

**TAMIL MEDIA'S RESPONSE TO JALLIANWALA BAGH:  
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**



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**ABSTRACT**



The present study aims to explore the role played by press and journals in shaping public perception and fostering political change during the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. The study explores how various forms of written expression, including articles, poems, and cartoons, served not only to inform but also to ignite a transformative political consciousness among the Indian populace. The tragic events at Jallianwala Bagh, where hundreds of unarmed civilians were ruthlessly killed by a senior British

military officer, acted as a catalyst for significant political developments. The research examines the impact of the massacre on Mahatma Gandhi's political stance, leading to his transformation into a non-cooperator. The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy is contextualized within the broader landscape of Indian history, highlighting its profound influence on the trajectory of the Indian National Movement. The study also analyzes the response of Madras-based journals, such as Swadesamitran, Desabhaktan, and others, condemning the atrocities in Punjab and advocating for justice. Besides, the research sheds light on the government's attempts to suppress information, evident in the denial of permission for journalists to visit Punjab and report independently. The study concludes with an exploration of the lasting impact of Jallianwala Bagh on the national movement, its role in challenging British rule, and the eventual construction of a memorial as a symbol of remembrance and national pilgrimage.

**KEY WORDS:** Jallianwala Bagh, Indian National Movement, Press, Political Consciousness, Mahatma Gandhi, Atrocities, Madras Journals, Memorial, British Rule.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 stands as a pivotal moment in India's struggle for independence, shaping the trajectory of the Indian National Movement. This tragic event, where hundreds of unarmed Indians were ruthlessly killed by a British military officer, not only left an indelible mark on the nation's collective memory but also triggered significant political and ideological shifts. Examining the role of the press and journals during this period is crucial for understanding how information dissemination influenced public sentiment and contributed to the emergence of a new political consciousness. Against the backdrop of the Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy, this study delves into the multifaceted expressions in various forms of media, including articles, poems, and cartoons. Theoretical frameworks related to media influence, political transformation, and the dynamics of public opinion provide a lens through which we can analyze the profound impact of these expressions. Additionally, the transformation of Mahatma Gandhi from a cooperator with the British government to a non-cooperator, catalyzed by the Jallianwala Bagh events, underscores the interconnectedness of historical incidents and individual ideologies. This investigation also explores the response of Madras-based journals, such as Swadesamitran and Desabhaktan, shedding light on regional perspectives and the concerted condemnation of British actions. As we navigate through the historical and theoretical dimensions, the study unveils the complexities surrounding the freedom of the press during a tumultuous period in India's quest for self-determination.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this study are to analyze the role of press and journals in shaping public perception during the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, elucidate the impact of media expressions on political developments, examine Mahatma Gandhi's ideological transformation, and investigate the regional responses of Madras-based journals. The study aims to contribute insights into the multifaceted dynamics of information dissemination and its influence on historical and political narratives.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, scrutinizing articles and editorials from Madras-based journals, including Tamil Nadu, Sudanthira Sangu, Ooliyan, Swarajya, Swadesamitran, Congress, Lokpakari, Navasakthi, and Desabaktan. The study focuses on the period spanning April 1919 to August 1921, examining how these publications covered and responded to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and its aftermath, providing a comprehensive understanding of media discourse during a critical historical juncture.

## DISCUSSION

The role of the press and journals held significant importance in disseminating information about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre to the public. Various forms of written expression, such as articles, poems, and cartoons, not only touched the populace but also stirred their minds, ushering in a new political development in India.<sup>1</sup> The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy, an event that altered the course of India's history and instigated a profound change in the mindset of Indians, remained a source of inspiration for the National Movement. Gandhi, who had initially cooperated with the British government during the First World War, underwent a transformation, becoming a non-cooperator. The Rowlatt Satyagraha led by Gandhi underwent a radical change overnight due to the turbulent events at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, Punjab. This historical incident proved to be a key moment in the trajectory of the Indian National Movement.<sup>2</sup>

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, involving the ruthless killing of hundreds of unarmed and defenseless Indians by a senior British military officer, occurred on 13 April 1919 in the heart of Amritsar, the holiest city for Sikhs. This tragic event unfolded on a day sacred to the Sikhs as the birth anniversary of the Khalsa, founded by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. Baisakhi, traditionally celebrated with great enthusiasm in north-

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western India, holds particular significance in Amritsar, a sacred place for both Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>3</sup> On this day, thousands of people from far and wide come to Amritsar to take a dip in the Tank of Nectar, visit the Har Mandir (Golden Temple), and then return to their homes. The practice of holding a Horse Fair on the eve of Baisakhi had also become a tradition.

