



Chauri Chaura (Eastern U.P) Incidents of 1922: A Critical Evaluation of the British System of Justice by the Press in Bihar

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Introduction

The present essay discusses about conflicting ideas that emerged between the English and the Indians on the issue of British System of Justice. The Western scholars made propaganda of their racial superiority and good governance on the one hand and argued that the Asians were backward and uncivilized on the other hand. The English were making propaganda throughout their rule that the British had come all the way from Britain to India, after travelling a long distance, to civilize Indians. But this hypothesis did not last for long. Indians began to think about the British and they tried to inquire about the nature of governance the English had in India. The story of 'Black Hole Tragedy' became famous all over the globe and almost every child of England was well aware of this incident. But there were many 'Black Hole' stories of English in India that have not been disclosed yet. And, therefore, through this paper we have made an attempt to compare the outcome of Chauri Chaura incident with that of the 'Black Hole' incident, though the British rule in India is full of such type of events and for the narration of these events, the Indian Press, especially the vernacular press has given due space to display a true picture of the British India. The purpose of narrating the atrocities of the British was to keep Indians aware of their policy and it also played a vital role in mobilizing public opinion against the British in Indian sub-continent. It also enlightened people towards national issues such as economic exploitation, draining away of India's wealth, decay of Indian handicraft industries, exploitation under new land settlements, export and import policies of the Government, and recurrence of famines in the country. Newspapers printed in English and vernacular languages had also been exposing the British atrocities and popularizing the idea of Swaraj; the representative government, democratic institution, liberty and Home Rule within the British rule. However, in this article we have tried to analyze how the Press created a significant base for the promotion of knowledge and the development of intellectual ideas and it transmitted knowledge in Indian minds across the country. And it was because of this free criticism of the British policies; restrictions were imposed on the freedom of Press as they were creating anti-British feeling in the country. In India, there was a tradition to read out newspapers aloud in group and then a group discussion and discourses on important news by the listeners was generally followed. And this practice is still continues in the countryside especially on the village tea stalls. Thus, the news travelled far and wide leaving its impact on society. The contribution of the Press, in this way, became very significant instrument for imparting ideas, knowledge, culture, thought and political theories in the country. The editorials of the papers were highly insightful, it took up most burning news to mobilize public opinion against British brutality on the one hand and it also showed its equal reaction against socio- religious evils on the other hand and pleaded the Government to enact legislation against inhuman practices such as Sati system, child marriages, child sacrifices and female infanticides etc.. The colonial atrocities were made known to the educated world in

and outside India. Though, it never assumed leadership but brought the question of civil liberties to the surface. The silent and imperceptible crusade of Press played an important part in the extinction of company's rule in India.

Chauri Chaura Incident of 1922

The present essay examines the unhappy incidents of Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur district of Eastern U.P. on February 5, 1922, that took place at a time when non-cooperation movement of Gandhiji was on full swing. This ugly incident has been compared with the 'Black Hole Tragedy'. However, the Chauri Chaura incident was not alone, there had been many such incidents perpetrated against Indians which have not yet been highlighted by the Indian scholars. This is a fresh attempt to evaluate and compare British system of justice by taking two incidents together- the 'Black Hole Tragedy' and the Chauri Chaura incident. There is hardly any difference in these two incidents but a close investigation of this would reveal that the former was an act of an individual while the latter was an act of a system of a so called civilized nation. This ugly incident of violence happened due to irresponsible behavior of some police-men, when an infuriated mob attacked them. The police opened fire and in retaliation the entire procession attacked the police and when the latter tried to hide them inside the police station, the crowd set fire to the building. The policemen who tried to escape were hacked and thrown into fire. In this incident twenty-two policemen were put to death.¹ The outcome of this event was taken up by the vernacular press in Bihar. Among them one was the *Bihar Bandhu*² that narrates two ugly incidents-the Jallianwala Bagh and Chauri Chaura that stormed Indian minds. However, in this article the Chaura Chauri incident has only been debated. A critical evaluation of these articles published in the *Bihar Bandhu* would help us to understand the British system of justice in Indian context. The articles under study published in the *Bihar Bandhu*, were declared "objectionable" by the government. One such article, *Khun pukar Raha Hai*³ (the blood is calling) published in the *Bihar Bandhu* was related to the sentences passed in the Chauri Chaura case. The *Bihar Bandhu* argues that the incident the Chauri Chaura occurred because of the provocation purposely given to them, as a result the entire procession attacked the police and when the latter tried to hide them inside the police station, the crowd set fire to the building. To take revenge against the crowd, a military soldier mad with the pride of his being a white man, carried more than 100 Indian prisoners hundreds of miles packed up in a carriage wherein there was hardly a space for them even to stand up. All of them breathed their last being suffocated and for want of water, only a few of them remained somehow alive to pass their lives in jail.⁴

