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# UNIT 11 THE TURNING POINT\*

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## Structure

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Unit we have discussed the emergence of Gandhi in Indian politics with reference to his contributions to the peasants' and workers' movements at Champaran in Bihar and Kheda and Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Next important event towards the growth of national movement in India and the leadership role played by Gandhi was the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919. The enactment of the Rowlatt Act in 1919 by the British government empowering the state with arbitrary powers to suppress voices against the British government evoked sharp reactions from Indian people. Gandhi's experience in South Africa of fighting against the government by using the technique of Satyagraha encouraged him to give a call for Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act. We will explain in this unit the background of launching the Rowlatt Satyagraha, and how in different provinces people belonging to different classes, castes and communities responded to Gandhi's call, and the violence that broke out following the movement in some parts of India. Gandhi withdrew the movement because of violence and the movement failed to repeal the Rowlatt Act. Still the Rowlatt Satyagraha through its mass mobilisation marked the beginning of a new phase in Indian national movement and Gandhi took the centre stage of national politics.

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## 11.2 BACKGROUND OF THE ROWLATT SATYAGRAHA

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In the previous Unit we have explained to you the Gandhian concept of Satyagraha and how Gandhi used the method of Satyagraha and non-violent protest to redress the local grievances. Gandhi's leadership to the movements of peasants and workers in Bihar and Ahmedabad paved the way for his larger role in Indian national movement. Following the repressive Rowlatt Act passed by the British government in India Gandhi launched his first all India mass Satyagraha in March 1919. In this section we will discuss the developments which culminated in the passing of the objectionable Rowlatt legislation and the consequent nation-wide Satyagraha movement launched under the leadership of Gandhi. In India practically every class had grievances against the British rule and they were hoping that after the end of the First World War the British government would bring

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\* Resource Person – Prof. Swaraj Basu

major administrative reforms to meet the expectations of Indian people. However the reform initiated by the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms Act of 1919 was of very limited nature and therefore the leadership of the nationalist movement was critical of this reform. This was also the time when India witnessed the outbreak of revolutionary activities particularly in Bengal, Maharashtra and the Punjab to fight for freedom of India through violent means. The British government on its part along with the path of limited reform wanted to suppress any activities by Indians which in their opinion are against the interest of the British government in India. During the course of the First World War the British government took recourse to extraordinary powers to deal with the ‘revolutionary’ activities. Once the War was over they appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Sidney Rowlatt to suggest legislative measures to curb revolutionary activities in India. On the recommendation of the Rowlatt committee the Government in India prepared two draft bills to enable the government to check anti-state activities and to empower the government with discretionary power to deal with political crime. In spite of the unanimous opposition by Indian members in the Imperial Legislative Council the government pushed through the legislation. It is also believed that through the Rowlatt Act the government in India wanted to assure those in Britain who felt that the reform proposals of Montagu would affect the British interests in India. The Rowlatt Act authorised the government to bring in amendment in the Indian Penal Code to ensure the security of the state and to short-circuit ‘the processes of law in dealing with revolutionary crime’. Gandhi was very much opposed to such repressive act and considered this an open challenge by the British government to Indian people. In a letter to V. S. Srinivasa Shastri (the liberal leader) Gandhi wrote, ‘If we succumb we are done for. If we may prove our word that the government will see an agitation such that they never witnessed before, we shall have proved our capacity for resistance to autocracy or tyrannical rule...For myself if the Bills were to be proceeded with, I feel that I can no longer render peaceful obedience to the laws of a power that is capable of such a devilish legislation as these two Bills, and I would not hesitate to invite those who think with me to join me in the struggle’. (9 February, 1919, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XV). Gandhi believed that the Rowlatt legislation was very much against people’s democratic right and the constitutional reforms appear to be a mockery. He understood the prevailing social discontents and the political situation in India correctly. Gandhi communicated his decision to the government of India to defy the new law and also signed a pledge along with his disciples to disobey the Rowlatt Act. Then Gandhi addressed an open letter to ‘the People of India’ urging them to join the Satyagraha launched against the Rowlatt Act. There was already growing Indian political opinion reflected through the Home Rule movement and the efforts made through the Lucknow Pact for united opposition against the British rule. But it was Gandhi who brought new techniques of mass protest through Satyagraha and non-violent method. Gandhi urged upon the followers of politics of prayer and petition that ‘the growing generation will not be satisfied with petitions...Satyagraha is the only way’.

