

1919

One hundred years after
the year of reckoning

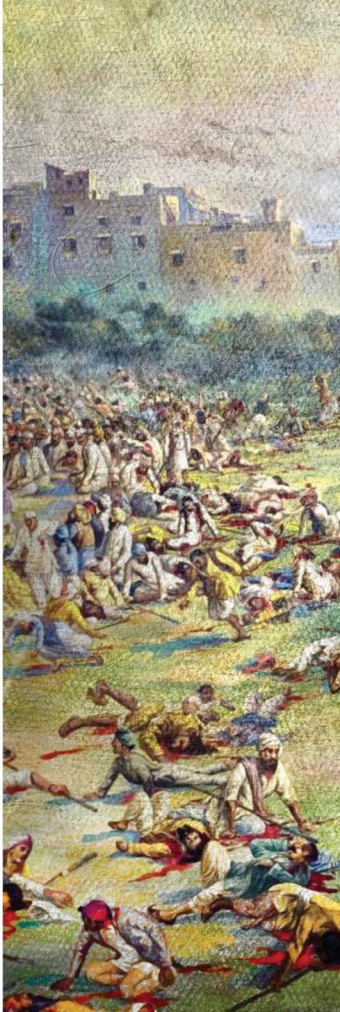


By TCA RAGHAVAN

I

IF A SINGLE EVENT WERE TO BE LISTED TO capture the mood in India a century ago, the massacre in Jallianwala Bagh in April 1919 would easily qualify. The enormity of the outrage obscures its context, but a wide angle to view events a century ago is instructive. The end of World War I was a catalyst for numerous changes in Asia as a whole. In India the Khilafat and anti-Rowlatt Act movements were the beginning of a process of mass politicisation through 'non-cooperation' that moved the Indian freedom struggle out of legislatures, debating halls and drawing rooms on to the streets. The upsurge in India through 1919—generally believed to be marking the beginning of the phase of 'Gandhian Nationalism'—in fact mirrored a wider pan-Asian trend broadly coinciding with anti-colonial movements elsewhere that year: the revolution in Egypt, the May 4th Movement in China and the March 1st Movement in Korea.

In India, for the many participating in protests against the Rowlatt Act an enduring memory that remained was of communal Hindu-Muslim unity. Mahatma Gandhi's support of the Khilafat Movement had something to do with this by drawing in Muslim concern over the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate after the defeat of Turkey in World War I into the broader mainstream of the Indian National Movement. As a tactic, it paid immediate dividends, but also sparked other concerns. For instance, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was uneasy about the prominence many orthodox *ulema* acquired on account of the Khilafat agitation. He saw them as obscurantist and regressive, and at odds with his own views of Muslim modernity. Possibly he



A depiction of the
Jallianwala Bagh
massacre



The British historian AJP Taylor was later to comment that the April 1919 Massacre was 'the decisive moment when Indians were alienated from British rule'. British conduct when viewed from India after the massacre played no small role in this



ALAMY

Lord Chelmsford (beside the driver), who was Viceroy of India when the Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place, in 1908

was equally concerned by the leaching away of his own supporters by the Mahatma Gandhi-led Indian National Congress. The seeds of the great political divide of the 20th century were being sown and the divergence between the League and the Congress were only to grow over the next quarter century.

But there were also concerns from those far removed from the cut and thrust of daily politics. The Maratha historian GS Sardesai was to ask, as Khilafat gained traction across the country, his close friend and fellow historian Jadunath Sarkar about the status of the Khalifa in Indian history. Sarkar's reply merits reproduction: 'The Sultan of Turkey was never recognized as the Khalif by any Muhammadan ruler of India, as every such ruler, according to the strict theory of Muhammadan Law, called himself the Khalif of the Age. In the Khutba or prayer for the sovereign, the Mughal emperors prayed for the Prophet and the first few Khalifs and then for the reigning sovereign of Delhi as the present-day Khalif, and never for the Sultan of Turkey.'

Similarly, describing Mughal relations with the Ottomans during Aurangzeb's reign, Sarkar had noted: 'The theory that the Sultan of Turkey is the spiritual head of the Muslim world is a fiction of the late nineteenth century, which we owe to the Indian pilgrims to Mecca.'

