

Modi Govt's Renovation of Jallianwala Bagh An Insult to Martyrs

The Centre's renovation work on the historic Jallianwala Bagh site has sparked a massive controversy with historians and opposition politicians criticising it as an "insult" to the martyrs and a bid at erasing history and heritage.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the renovated Jallianwala Bagh complex in Amritsar on August 28. The monument was the nation's homage to the victims of the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre wherein over thousand unarmed people were killed by British troops.

The British troops led by Col. Reginald Dyer opened fire at a large gathering of people who had assembled to protest against the arrest of freedom fighters Satya Pal and Saifuddin Kitchlu for opposing the Rowlatt Act.

History of Jallianwala Bagh

The Bagh is a quadrangle with a well, encircled by tall houses and a narrow entry passage, which made it near impossible for the crowd to escape while the British soldiers killed them by firing more than a thousand rounds of shots at the command of Col. Dyer.

The incident led to Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore returning his Knighthood title and Mahatma Gandhi starting his non-cooperation movement soon after. Even Winston Churchill, who was then a British parliamentarian, called the massacre "a monstrous event".

The Congress tried to acquire the land to preserve it with Mahatma Gandhi making a nationwide appeal for fundraising. After a year of raising funds, a trust set up for the Bagh acquired the 6.5-acre area from its owner Himmat Singh on August 1, 1920.

After India's Independence, the government established the Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Trust on May 1, 1951. The memorial was inaugurated by then President Dr Rajendra Prasad on April 13, 1961. The Trust is headed by the Prime Minister as the chairman, and permanent members including the Congress president, Punjab Chief Minister, Governor, Union Culture Minister, and Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha.

Revamp and Changes

Although the Jallianwala Bagh site has seen repairs and renovations over time, the narrow passageway had remained intact for almost 100 years. It continued to remind the terrifying event of 1919 as the alley played a key role in constricting the movement of victims because it was blocked by British troops.

Last year, under restoration work carried out by the Union Ministry of Culture, the lane was completely rebuilt into a gallery with embossed sculptures, a partial overhead cover and a shiny floor, among other things. This particular makeover has erased the old alley sparking the outrage among different sections of the Indian society.

Further, as part of the renovations, the entry and exit points have been repositioned. The 'Shahidi Khu' or Martyrs' Well, into which many victims jumped to save themselves from the gunshots, has also been enclosed with glass. This has also not been well received since it may restrict view.

The new complex also has Salvation Ground for visitors to sit in silence in honour of the martyrs and a light-and-sound show of the day of the massacre.

Reactions to the Renovation

"This is corporatisation of monuments, where they end up as modern structures, losing the heritage value. Look after them without meddling with the flavours of the period these memorials represent," tweeted historian S. Irfan Habib.

Former Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Chaman Lal called it a "distortion of history". "People visiting Jallianwala Bagh should go with a sense of pain and anguish. They have now tried to make it a space for enjoying, with a beautiful garden. It was not a beautiful garden," Lal told The Hindu.

Kim A. Wagner, professor of history in London and author of *Amritsar 1919 – An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre*, tweeted that the renovation "means that the last traces of the event have effectively been erased".

Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi flayed the government over the renovation saying he could not stand this "insult to martyrs". "This insult to the martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh could only be done by those who do not understand the meaning of sacrifice," Gandhi wrote on Twitter.

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury condemned the new makeover saying it insulted the Jallianwala Bagh martyrs. "Insulting our martyrs. Jallianwala Bagh massacre of Hindus Muslims Sikhs who gathered together for Baisakhi galvanised our freedom struggle. Every brick here permeated the horror of British rule. Only those who stayed away from the epic freedom struggle can scandalise thus," he said on Twitter. He further said the Jallianwala Bagh renovation was a precursor to what would happen after the Central Vista is built in Delhi, leading to demolition of heritage buildings.

Ramesh Sharma, an award-winning feature film and documentary producer and director, said, "We have desecrated the memory of those who were brutally massacred by Gen Dyer by creating this tacky, tasteless mural that leads on to the site of the #JallianwallaBagh"

"So, the bullet-hit walls testifying the violence at Jallianwalla Bagh are now turned into decorative murals. This obsession with turning "unsafe" zones into "safe" zones in public perception, erasing the event itself, is deliberate forgetting of India's struggle for freedom," said Shalini Sharma, Environment and Urban Studies professor at IISER, Pune.

(Courtesy '*Janata Weekly*', 12-09-2021)