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### 11.3 ORGANISATION OF THE SATYAGRAHA

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Ravinder Kumar has observed that ‘The launching of the Rowlatt Satyagraha was an act of faith rather than an act of calculation, for although Gandhi had a

firm belief in the righteousness of his cause, he had no idea how the people of India would respond to his initiative.’ (‘Introduction’, *Essays on Gandhian Politics*). By 1919 Gandhi had developed contact with prominent Indian leaders, addressed different sections of Indian people in different parts of the country and also provided leadership to peasants and workers movements in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad. But he still did not have control over Indian National Congress or any political organisation to have the support for organising all India movement. Despite this limitation Gandhi’s decision to launch the first countrywide Satyagraha against the British government, in the opinion of Ravinder Kumar, ‘transformed nationalism in India from a movement representing the classes to a movement representing the masses’. This movement also brought Gandhi in the centre of Indian national movement. The two Home Rule Leagues organised by Mrs. Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak and the associations of Indian Muslims provided Gandhi with the needed support base. He also organised his own organisation, the Satyagraha Sabha, for carrying out the movement. The end of the First World War created a sense of urgency among young Indians that Britain must fulfill the war time promises but they were not happy with the proposed Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. Whereas Indian Muslims were concerned about the fate of the Khilafat and were critical of Britain, Gandhi from his political experience in South Africa very tactfully tried to use this anti-British sentiment. Members of the Home Rule Leagues held protest meetings against the Rowlatt Bills in different cities in India. Bombay being very active in the Home Rule movement members of Bombay Home Rule movement first approached Gandhi when he was in Bombay in February 1919 on the Rowlatt Bills. It was the Bombay Home Rulers who through posters and leaflets made people aware of the Rowlatt Bills and publicised Gandhi’s pledge against the Bills. Important newspapers like *Young India*, the Bombay bi-weekly, *Navajivan*, the *Gujarati weekly of Ahmedabad*, the *Bombay Chronicle*, the *Independent of Allahabad*, the *Muslim Akhuwat* of Lucknow, the *Waqt* of Amritsar, etc. played important role in mobilizing public opinion against the Bills. Gandhi by forming the Satyagraha Sabha in Bombay took a definite organisational step to carry forward the movement. This was followed by formation of Satyagraha committees in Delhi, Allahabad, Gujarat and other places. The Sabhas were responsible to mobilise participants, to educate people about Satyagraha and non-violence and to explain the Rowlatt Bills. Much of the effectiveness of the Satyagraha campaign depended on Gandhi’s personal visit to different cities and the initiatives of local leaders. Rajendra Prasad, J.B. Kripalani, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajagopalachari, Jawaharlal Nehru, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. M. A. Ansari, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlu, Dr. Satyapal, Swami Shradhdhananda, Hasan Imam, etc. committed themselves to help in organising the Satyagraha movement. Gandhi in the course of this Satyagraha movement did not take formal support of the Congress organisation which was not yet prepared for mass agitational politics. He undertook tour to many parts of India to establish Satyagraha Sabhas, to mobilise mass support and to create awareness about non-violence. Before going to the next section here I like to introduce you to the speech given by Gandhi at Madras to mobilise popular support for the proposed Satyagraha. This speech clearly states his ideas on the Rowlatt Bills and the proposed Satyagraha.

## Speech on Satyagraha Movement

Trichinopoly

March 25, 1919

FRIENDS,

... You know the Rowlatt Bills perhaps as much as I do. I need not explain them. You all want them to be withdrawn. The Indian councillors in the Imperial Council tried their best to have this legislation withdrawn. They failed. The Bills are bad, but this flouting of the unanimous voice of the Indian members is worse and it is for you and for me, whose representatives those councillors are, to right this double wrong. How can it be righted? When the governors of a country do a great wrong to the people whom they govern, history teaches us that they have resorted to violence, sometimes with apparent success, often they have been defeated; but violence can only result in violence, as darkness added to darkness really deepens it. The doctrine of violence is of the earth, earthy, merely material, and can be no guide for a human being who at all believes in the existence of the soul. If, as I am sure you will reject the doctrine of violence, you have to consider other means for seeking redress, and that, as I would translate, would mean *shatham prati satyam* ....

The Bills have violated the national conscience, and resistance to those commands which are in violation of one's conscience is a sacred privilege and a beauty, and it is not this law or this command of the governor that we resist, but it is our duty, it is open to us to resist all his commands which are not moral commands, and when we respectfully disobey wrongful things of these governors, we serve not only them but the whole nation. I have been asked wherever I have gone what law, what other laws, shall we disobey. The only answer I am able to give you today is that it is open to us to disobey all the laws which do not involve any moral sanction. That being so, it is totally unnecessary for you to know what laws we shall disobey. The aim of a satyagrahi is to invite upon his own devoted head all the suffering that he is capable of undertaking. Those of you, therefore, who disapprove of the Rowlatt legislation and who have faith in the efficacy of satyagraha, I have come to invite in order that you might sign this Pledge, but I will ask you to consider a thousand times before signing the Pledge. It is no discredit to you that you do not sign the Pledge, either because you do not disapprove of the legislation or you have not got the strength and the will, and it is not open to any satyagrahi to resent your refraining from signing the Pledge....

