

Rowlatt Act

[UPSC Notes]

What is the Rowlatt Act?

The Rowlatt Act was a strong step toward the censorship of free thought under colonial rule. The key points and their significance have been discussed below:

- The Rowlatt Act was officially called the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919.
- It was passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in the March of 1919.
- This act gave the British government the authority to make arrests of any individual who was suspected of terrorist activities.
- This detainment could go up to two years without a need for a trial.
- It also gave police the leeway and authority to search anyone's place without needing a warrant.
- There were severe restrictions placed on the freedom of the press. The censorship was extreme.
- The Rowlatt Act was passed in accordance with the recommendations made by the Rowlatt Committee, which was chaired by Judge Sir Sidney Rowlatt. The act ended up being named after him.
- The act saw wide condemnation by the majority of the Indian leaders and the public. These bills came to be known as 'black bills' because of their unjust nature.
- The act was passed successfully despite the unanimous opposition from the Indian members of the council. All of these members resigned in protest. These included Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Madan Mohan Malviya, and Mazhar Ul Haq.
- A nationwide hartal was called by Gandhiji on the 6th of April 1919 in protest of the law. This came to be known as the Rowlatt Satyagraha.
- The situation in Punjab was pretty grim. The Rowlatt Satyagraha took a violent turn in the province which caused Gandhiji to take back the movement.
- The passing of the Rowlatt Act was a way for the British government to repress any and all forms of dissent under their regime. Their primary intention was to slow down the growing nationalist movement in the country that was slowly picking up pace.
- The Ghadarite revolution was slowly picking up pace in Punjab and the rest of the country, which cautioned the British government.
- Satya Pal and Saifuddin Kitchlew, two popular Congress leaders, were arrested under the Rowlatt Act's provisions.
- This protest for progressively intense when the act came into effect. This resulted in the army being called to Punjab to handle the situation.

Facts about Rowlatt Act for UPSC

Meaning of Rowlatt Act	The Act was passed by the Rowlatt Committee, headed by Sir Sydney Rowlatt, a judge. It authorised the arrest of any individual living in British India without trial for 2 years without trial on the grounds of suspicion of terrorism.
The Black Bills associated with Rowlatt Act	Central Legislature introduced two bills that gave the police the authority to search a place without a search warrant and to arrest anyone who they disapproved of. These bills came to be known as 'Black Bills.'
Who resigned from Imperial Legislative Council after the Rowlatt Act was passed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Madan Mohan Malviya • Muhammad Ali Jinnah • Mazhar ul Haq
When was the Rowlatt Satyagraha Initiated by Gandhiji?	6th April 1919
Which Congress Leaders were arrested?	Dr. Satyapal and Saifuddin Kitchlew

Short Note on Rowlatt Act

Not too long ago, in the April of 2019, the Rowlatt Satyagraha marked 100 years since it was started by Mahatma Gandhi in 1919. A short note on Rowlatt Act has been provided below;

- Rowlatt Satyagraha was launched in response to the British government's enactment of the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, which came to be popularly known as the Rowlatt Act. Under the Rowlatt Satyagraha, Gandhiji called for a countrywide campaign against the Rowlatt Act or the Black bills.
- The recommendations of the Sedition Committee, chaired by Sir Sidney Rowlatt, were taken for the formation of the laws.
- The Imperial Legislative Council hurriedly passed the bill, even though the act faced grave and deep opposition from the Indian members. The primary point was to clamp down the Indian independence movement, which was slowly gaining substantial momentum.
- This act gave the government enormous and absolute powers to the government and its police to repress any and all political activities as it allowed for the detention of political prisoners without any trial for two years.
- Some important details about the Rowlatt Act have been given in the table below;

Rowlatt Act, 1919	
Official Title	Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919
Territorial Extent	The entire territory under British India
Enacted by	Imperial Legislative Council
Enacted in	March 1919
Commenced from	March 1919
Status	Repealed

What is Rowlatt Satyagraha?