Regardless of such concerns, the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements merged over 1919, but it was the reaction to the April 1919 Massacre in Amritsar that has had a long after-life. The British historian AJP Taylor was later to comment that this was 'the decisive moment when Indians were alienated from British rule'. British conduct when viewed from India after the massacre played no small role in this. Following critical remarks made about his conduct in Jallianwala Bagh in a government commission of inquiry, General Dyer was advised to retire from the army. He resigned his commission but received something

similar to a hero's welcome, or so it seemed to many Indians then, awaiting him in London. A censure motion in the British House of Commons, against the government, for the treatment meted out to General Dyer failed to pass but those supporting Dyer were considerable in number and the debate was divisive. Oddly enough, given his otherwise negative role on most issues connected to India, Winston Churchill, a government minister, led the charge against Dyer. For Churchill, the action taken against Dyer was merited because his conduct was unBritish: 'What Dyer did was 'absolutely foreign to the British way of doing things'. Public opinion in India was however more disturbed when in the House of Lords the government lost by a significant number the motion against it: 'The government deplores the conduct of the case of General Dyer as unjust to that officer and as establishing a precedent dangerous to the preservation of order in the face of rebellion.'

Perhaps what angered public opinion equally was a public appeal for funds for Dyer—in response to a campaign started by a newspaper. In the space of a few weeks over £25,000—quite a substantial amount in those days—was raised and a good proportion of this came from British people living in India. Clearly for many in India, this British response to the Jallianwala outrage reflected the realities of racism and colonial domination.

In 1919, the resentment over support for Dyer, the repression of the colonial state after the end of World War I notwithstanding the fact that Indian troops had contributed significantly to the British victory, the growing numbers in the national movement who felt that representative government was now within arm's reach—all this had now a single focus of Jallianwala Bagh and meant a mood in India evoked by the poet WB Yeats in another colonial context. In 1919, Ireland saw the beginning of a guerrilla war of independence between the Irish Republican Army and the British. Yeats' poem was about an insurrection in

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Dublin in 1916, but its lines have acquired a metaphoric value to signify the erosion and ending of a moral order:

*He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.*

II

HOWSOEVER RIVETING THE IMAGE OF MASS agitation against a colonial power, there were other Indian aspirations also on the rise in 1919. One of these has greater importance in hindsight than it had at the time but it emerged not in opposition but in cooperation with the British. Far away from the contestations in India over Jallianwala Bagh and General Dyer, or the Rowlatt Act and Khilafat, a meeting was taking place in the Palace of Versailles in France in June 1919. This was the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference out of which emerged the League of Nations. India on account of its military contribution to World War I was present in this meeting of victorious and defeated powers to make fresh institutional arrangements for the world after the carnage of 1914-18. Ganga Singh, the Maharaja of Bikaner, was present as India's plenipotentiary and was one of the signatories of the Treaty of Versailles. If most decisions were made by the real victors of the War—the US, France and Britain—nevertheless Ganga Singh's signature did have material consequences. As a signatory to the Treaty, India automatically became a member of the League.

That India was then a colony, far from being self-governing and subordinate in every sense, made this situation an anomaly and was recognised as such from the start. Yet a full member it was and India thus became an international entity almost three decades before its independence. This achievement of 'external' self-determination while very much a subject nation bewildered many in India. India in the League, many nationalists insisted, with some merit, would be no more than 'His Master's Voice': that is, no more than a front for the British Foreign Office and imperial interests. Nevertheless, membership of the League also meant a presence, howsoever minimal in the initial years, on the world stage and therefore the incremental accumulation of experience and knowledge of world affairs. So if one wants to add another layer to the multiple contradictions of Indian history, then the coincidence of the centenary of Jallianwala Bagh with that of a century of Indian multilateralism would certainly be one.