You might have seen from today's papers received here that I have addressed to the Press a letter embodying some suggestions. I will, however, repeat them this evening. My first suggestion is, that on Sunday week, i.e., 6th day of April, we shall all observe a 24 hours' fast. It is a fitting preliminary for satyagrahis before they commence civil disobedience of the laws. For all others, it will be an expression of their deep grief over the wrong committed by the Government. I have regarded this movement as a purely religious movement and fast is an ancient institution amongst us. You will not mistake it for a hunger- strike (Laughter.) nor will you consider it as designed for exerting any pressure upon the Government. It is a measure of self-discipline, it will be an expression of the anguish of the soul, and when

the soul is anguished, nobody could resist. I hope that all adults will take up the task unless they are prevented from doing so by ill-health or religious conviction. I have also suggested that on that Sunday all work should be suspended, all markets and all business places should be closed. Apart from the spiritual value of these two acts, they will form an education of first-class value for the masses. I have ventured to include in my suggestions even public servants, because I think that we have to credit them with conscience as also their independence and ability and privilege to associate themselves with wrongs which the nation may want to resent. It is right that they should not take part in political meetings and political discussions, but their individual conscience must have full and free play. My third suggestion in which public servants may not take part is that on that day, we should visit every hamlet, if we can, and hold meetings and pass resolutions asking the Secretary of State for India to veto this legislation. I would not ask you to resort to these public meetings and resolutions, but for one reason, and the reason is that behind these meetings and resolutions lies the force of satyagraha to enforce the national will. In these three suggestions, whether you are satyagrahis or not, so long as you disapprove of the Rowlatt legislation, all can join and I hope that there will be such a response throughout the length and breadth of India as would convince the Government that we are alive to what is going on in our midst....

*The Hindu*, 27-3-1919.

(Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XV)

Gandhi was not very sure of the success and consequences of the movement. Still he went ahead and decided to launch the movement with the nation-wide hartal (strike) on 6 April 1919. Gandhi was arrested on 9 April 1919 and there was mass agitation in different parts of India which soon took a violent turn. Although the movement was most effective in cities and larger towns but followers of Gandhi also reached out to smaller towns and rural areas. Even with very little formal organisation and much beyond of his calculation the Rowlatt Satyagraha succeeded in creating passions among masses. We will now discuss the regional spread of this Satyagraha movement.

## 11.4 REGIONAL SPREAD OF THE SATYAGRAHA

The Rowlatt Satyagraha proved Gandhi's leadership ability to connect with the masses irrespective of caste, class and community linkages. It was not only the skillful use of popular religious symbols by Gandhi but also his understanding of social realities and different class loyalties helped him in uniting them for a common political cause. Ravinder Kumar said that Gandhi 'looked upon the peoples of India as a loose constellation of classes, communities, and religious groups, and because he had no illusions about the nature of political society in the country, he was able to unite it in a way it had never been united before'. The Rowlatt Satyagraha movement is characterised as 'the biggest and most violent anti-British upsurge which India had seen since 1857'. Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar, Gujarat, etc. were the most affected areas in the course of this movement. With the transfer of capital to Delhi in 1912 political awareness also increased. Revolutionary nationalism, Pan-Islamism and the agitation of the Home Rule League kept people of Delhi politically engaged. Initiatives taken by the members of the Home Rule League and the All India Muslim League to arouse public

awareness against the various actions of the British Government along with the local press highlighting common problems created an anti-British sentiment to which various rumors about the Rowlatt Bills added further fuel. Gandhi attended a large public meeting in Delhi on 7 March in which people representing different sections of society were present. Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Sabha in Delhi which succeeded in drawing a large number of students. Analysing the Rowlatt Satyagraha movement in Delhi Donald W. Ferrell (Ferrell's article on Rowlatt Satyagraha in Delhi, See Ravinder Kumar (ed.), *Essays on Gandhian Politics*) has written that the movement in Delhi lasted from 30 March to 18 April and the men who took part in the movement are divided into two categories—primary leaders and secondary leaders. Primary leaders were those who were recognised as political leaders and secondary leaders were those who were not much known but wanted to play an active role by voicing the concern of the underprivileged sections of the city. Swami Shradhanand who belonged to the Arya Samaj was persuaded by Gandhi to join the movement. Shradhanand played crucial role in drawing popular support in Delhi for the movement. Merchant community as well as common people observed hartal on 30 March in Delhi to protest against the Rowlatt legislation. There was spontaneous response from different quarters without much effort by the leaders of the movement. There were riots and police firing on 30 March in Delhi in the course of public gathering which was given wide publicity by the local press. Due to this incident of violence Gandhi advised volunteers in Delhi not to participate in the hartal on 6 April. Despite Gandhi's appeal there was complete hartal on 6 April in Delhi. Shradhanand and other leaders addressed a gathering of about 15,000 to 20,000 and spoke on the importance of Satyagraha. Gandhi was expected to arrive in Delhi on 9 April but he was arrested on his way to Delhi. Following this public meeting was organized in Delhi under the presidentship of Muhammad Abdul Rahman which was attended by about one lakh people. In this meeting Shradhanand introduced a resolution asking for Gandhi's release and appealed people to follow Gandhi's example of non-violence. Despite the news of Gandhi's release and the requests made by the leaders, hartal continued in Delhi till 18 April. Employees of bank and railways gave the strike call on 13 April. There was sign of more aggressiveness among people and the masses from neighbouring areas of Delhi to the violent mood. There was firing at Chandni Chowk on 17 April. The Rowlatt Satyagraha in Delhi proved that it was possible to bring heterogeneous groups in one platform provided there was unity of interests.