Jallianwala Bagh, originally a garden owned by the Jalla family, derived its name from the family that owned the land during Sikh times. Sardar Himmat Singh, a noble in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, belonged to this family, which originally hailed from the village of Jalla.<sup>4</sup> By 1919, the Bagh, once a garden or garden house, had become an uneven and unoccupied space, approximately 225x180 meters in size, used primarily as a dumping ground. Surrounding houses had been built with their backs facing the Bagh, except for a small stretch on the southern side, which had a low boundary wall. The Bagh also featured one small 'Samadh' towards the southern side and an open well with a substantial circumference along its eastern boundary.<sup>5</sup> Notably, the Bagh's land was uneven in those days. The Swadesamitran issue dated 28th April 1919 highlights the growing unrest in Punjab, contrasting with the subsided situation in Ahmedabad.<sup>6</sup> It notes the extension of martial law to new districts and raises the question, posed by a leader, of whether Sir Michael O'Dwyer's administration over the past six years contributed to this state of affairs. The editorial suggests that the Government of India should establish an impartial committee to investigate the true reasons behind the province's heightened agitation.

In the issue dated 7th May, the Swadeshamitran references the emergency law enacted on 15th April, asserting that the Governor-General in council declared a state of open rebellion against the authority of the Government.<sup>7</sup> The editorial contends that it is the responsibility of the British Cabinet and Parliament to promptly appoint a commission to inquire and report, satisfying public curiosity on whether there was a legitimate state of rebellion in Punjab justifying the imposition of martial law. On 13th May, the Desabhaktan discusses the denial of permission sought by the editors of six Indian newspapers to send Mr. Andrews to Punjab as their representative to independently assess the situation.<sup>8</sup> The publication expresses widespread discontent and anxiety about the alleged awful actions of Sir Michael O'Dwyer and the military authorities in Punjab, resulting in indescribable hardships for the people. The editorial urges the Viceroy to intervene, emphasizing the need for justice. The refusal to grant permission intensifies doubts about the fairness prevailing in Punjab, prompting questions about the justification for denying Mr. Andrews the opportunity to witness the situation firsthand. The editorial highlights the prevailing martial law in Punjab, suggesting that under the current circumstances, individuals from other provinces may not be allowed entry, leaving the equity of this rule open to scrutiny.<sup>9</sup>

The Desabhaktan criticised the government's refusal to grant permission for Mr. Andrews from Indian newspapers to visit Punjab, urging the Viceroy to intervene in the tragic situation. In its issue dated 26th May, the Desabhaktan asserted that Sir Michael O'Dwyer bears sole responsibility for the current state of Punjab.<sup>10</sup> It expressed the belief that the people of Punjab, as well as Indians in general, will long remember his name. The editorial expressed a hope that individuals possessing a strong approach should not become governors of Indian provinces, emphasizing the importance of appointing leaders who uphold British justice, equity, and have a genuine concern for the well-being of the Indian populace. An article titled "The Condition of Punjab," published on 25th April 1919 in Swadesamitran, raised the question, "Does the law permit innocent people being killed like this?" The paper condemned the military action resulting in numerous casualties. The government deemed this publication objectionable and demanded a security deposit of Rs. 2000 from the paper's publisher under Section 4(1) of the Indian Press Act, 1910.<sup>11</sup> Swadesamitran, a nationalist paper, cautioned the government that repressive measures would not align with the introduction of Montford reforms, as published in its 2nd May 1919 issue. It further published an article on 8th May 1919 titled "The Agony of Punjab," which highlighted official atrocities in Punjab, condemning the actions of Dyer and Michael O'Dwyer as attempts to crush the struggle for freedom. The

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government of Madras also demanded a security deposit of Rs. 2000 from the publisher and printer under Section 4(1) of the Indian Press Act of 1910 for these publications.<sup>12</sup>

In an article published in *Desabhaktan*, Madras, on 6th May 1921, titled "Repression" and referring to government policy, criticism was directed towards the government spending 60 crores of rupees to save Dyer, a man responsible for killing thousands in Punjab. The government of Madras initiated action under Section 124 A of the Indian Penal Code against T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, the editor of *Desabhaktan*, for the article published on 6th May 1921.<sup>13</sup>

Since the split of the Indian National Congress, extremism and militant nationalism have emerged. Criticism of the government and calls for self-government prompted firm measures against political leaders.<sup>14</sup> Agitators were prosecuted under the Defense of India Act of March 1915, and the activities of the Home Rule League were curtailed under the Indian Press Act of 1910. Tilak faced charges for delivering seditious speeches, and both Tilak and Annie Besant were barred from entering Punjab, as Lt. Governor Michael O'Dwyer viewed the home rule movement's programmes as revolutionary and subversive to the existing constitution.<sup>15</sup> Following the Montague Declaration in 1917, the Home Rule Movement lost its influence.<sup>16</sup> In response to the Rowlatt Act, Gandhi led the Rowlatt Satyagraha, posing a threat to the British government, which decided to take stern measures. Gandhi protested against the Rowlatt Act through the Satyagraha movement, based on the principle of Ahimsa. The government, however, opted to suppress the resulting mass awakening through harsh methods.