III

YET POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS do not encapsulate the totality of 1919. Juxtaposed with the centenaries of Jallianwala Bagh and Indian multilateralism, in intellectual terms also 1919 is a landmark year—and of Indian history writing. This is largely on account of Jadunath Sarkar, still possibly India's best-known historian. Sarkar published in 1919 two landmark works: the fourth volume

of his five-volume *History of Aurangzeb and Shivaji and His Times*.

As the two rival protagonists of the 17th century confronted each other again some two-and-a-half centuries later through Sarkar's pen, their respective treatments make 1919 a significant year for Indian historiography. The books themselves but even more so the reactions they aroused telescope the past and make it merge with our own times.

Sarkar's *Aurangzeb* volumes had consolidated his reputation as one of India's foremost but most controversial historians. Volumes I and II had appeared in 1912, but it was Volume III in 1916 that was to draw more attention. 1916 was a landmark year of Hindu-Muslim unity with the Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the Muslim League, largely as the outcome of the efforts of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Jinnah. Appearing in that very year, the third volume of *Aurangzeb* created, in the words of KR Qanungo (one of Sarkar's prominent students and a well-known historian in his own right), 'a stir in the country'. In Volume III, Sarkar covered Aurangzeb's reign as emperor of India and he was conscious from the very first pages of the volume that

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he was embarking on a new phase of his subject's life.

The book details Aurangzeb's moral and religious regulations in the context of what Sarkar termed the 'Islamic State Church in India'. Chapters XXVIII ('Moral and Religious Regulations'), XXXIV ('Islamic State Church'), XXXV ('Hindu Reaction') and two appendices—'Temple destruction by Aurangzeb: extracts from authorities' and 'Shivaji's letter protesting against the *jaziya*'—laid forth the arguments and evidence in a historiographical debate that continues in different forms to this day.

Inevitably, Sarkar's treatment, and perhaps even more so in the context of the Lucknow Pact of 1916 and the efforts to forge a united front of Hindu-Muslim unity through the Khilafat Movement, was regarded as objectionable and offensive by many. The debate has obvious contemporary overtones and critics of Sarkar have argued that the question was not so much the simple statement of 'truths', but rather what constituted truth and how it so came to be constituted. Yet, true or not, Sarkar's analysis of Aurangzeb's bigotry has come to be regarded as communal or prejudiced against Muslims in itself and this has deeply coloured perceptions of his history-writing as a whole. The controversies over Sarkar's treatment of Aurangzeb's religious policy neverthe-

Volunteers of the Khilafat Movement in Bombay during the 1920s

TIMES CONTENT



less do obscure the vast scope of his treatment of Aurangzeb's India—its detailed examination of personalities, battles, politics, court etiquette, foreign engagement, etcetera.

Because of perceptions of Sarkar's bias against Aurangzeb, it is also easily overlooked what attracted him to the subject in the first place: 'The history of Aurangzeb is practically the history of India for sixty years... Under him the Mughal Empire reached its greatest extent, and the largest single State ever known in India was formed... Islam made its last onward movement in India in this reign....'

But [e]ven before Aurangzeb closed his eyes, the Mughal empire had turned bankrupt in finance and prestige, the administration had broken down, the Imperial power had confessed its failure to maintain order and hold this vast realm together.'

So clearly Sarkar is attracted to the mixture of opposites he found in the late 17th and early 18th century—a 'grand edifice' that was 'rotten to the core' and whose 'moral weakness... was even greater than the material'. He asked the question: 'Why was it so?' This question was especially important to Sarkar because his subject Aurangzeb 'was free from vice, stupidity or sloth. His intellectual keenness was proverbial... he took to the business of governing with all the ardour which men usually display in the pursuit of pleasure.... His patience and perseverance were as remarkable as his love for discipline and order. In private life he

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was simple and abstemious like a hermit. He faced the privations of a campaign or a forced march as uncomplainingly as the most seasoned private... Of the wisdom of the ancients which can be gathered from ethical books he was a master....'

And so the question Sarkar tried to answer was why was 'the result of fifty years rule by such a sovereign... failure and chaos?'