At the end, the Government took notice to the incidents and a Special Tribunal was appointed for both and regular proceedings commenced. Sergeant Andrews, who was accused in this case, was held responsible for the death of hundreds of men painfully. He was the same person who was also culprit

in the Moplah Incident.⁵

For the Special Tribunals, the *Bihar Bandhu* argues, there was not much difficulty in ascertaining facts, examining witnesses and taking evidence on this particular incident and imparting real justice. But in this case the Jury sat and evidences of European Railway employees were recorded. What a rubbish proceeding, the Special Tribunals, initiate with, writes the *Bihar Bandhu*. Inquiries were made as to where Sergeant Andrews used to carry prisoners prior to this event in the same way in small carriage and whether those Prisoners reached the destination alive or dead, and it was found that he had done so on several occasions before that but then the prisoners did not die. We do not know why they thought of dying this time. Thus after considering the case from every point of view he was punished with three months simple imprisonment but on filing an appeal, Sergeant Andrews, escaped scot free.⁶ This was nothing but mockery of Justice that the culprit was made scot free and there was no punishment for him even if he was found involved in heinous crimes like that of Moplah and Chauri Chaura in 1922, that puts a big question mark on the system of justice of a self-styled civilized British nation.

The most surprising part of this incident was that thousands of men created a disturbance. One single policeman out of those assaulted remained alive in a half dead condition. After the incident when the police re-established their authority with a desire of vengeance. The process of arrests began and the people of the neighboring places were arrested and brought inside the jail to identify them, where their case was tried. There were neither witnesses nor evidences nor pleaders nor jury for the accused, and one day the Judge Sahib without any hesitation or doubt passed the ruthless judgment ordering 172 persons to be hanged, and thus a capital punishment was given for deadly assault on 21 policemen by the infuriated mob. While the Sergeant causing the death of a little less than one hundred men, was considered innocent. The *Bihar Bandhu* compares the British system of justice by taking evidences of two incidents- the Jallianwala Bagh and Chauri Chaura and argues that General Dyer who had shot down thousands of people in the Jallianwala Bagh was released and Andrews who had destroyed hundreds of lives and that irresponsible and unrighteous British Jury hanged 172 persons in the name of justice.⁷ As regards the punishment and justice in Chauri Chaura case, *Abhyuday*, a Hindi newspaper of Allahabad wrote, "The Chauri Chaura case was no doubt horrible but the judgment in that case was more horrible". Another newspaper, *the Pratap*, published from Kanpur narrates the British system of justice in these words: "This is not justice; it is the murder of justice".⁸ By narrating this incident of Chauri Chaura, the *Bihar Bandhu* exhorts the people with these words:

"O soldiers of Indian's battle of independence, what are you doing?

Today the blood (execution) of 172 of your brethren is calling you to the path of duty.

Are you ready to attend to that call?

Today so many mothers are weeping bitterly for their sons, wives for their husbands and sons and brothers for their fathers and brothers.

Do you want to offer them consolation?

To console them is not to go to them to offer mere percepts of the philosophy that life is transitory.

To give then real consideration you will have to practice the Karma Yoga as explained in Gita by God. Well, you will have to do something practical.

When those mothers will come to know that their husbands and sons have inspired life in the country by sacrificing themselves, their tears will themselves wipe off and the brave la-

dies will think themselves as fortunate as Ratan Devi among females.

