining Amritsar had been wrecked and looted. A goods train had also been looted. An attempt had been made on the Calcutta mail proceeding to Lahore, but this was repulsed by fire from the railway police guard. The Town Hall had been set on fire, and various post offices in the city plundered."

I am told the Civil Commissioner of the division was specially sent down to Amritsar by the Lieutenant-Governor on the 10th April. Assured that the civil power could do nothing, he made over charge of the situation to the Officer Commanding troops, to re-establish, by military power, the authority of Government. The next day (11th April), Brigadier-General Dyer arrived at Amritsar with reinforcements, and taking over command, issued a proclamation on the 12th in all the main thoroughfares, forbidding any public meetings, and warning the people that such would be dispersed by force. He was an officer of long and varied experience with a great knowledge of the country also.

On the same day he issued a further proclamation and, marching troops through the city, got control of the exits. The city was still in a state of tumult and revolt, the attitude of the mob on this day being so hostile that the question of opening fire had to be seriously considered. General Dyer, however, decided to issue a still further proclamation first.

Meanwhile, emissaries from the rebels had taken an active part in stirring up an outbreak at the adjoining railway station of Kasur on the 12th. Here a furious mob attempted to kill every European in the train, and



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*Photo: London Daily Mail Copyright*

**BRIGADIER-GENERAL R. E. H. DYER, C.B., INDIAN ARMY.**

• actually did murder two warrant officers. On the same date they had also attacked the Government treasury of Taran-Taran.

• These facts were known to General Dyer when, soon after issuing his final proclamation on the 13th, he discovered that a large gathering had assembled at the Jalianwala Bagh (Garden), in open defiance of his order, of which few, if any, in the circumstances, could have been ignorant.

It seemed to him, therefore, that there was no alternative but dispersion by force, and on this afternoon of the 13th April, he proceeded with an armoured car and ninety Indian troops, all he could spare, to the Jalianwala Bagh gathering for this purpose.

The meeting had been convened by the rebel who led the attack on the National Bank on the 10th, when the two European employes were murdered. Before Dyer's arrival it had been addressed by eight speakers, all of whom had taken a leading part in the rebellion, and five of whom were subsequently sentenced to transportation for life. There can be no doubt, therefore, that the object of the meeting was to stimulate sedition and rebellion, as well as to defy the proclamations of the military authorities.

As General Dyer was clearly dealing with a rebellion the Lieutenant-Governor, that same day, sent a wireless message to Simla (all other means of communication having been cut) proposing the application of martial law to Lahore and Amritsar. This was sanctioned the same night, and proclaimed on the 15th April.

Now the approach to Jalianwala Bagh was by a small alley too narrow for the armoured car, which was left in the main city street, and not utilised. On arrival with his men at the end of the alley, overlooking the garden, General Dyer saw that an excited mob of some thousands was being harangued by political agitators. He ordered fire to be opened at once in order to disperse the hostile gathering. The death-roll was 397. I have heard it said that women and children were shot. This is incorrect, for there were none there. Moreover, of the 397 killed, 300 were lawless and desperate characters belonging to Amritsar city.

• A visit to this Bagh and reflections on the incidents

that had occurred on the 13th April, and before, brought home to me the very difficult situation in which General Dyer was placed. It appeared to me to be his mission to disperse that mob by force, and prevent further acts of rebellion in Amritsar. His action not only effectively stopped them there, but, as the news spread, in many other places. I knew this to be a fact myself, months afterwards, and in a locality so remote as Poona, near Bombay.

Very high authority does not hesitate to affirm that Dyer's action that day was the decisive factor in crushing what was a very serious rebellion. Further, this same authority is convinced that if he had not dispersed the gathering by force, the rebellion would have assumed such dimensions that its suppression would have involved infinitely greater loss of life and suffering than was caused at Amritsar on the 13th April, 1919.

There has been much controversy over General Dyer's action that day, not only as to whether he used too much force, but also as to whether he was justified in using greater force than the actual situation required, in order to create an impression elsewhere. I do not wish to revive that controversy. The decision was against him, and it is useless flogging a dead horse.

I understand the highest military authority in India asked for an immediate Government enquiry. This was not sanctioned; but, later on, the Hunter Committee was appointed from home, and began its enquiry seven months after the events had happened, and when hostile propaganda had made it most difficult to ascertain the true facts. Meanwhile General Dyer was given a better appointment on the frontier, and remained uncensured during this period.

He was called as a witness before this court of enquiry and cross-examined by the three expert Indian lawyers, who had been appointed to the committee, much as if he had been a criminal in the dock. Whether he was offered legal assistance or not, I do not know. Anyhow he had none, and, being a simple, frank soldier, suffered badly in that examination, which was distinctly adverse in tone. Asking me, just before he left India, what I thought of his action on the 13th April, and of his evidence, etc., I told him plainly, that I considered he was bound



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**THE STREET IN AMRITSAR CITY, PUNJAB, WHERE MISS SHERWOOD WAS LEFT FOR DEAD BY THE REBELS IN APRIL, 1919.**

to get the worst of it; *not so much for what he had done, but for what he had said.*

As regards what he *did*, we have now before us the case of two young officers in the Leinsters operating recently with a platoon in the Moplah country. They are said to have been cut to pieces and horribly mutilated because they hesitated to fire, and therefore gave the rebels the chance of rushing them. The inference is obvious, but I have wished to tread in this delicate matter with all caution, and it will be quite sufficient if I conclude by giving my own feelings on the Dyer Case, which are shared by the majority of my brother soldiers.

We feel, that whatever excesses or errors of judgment it may be thought he committed, his actions effected the immediate object in view, i.e. the suppression of the rebellion at its very centre, and were primarily approved by the highest authorities. This being so, no political or other influences should have induced the same authorities, later on, to reverse their judgment and let him down. True, the findings of the Hunter Commission were adverse, and this was really the final verdict. True also is it, that his own evidence before it was self-condemnatory. Yet, it seems to us, that, the just line to have taken would have been to clearly and emphatically disavow his acts—or rather his subsequent explanation of them—where necessary, while at the same time refusing to be a party to his professional ruin. The reason being, as I say, that his action had already been tacitly confirmed, and because it was agreed, on all sides, that he had acted in good faith, in a way which, to his lights, seemed absolutely necessary and quite unavoidable.

On my visit to Amritsar in December, 1919, were still standing, in the fort, the tents and other shelters in which the British, Indian and American missionaries had been accommodated when fleeing for their lives the April before. Here and about the adjacent railway, a busy day was spent settling the new scheme of defence to deal with any future eventualities. Later on, I camped in the public gardens a strong company of Gurkhas as an addition to the ordinary garrison, which, except for garrison gunners and a platoon of British infantry in the fort, was located some distance away in cantonments, on the farther side of the civil lines.

The Gurkhas enjoyed these gardens immensely and were very happy there. The company belonged to a battalion to which I had been adjutant, when it was raised, some twenty years before, and it knew me well. The men told me that on first arrival it had been unpleasant, and almost dangerous, for less than a group of half a dozen or so to walk into the city. If they did so, they were met with scowling looks and an offensive remark about shooting down the speaker's brothers, an accusation which was most unfair, as I believe no Gurkhas were employed to fire on that 13th April, 1919. However, in a month or two—such is the fascination and attractiveness of the Gurkha—they could go in singly, and make what purchases they liked without any disagreeable comment whatever.