Sarkar divided Aurangzeb's half-century-long reign into two halves—geographically and chronologically. The first half stretches from 1658 to 1682 and mainly concerned North India 'not because the Emperor lived there but because the most important events, civil and military, concerned this region, while the South figured as a far off and negligible factor'. In the second

half—from 1682 up to Aurangzeb's death in 1705—the situation reverses and all the resources of the Empire are concentrated in the Deccan. In Volume IV of *Aurangzeb*, Sarkar's focus was mainly the Deccan, Shivaji and the Mughal-Maratha interface. His *Shivaji and His Times* is thus very much a companion study to the fourth volume of *Aurangzeb*. The substantial overlap is suggested by the fact that 150 or so pages in the two books are identical.

Sarkar was later to note that 'Aurangzeb is my life's work—Shivaji was only the outcome of it.' Yet evidently, he realised from the very beginning the independent interest there would be in Marathas. Much like the *Aurangzeb* volumes had done, *Shivaji and His Times* offended many and especially so in the Marathi-speaking parts of the Bombay Presidency. Maharashtra was then in the throes of an anti-colonial upsurge and accustomed to a more reverential treatment of a nationalist icon. Some parts of the book were appreciated. For instance, his treatment largely absolved Shivaji of the charge of having clandestinely murdering the Bijapur general Afzal Khan after inviting him under a truce. Sarkar showed that Afzal Khan struck the first blow but Shivaji who had come prepared for treachery retaliated and in brief this was 'a case of diamond cut diamond'. If this conclusion was well received by nationalist opinion in Maharashtra and elsewhere, there was much in the book which was found most objectionable. For instance, Sarkar found Shivaji guilty early in his career of the acquisition of the principality of Javli by arranging for the murder of the heads of its ruling clan, the Mores. This 'deliberate murder and organized treachery' was a 'dark episode' in Shivaji's life although Sarkar recognised that Shivaji's 'power was then in its infancy and he could not afford to be scrupulous in the choice of the means'. This conclusion nevertheless was hardly palatable to many in Maharashtra where Shivaji was an established icon of

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the nationalist movement and of Maratha identity.

In the book Sarkar also frequently followed the practice in many Mughal documents of referring to the Maratha king as 'Shiva' without the appellation 'ji'. There would be, on accounts of this, frequent bouts of friction between Sarkar and the numerous admirers of Shivaji in Maharashtra. His close friend Sardesai wrote to Sarkar in February 1927 when the second edition of *Shivaji and His Times* was being worked upon: 'I have to make a personal sug-

gestion. When you print your new edition of Shivaji, please do change Shiva into Shivaji. The former is an insulting appellation.'

In the event many references to 'Shiva' remained in the second and subsequent editions.

Sarkar's own admiration for Shivaji is frontally stated at the end of the book: 'I regard him as the last great constructive genius and nation builder that the Hindu race has produced.' Nevertheless, the impression of Sarkar being anti-Maratha had and has considerable appeal, and this was possibly because of his approach as a historian—clinical and often irreverential. Possibly there were also more parochial factors at work and Qanungo was to note that 'Jadunath's Shivaji was undoubtedly a bold and provocative invasion of a special preserve of Maratha historians.'

A review in *The Times of India* in October 1919 conveys a sense of the reaction to the book: 'The result of Mr Sarkar's pro Moghul bias and of his lack of acquaintance with Marathi is that he has, we regret to say, given us in spite of his immense industry, a picture of Shivaji unworthy both of the subject and the author. Indeed, it is impossible to say whether Mr Sarkar considers Shivaji a great man or an inhuman scoundrel.'

THERE WAS MUCH IN FACT IN THE book that those who expected deference to Maratha history would have objected to, not so much in terms of Sarkar's conclusions but more in terms of the questions he posed: '...by the character of his State, the Maratha's hands were turned against everybody and everybody's hands were turned against him. It is in the very nature of a Kreig-staat [a government that lives and grows only by wars of aggression] to move in a vicious circle. It must wage war periodically if it is to get its food; but war, when waged as a normal method of supply, destroys industry and wealth in the invading and invaded country alike, and ultimately defeats the very end of such wars. Peace is death to a Kreig-staat...'

And later: 'Did Shivaji merely found a Kreig-staat? Was he merely an entrepreneur of rapine, a Hindu edition of Alauddin Khilji or Taimur?'