- The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, popularly remembered as the Rowlatt Act, was passed by the British Indian government in 1919.
- Termed the 'Black Act' by the Indian public, the act was unjust and restrictive in nature and aimed at the absolute clamp down of the nationalist movement that was dissenting for the British.
- The Imperial Legislative Council passed this act on the 18th March of 1919. It imposed emergency-like provisions of the 1915 Defence of India Act which was passed during World War I.
- It provided for preventive indefinite detention and arrest without a warrant, purely on the grounds of suspicion and no hard evidence. Other provisions of the act were trials without juries for forbidden political acts.
- Securities were deposited by the prisoners upon their release. They were also to refrain from taking part in any political, religious, or educational activities in the future.
- On top of all of this, the Rowlatt Act also severely curbed and censored the freedom of the press.
- Despite the opposition from the Indian members, the bill was passed. The Act was described as "**No Dalil, No Vakil, No Appeal**".
- Gandhi did not want to resort to constitutional measures as, so far, they had been in vain. He proposed a nationwide hartal as a form of protest. This came to be known as the Rowlatt Satyagraha.
- April 6th, 1919, marked the beginning of the Rowlatt Satyagraha. People were to refrain from going to work and hold meetings to resist the repressive act.

- Violent clashes were observed in many parts of the country as the government tried to stifle the movement. The hartal was successful in Delhi. However, Punjab and a few other places witnessed violence. This led to the hartals being suspended by Gandhi.
- The protests got particularly intense in Punjab. When two famous Congress leaders, Dr Satya Pal and Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew, were arrested, martial law was enacted in the state.
- It was this chain of incidents that led to the infamously terrible Jallianwala Bagh massacre that took place in Amritsar on 13th April 1919.

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre was one of the bloodiest chapters of our struggle for independence. The key points have been listed below;

- The Rowlatt Act had intense protests being done in Punjab, causing there to be an implementation of martial law which made any gathering of more than 4 people at a place unlawful.
- Michael O'Dwyer was the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab in the year 1919, while Lord Chelmsford was the viceroy of the country.
- The occasion of Baisakhi on the 13th of April 1919 marked to be the bloodiest day in the Indian independence struggle when troops led by General Reginald Dyer open-fired upon a gathering of people, killing hundreds of innocent who had gathered to celebrate the occasion while talking about the arrest of Dr Kitchlew and Pal.
- The firing that did not discriminate between children and women went on for 10 minutes until a total of 1650 rounds of ammunition were emptied. The massacre killed over 1000 people while severely injuring 1500+ people.
- This tragedy shook the entire country and removed whatever little trust they had in the British government and justice system.
- The act was condemned by Indian leaders unequivocally.
- However, the massacre by Dyer was appreciated by many in Britain and the British in India. There was some criticism, too that came from Winston Churchill and former Prime Minister H.H Asquith.
- To appease the nationwide rage over the incident, the government established the Hunter Commission with the aim of inquiring into the massacre. The Commission condemned Dyer's act but did not take any disciplinary action against him. He was relieved of his duties in the army in 1920 without any charges.
- In protest, Rabindranath Tagore gave up his knighthood. Gandhiji relinquished the title 'Kaiser-e-hind' that had been bestowed on him by the British for his services during the Boer War in South Africa.
- Udham Singh assassinated Michael O'Dwyer, who had approved the actions of Brigadier-General Dyer, in London in 1940 as revenge for the massacre. It is believed that he had witnessed the massacre as a child.

Hunter Commission

The government formed a committee of inquiry to investigate the Jallianwala Bagh shootings to calm the nationwide rage and protest over the incident. The key points have been listed below;

- The British Government of India announced the formation of the Disorders Inquiry Committee on October 14, 1919.
- This committee came to be known as the Hunter Commission, after the name of its chairman, Lord William Hunter.

- This Committee had Indian members.
- The Committee submitted the final report submitted in the March of 1920, where they unanimously condemned Dyer's actions.
- Though the committee condemned Dyer's actions, it did not impose any penal or disciplinary action against him.

Nationalist Response

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre stirred great grief and sadness in the populace. There was anguish expressed by all Indian leaders.

- In protest, Rabindranath Tagore renounced his knighthood.
- Mahatma Gandhi renounced the title of Kaiser-i-Hind that had been bestowed upon him by the British for his work during the Boer War.
- The Indian National Congress appointed its own non-official committee to look into the shootings, which included Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das, Abbas Tyabji, M.R. Jayakar, and Gandhi.
 - Congress put forward its own view. This view criticized Dyer's act and called it inhuman, stating that there was no justification for the introduction of martial law in Punjab.