

Punjab Disturbances 1919

By [Ahmad Azhar](#)

This entry revisits the political upheavals that swept across several towns and cities of Punjab in April 1919, in protest against the passage of the Rowlatt Act in the Imperial Legislative Council. It argues that the moment marks a fundamental break in the form and content of popular politics in Punjab.

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Background

Punjab had served as the British army's main recruiting grounds in India during WWI. The enormous flow of men and monies from the province was made possible by and led to a distinct culture of governance, enshrined in the outlook and approach of what came to be regarded as the "Punjab School" of administration. The adherents of this governmentality, frequently of military background, romanticised the Punjabi rural, crafted the image of the rustic ploughman-soldier and appointed themselves his guardian. Ostensibly for this purpose, the colonial state in Punjab penetrated deep into the rural heartlands, spawning a host of institutions meant to closely monitor the pulse of the military districts.^[1] These structures of governance, built in response to extraordinary wartime pressures, were to become permanent over time, with far-reaching consequences. They represent simultaneously the means and the price of the region's militarization, markers of its development into

a garrison state.^[2]

As the war lengthened, the attention of the state tilted further in the direction of the rural recruiting centres, while its [propaganda](#) valorised the contributions of the countryside. Official proclamations, especially the public remarks of the Lieutenant Governor [Michael Francis O'Dwyer \(1864-1949\)](#), governor in Punjab from 1912 to 1919, formed part of an increasingly strident discourse presenting the state as the guardian of a supposedly loyal and contented peasantry's interests against parasitic, trouble-making townsfolk. Wartime provisioning of agricultural commodities and regulation of their market price by the government was one way in which this rhetoric was put to action. Heavy taxation of urban, commercial enterprises was another. The popular [press](#) was put under strict control of the government censor and dissent explicitly illegalised. Many from the limited but expanding urban populations of intelligentsia, tradespeople, professionals and the working classes felt at this juncture that they were being either completely ignored or thoroughly mistreated by the state. In a broad sense, this understanding of affairs, and the resentments that resulted from it, lay at the heart of the political upheavals that shook several of the towns and cities of Punjab in early 1919.

Unfolding of Events

The Punjab "disorders", as the official investigative report called them, were sparked by the passage of the Rowlatt Act in the legislative council and [Mahatma Gandhi's \(1869-1948\)](#) ensuing call for [satyagraha](#).^[3] Lahore, the capital of the province, responded with a peaceful *hartal* (a strike of traders and retailers) on 6 April. On 10 April, hearing the news that the authorities had just deported two of Amritsar's most popular leaders, a large crowd attempted to approach the Deputy Commissioner to lodge their protest. That crowd was shot at. Riots followed, which led to the lynching of a few Europeans in the city and the destruction of European-owned banks and government properties. A similar scenario, barring the murderous aftermath, unfolded in Lahore later that same day, with the police again employing force to thwart a massive crowd marching from the old city to the civil station. In both instances, there was no clear reason to believe that the crowd had violent intent. There was however, strong indication that they were approaching the authorities as supplicants; intelligence reports inform us that many in the processions marched barefoot and bareheaded.

Radical Departures in Plebeian Protest

A scrutiny of the course of events in Lahore over the next few days, till the imposition of martial law on 15 April, supports the argument of certain researchers that, in choosing the path that the provincial government did, it was not simply responding to, but in fact was helping to bring about a radical break in the popular politics of the province.^[4] "The king cannot hear us" and "the government is the enemy of British justice and rule of law" were some of the sentiments expressed by orators at popular assemblies during this tumultuous time – hardly a confrontational tone. On some occasions, however, the rhetoric could be incendiary. The rhetoric of the people at this confluence lurched

between humble petitioning and violent threats, appeals to the state's paternalism and the refutation of its authority. This rhetoric is reflective of the broader changes shaping the sphere of popular politics in Punjab. It was in this moment that plebeian groups first asserted themselves alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, their elite counterparts on the political stage. The moment also marked a rapprochement between the religious communities at the grassroots level; one that was soon supported by the political alliance between the *khilafatists* and the Congress. In short, the events that are subsumed under the rubric of the "Punjab disturbances (disorders)" are crucial for grasping a fundamental break in the tenor of popular politics in Punjab.

Ahmad Azhar, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Section Editor: [Heike Liebau](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Tan, Tai Yong: *The Garrison State. Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947*, volume 8, Delhi 2005.
2. ↑ Jalal, Ayesha: *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia. A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, volume 1, Cambridge 1995.
3. ↑ Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee, 1919-20, esp. evidence volumes on Amritsar and Lahore, India Office Records IOR/V/26/262/5-6.
4. ↑ Kumar, Ravinder: *Essays on Gandhian Politics. The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919*, Oxford 1971; Azhar, Ahmad: *The Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Railway Strike of 1920. Radical Developments in the Language of Plebeian Protest in Colonial Punjab*, in: Ahuj, Ravi (ed.): *Working Lives and Worker Militancy. The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, New Delhi 2013.

Selected Bibliography

Azhar, Ahmad: **[The Rowlatt Satyagraha and the railway strike of 1920. Radical developments in the language of plebeian protest in colonial Punjab](#)**, in: Ahuja, Ravi (ed.): *Working lives and worker militancy. The politics of labour in colonial India*, New Delhi 2013: Tulika, pp. 134-173.

Jalal, Ayesha: **[Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia. A comparative and historical perspective, volume 1](#)**, Cambridge 1995: Cambridge University Press.

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