While Sarkar answered the question in the negative, the fact that it was posed was itself provocative to many.

Aurangzeb and Shivaji apart, scattered through the historical record are numerous instances of the criticism Sarkar faced from different quarters for his inclination to frontally state what he thought the historical record revealed. One telling episode comes, not surprisingly, again from 1919. In 1917 Sarkar had moved to the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) as head of its newly established history department. This was not a happy experience: 'I have left on account of Malaviya's factious opposition and unscrupulous tactics which have thoroughly discredited the institution among educationists,' he wrote to Sardesai in July 1919. His student KR Qanungo was later to describe the experience as one of the irritating politics of a politician's University' which made him leave.

We have however a fuller account of Sarkar's departure

from BHU from the recollections of another great historian, KA Nilakanta Sastri, who had just joined the history department in Benaras. The issue arose from some references in Sarkar's *Aurangzeb* Volume III, but the point of controversy was not the emperor or his action against Hindus but rather certain comments Sarkar made on the 'blind unquestioning devotion of the Sikhs to their spiritual head'. This was in a chapter on Hindu reactions to Aurangzeb's policies in which there is a separate section on the evolution of Sikhism. In Nilakanta Sastri's recollection: 'In his account of the Sikh movement in the History of Aurangzeb [Sarkar] had cited an anecdote from Dabistan of how a certain Guru praised a parrot and a Sikh immediately went to its owner and offered to barter his wife and daughter for the bird; and commented on the perversion of values resulting from the

extremity of devotion.'

Sarkar had in his account used this anecdote as illustrative of how implicit faith in a common superior knit Sikhs together like soldiers of a regiment. He also said that a similar anecdote was being 'omitted for the sake of decency'. A footnote somewhat obscurely mentioned that Sikhs in the mid 17th century held views on women which were the same as the 'Anabaptists of Munster'.

Whatever the reasons, the reaction was severe. Nilakanta Sastri writes that Sarkar was 'thereafter attacked wildly in the court of the university and very soon things were so hot for him that he decided to quit'. In any event Nilakanta Sastri noted that 'the loss was certainly not [Sarkar's]'.

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SAURABH SINGH

SARKAR MAY WELL HAVE ANTICIPATED such criticism—both with regard to Aurangzeb and Shivaji as also from criticism on the freedom of historians to write as they pleased. In a speech in 1915, he had said: "I would not care whether truth is pleasant or unpleasant, and in consonance with or opposed to current views. I would not mind in the least whether truth is or not a blow to the glory of my country. If necessary, I shall hear in patience the ridicule and slander of friends and society for the sake of preaching truth. But still I shall seek truth, understand truth and accept truth. This should be the firm resolve of a historian." Towards the end of his life, he restated this with greater eloquence: "The true scholar is a national of the Republic of Letters which transcends the narrow bounds of provinces, countries and languages and places its student at the bar of the court of scholarship. Let recognition by that court be the secret ambition of every one of our research workers."

So, can we understand these unconnected events a century ago in the light of our own experience? Perhaps we can find obvious parallels. That the conspirators of 26/11 are unpunished and remain free is what makes that terrorist attack a festering sore and gives it a metaphoric value in India's relations with Pakistan. As in the case of Jallianwala Bagh, it was the British response to a conceited army officer's act that lingered even as memory of the deed's violence receded. Secondly, even as India acquired an international legal personality in 1919 through membership of the League, formal entry did not address fundamental imbalances of power. Although power differentials today are far less than they were a century ago, we encounter much the same situation when it comes to a permanent membership of the UN Security Council. Thirdly, and finally, the struggle for truth in history continues unabated. ■

TCA Raghavan is completing a book on the three historians Jadunath Sarkar, GS Sardesai and Raghubir Singh tentatively titled History Men: Friendship and History in Modern India (Harper-Collins, 2019). He is the author of Attendant Lords: Bairam Khan and Abdur Rahim, Poets and Courtiers in Mughal India (2016) and The People Next Door: The Curious History of India's Relations with Pakistan (2017)