Has the call of the blood of those helpless men reached you?"⁹

The call of the *Bihar Bandhu* to the people of the country by the narration of judicial crime of the British was so provocative in nature that would have caused regular forceful attack on the white-skinned people and it served as a mobilizing factor as well. It also speaks of Indian common man's self-respect for democratic means of protests. This is well displayed in the ongoing national movement after the incident of Chauri Chaura.

In view of the above incident and promulgation of Justice thereon, one Afzal-ul Mujtaba of Delhi in his Urdu pamphlet, *Zalim ka Zulm*" (the tyrant's tyranny)¹⁰ intends to argue on the method of framing laws and the kind of punishment given to General Dyer, a culprit of Jallianwala Bagh, to make people understand British system of justice. While addressing the tyrant, Afzal-ul Mujtaba, argues, "O enemies, practice tyranny fearlessly so that your desires may not remain unfulfilled and no obligation be left on India. Send here a greater tyrant than Dyer so that no guest thirsty of the blood of India may be left out. Learn how to frame laws from Rowlatt, so that no yearning is left in your heart. He further says, "We have already become breathless but crush us more, so that no life is left among the dead. O Murderer! Kill me to your hearts satisfaction and see that no life is left in the body. Let all countrymen accept Gandhi's instructions, so that no one is left ignorant in India".

If the Indians suffer gladly no difficulty will be left unsolved. Friends! Turn out the enemy now from my country so that no Satan may remain in the land of gods. Hang me at once or send me to the Andamans so that no one may remain free like me."¹¹

Criticizing the British policy intensely Pathak Bipin Bihari Sharma in his letter addressed to Lord Reading says: "Lord Reading's administration has been full of such events as excite the brain, cause blood to boil, and fill the mind of every self respecting Indian with (a desire for) vengeance. Further on he says that this unjust policy has been able to cover the fire only for a short time, and that it will soon burn forth so violently as to spread its flame though the Empire".¹² Pathak Bipin Bihari Sharma further narrates the whole issues in his open letter to Lord Reading that was published in the *Bihar Bandhu*, the extract of his letter is as follows:

"Your Excellency, --I remember pretty well the December of that year when, on one hand, Lord Chelmsford—a bitter enemy of India, enveloped, as it were in the sighs of the Indian public due to his black deeds—was ready to embark for England and there was shower of reproaches on him from all sides (as a result of which he, though a White man, hesitated to show his black face to Indians), while on the other, you with your announcement of love for justice, were hastening to India to trample it under foot. There was indeed a vista of justice in the announcement made by you at that time and the words of consolation given by you created some hope in the minds of the conservatives. Your sweet and cooling words had begun to have the effect of throwing a veil over the cruel acts committed by general Dyer at Jallianwala Bag and some prominent leading men of the country had begun to regard your diplomatic pronouncement as representing your real views. But, Your Excellency, it extremely pains me today to say that the words uttered by you at that time had no greater importance than the ravings of a mad man. You have acquired enough of fame or notoriety by your cruel acts during the last three years. Your administration has been full of such events as excite the brain, cause the blood to boil and fill the mind of every self-respecting Indian with (a desire for) vengeance. Sir you may well characterize non-cooperation as something leading to a breach of peace or anarchy and describe the present awful oppression as law and order meant

for the restoration of peace, but the world has already understood to a considerable extent Mahatma Gandhi as to dive deeper into it. It is under your administration that law is being interpreted in an arbitrary way and Indian patriots have been handcuffed and their lips sealed. You alone are responsible for the confinement in jail of Lala Lajpat Rai. It is you at whose instance Shaikat Ali has been sent to jail. It is you who have imprisoned a virtuous man like Mahatma M. K. Gandhi. You have revealed your formidable countenance by imposing duty on such a necessary article of food as salt. Finally, it would not be improper to mention that the public have become sick of your acts of injustice and highhandedness. You must have been happy at heart that you have put out the fire of non-cooperation by the strength of your diplomacy. But you should remember that this unjust policy (of yours) has been able to cover the fire only for a short time, and that it will soon burn forth so violently as to spread its flame throughout the Empire. The stories of the Tsar of Russia, the Kaiser of Germany and the Sultan of Turkey are still fresh in our minds. Hence if you want yourself to be ranked among great men, have pity on the oppressed, otherwise your Prophet himself will give evidence against you in the supreme Court (of the Almighty)." ¹³

While Kali Prasad has other way of understanding British system of Justice, in his pamphlet, "*Swaraj Dhara*" he argues the following:

"It is, now, useless for us to live without attaining Swaraj.