Dyer, who had never visited Jallianwala Bagh before, observed ongoing meetings there, with Dr. Kitchlew presiding. Despite estimates by Captain Briggs placing the crowd at five thousand, around 20,000 individuals were present in the Bagh at that time. Dyer issued no warning to the people; instead, he immediately deployed the military and ordered them to open fire, resulting in a tragic loss of lives.<sup>17</sup> The Jallianwala Bagh event not only influenced public sentiment towards the grieving but also raised doubts about the fairness of British rule. The extent of repression reached unprecedented levels, providing momentum to the national movement and accelerating India's struggle for independence. The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy revealed the true nature of the British Government to the people. To prevent political leaders and journalists from visiting Amritsar or the Jallianwala Bagh site, the Government implemented strict precautions. The absence of contemporary press and journals covering the tragedy suggests a significant threat to the freedom of the press and journalists. Most journals focused on matters related to martial law or other government policies rather than the massacre.<sup>18</sup>

Several Madras-based journals, including *Tamil Nadu*, *Sudanthira Sangu*, *Ooliyan*, *Swarajya*, *Swadesamitran*, *Congress*, *Lokpakari*, *Navasakthi*, and *Desabaktan*, condemned the atrocities committed by General Dyer in Punjab. Leaders like C. Rajagopalachari, Kasthuriranga Iyengar, and Vijayaraghavachari played active roles in Tamil Nadu. After the Punjab massacre, the Regional Congress Committee in Madras, under the presidency of Kasturiranga Iyengar, formulated proposals for the All India National Congress in December 1919 at Amritsar, highlighting the influential role played by Madras leaders.<sup>19</sup> The British rule exhibited its strength by firing upon innocent people gathered at Jallianwala Bagh on 13th April 1919, but it proved to be the death knell for British dominance. While the event might have initially appeared as a success for the British, it was the embodiment of non-violence and Satyagraha that persuaded the British to leave India with goodwill and affection, maintaining friendly relations. Jallianwala Bagh became a national pilgrimage site, and a committee led by Pandit Madanmohan Malaviya, formed soon after the tragic events of Baisakhi day in 1919, aimed to erect a memorial to honour the martyrs.

The nation acquired Jallianwala Bagh on 1st August 1920 at a cost of 5,60,472 rupees, but the actual construction of the memorial was delayed until after independence. The Flame of Liberty, constructed at a cost of 9,25,000 rupees, was inaugurated by Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of the Republic of India, on 13th April 1961.<sup>20</sup> The central 30-ft high pylon, a four-sided tapering structure of red stone standing in the midst of a shallow tank, is adorned with 300 slabs featuring the Asoka Chakra, the national emblem.<sup>21</sup> Stone

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lanterns stand at each corner of the tank, and on all four sides of the pylon, the inscription "In memory of martyrs, 13 April 1919" is written in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, and English.<sup>22</sup> A semi-circular verandah near the main entrance to the Bagh, overlooking a children's swimming pool, marks the spot where General Dyer's soldiers took position to fire at the gathering.

### CONCLUSION

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 stands as a defining moment in Indian history, leaving an indelible mark on the nation's collective memory. This research has illuminated the instrumental role played by press and journals in disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and instigating political change during the aftermath of the tragic event. The diverse forms of written expression, ranging from poignant articles to evocative poems and powerful cartoons, served as catalysts for a profound shift in the political mindset of the Indian populace. The study analyses how the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy prompted a significant transformation in Mahatma Gandhi's approach, marking a critical juncture in the Indian National Movement. The condemnation of atrocities by Madras-based journals, such as *Swadesamitran* and *Desabhaktan*, reflected a collective call for justice and accountability. The government's attempts to suppress information, evident in denying permission for independent assessments, further underscored the threat posed to the freedom of the press. The enduring impact of Jallianwala Bagh is not confined to its historical occurrence; it resonates in the collective consciousness of a nation that struggled for independence. The construction of the memorial and its inauguration in 1961 symbolize a commitment to remembrance and a testament to the resilience of a people seeking justice and freedom. Jallianwala Bagh, once a site of unspeakable tragedy, has become a sacred space, immortalizing the sacrifices of those who perished and standing as a solemn reminder of the quest for a liberated India.

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