O Lord! Help us, our boat is in the middle of the current.

There are thieves and pick-pockets on the shores; how are we to get across.

It is now etc. (burden).

The leaders have been picked and all arrested.

Religion, too, is about to go; how long are we to think and meditate?

This Government of India has proscribed the Fatwa also.

It has become difficult to tread on religion even.

It is now etc. You must have heard of the Punjab events and of Dyer's atrocities.

He had shot children even, parched them in an oven (as it were). It is now etc.

What atrocities he committed in the name of justice! Just go to Amritsar and see, they are clearly visible.

Where is Symrna? Where are Aracan and Baghdad gone?

The tyrant has snatched them all away and ruined them. It is now, etc.

What are we to speak of Sheikh and Syed? We have all become soulless.

The former things no longer exist: religion has, now departed.

It is now etc.

There is no truth in the Kshatriyas; the Brahmins have become rustic; the Pandits have all turned beggars and call (for help) at each door. It is now etc.

Whose lamentations are we to take into account, and whose names are we to cite! The Khan Bahadurs and Lalas have become slaves of Dover (?) It is now etc". ¹⁴

The information given in this paper was declared by the Government "seditious" as it was creating a sense of hatred against the British and as a result Pathak Promode Sharan Sharma, the editor and Deo Narayan Singh, the publisher of the *Bihar Bandhu* were prosecuted under section 124-A of IPC and 99-A of Cr. PC. The Government also restricted the circulation of the *Bihar Bandhu* on the ground that the article contained a number of mis-statements of serious nature that in the Chauri Chaura case there were no witnesses, no evidence and no pleader which was against natural justice. Even without proper investigation 172 persons were hanged in the name of justice. And such a remark was considered an attempt to bring hatred or contempt against the Government. The article concludes with two allegorical question, which if they have any meaning or intention can only be an incitement of violence. What aggravates matters is that the sentence have yet to be confirmed and the appeals heard by the High court. It did not till then that any question of reprieves by Government arises. But in anticipation the Government is abused, and the blood of 172 persons who were still alive is "calling" for Vengeance. Moreover, it was not Government who released Andrews. He was, I believe, discharged by the Magistrate. That false statement can only be intended to bring Government into hatred or contempt. The passage from "the bureaucracy", come in my opinion, within Section 124-A. ¹⁵

Conclusion

On the basis of facts and the kind of punishments given to Indians in most of the cases put a question mark on the British system of justice. The nature of crime, if we analyze closely, in the case of Chauri Chaura, Moplah and the Jallianwala Bagh, the British violated all norms of a civilized nation by making a brutal killing of the Indians in the name of justice. It speak of atrocious Judiciary of the British rule which unveils their hollow claim of being a 'civilized nation'. The Chauri Chaura incident was a result of provocation given by the police to the infuriated mob but the case was heard of by the sensible Judges of the British who excelled in criminal offence in the name of justice by awarding death sentences on 172 persons and transportation for life to more than hundred people and setting free a British Sergeant who committed ugliest crime in vengeance. If we believe that "the Black Hole Tragedy" was true, it was an act of an individual which has been given due attention by the Western scholars. On the contrary, there were a numbers of Black Hole Tragedies under the colonial rule in India, have not been referred to by Western scholars in their writings. Thus, the criminal atrocity of the British police and the judiciary in the name of justice either in the case of Chauri Chaura or in other cases as well, they exposed negative aspects of their judicial system by committing several Black Holes in the name of justice in the country.

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