Lahore on the eve of the Rowlatt Satyagraha had enough reasons for disillusionment with the British government. The thinking of Islam in danger because of the British attitude towards Turkey after the First World War, the decision of reparation of Bengal, distress caused by inflationary prices, were enough to agitate the mind of people of Lahore. Gandhi's appeal to observe hartal on 6 April in protest to the Rowlatt legislation got positive support from the people of Lahore. The Provincial Congress Committee extended support to the call for Satyagraha and many prominent citizens also came forward to support the movement. The crowd comprising of different social groups gathered in large numbers and was in rebellious mood. Leaders addressed the gathering on the importance of the hartal and a resolution was passed against the Rowlatt Act. There were protests in the streets of Lahore against local government officials who tried to oppose hartal. On behalf of the government, warning was issued to citizens asking to maintain public order but the mood in the city was of defiance.

The leaders of Lahore used the festival of Ram Navmi on 9 April inviting Hindus and Muslims to join hands and a procession of about 20,000 people, Hindus and Muslims, travelled in different parts of the city. In the procession there was a visible mood of protest against the government. Rumours of Gandhi's arrest on the way to Punjab and the deportation of local leaders of Amritsar like Kitchlew and Satyapal caused strong popular resentment resulting in massive protest against the government in the city. The government on its part resorted to police firing which aggravated the crisis further. Lahore witnessed a massive gathering of about 35,000 people consisting of different religious communities and social classes protesting the government action. On the suggestion of a local leader a Popular Committee was formed to act on behalf of the citizens of Lahore. Seeing no other way the local government tried to negotiate with the People's Committee to enforce law and order in the city. But the general mood was so much against the government action that the leaders of the People's Committee failed to get support for the termination of the hartal. Seeing the popular discontent the government imposed martial law in the city and forced to withdraw the movement. Analysing the Rowlatt Satyagraha in Lahore Ravinder Kumar summed up, 'All that was required in April 1919 to launch a popular movement against the British Government was an issue which would provide a channel of expression for the discontents which affected various classes and communities in Lahore. By initiating a Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act, Gandhi provided such an issue, and he thereby set afoot a movement whose intensity surprised the local administration no less than it surprised the local leaders of Lahore'.

The worst happened in Amritsar. There was general discontent among people in the Punjab, particularly the Sikhs, because of actions of the British government and the activities and trials of the Ghadrites. On 6 April 1919 Amritsar witnessed a hartal in protest against the Rowlatt legislation. However the government action of deporting local leaders, Kitchlew and Satyapal, and the ban on Gandhi's entry to Punjab led to popular discontent. There was a protest march by local people of Amritsar against the government decision of the deportation of the two leaders. The protesters were stopped and fired upon near the railway foot-bridge. The police firing on 10 April in Amritsar was followed by attacks on government institutions by the common people. To bring the situation in control martial law was enforced by General Dyer. The city was quiet for two days and on 13 April which was the day of annual Baisakhi festival peasants from villages around Amritsar came to visit the Golden Temple. On that day a public meeting was organised in the afternoon in Jallianwala Bagh, a place near to the Golden Temple. The crowd was mostly local residents and the village peasants who were not aware that public meeting was banned in the city. General Dyer without giving any warning to the crowd in that enclosed ground opened fire and according to government estimate 379 persons were killed and 1200 were injured. On the following day martial law was clamped on several other towns of Punjab. In protest to the brutality of the British repression Rabindranath Tagore renounced the 'Knighthood' given to him by the British. Apart from Lahore and Amritsar districts of Gujranwala, Gujarat and Lyallpur in Punjab were seriously affected by the Anti-Rowlatt movement. There were attacks on government buildings and institutions to express people's anger against the government. The government on its part took recourse to force to suppress the movement.

Seeing the cruelties perpetuated at Amritsar the Congress decided to hold the next Congress annual session at Amritsar to express its solidarity with the people

of the Punjab. Paying tribute to those who were killed in Amritsar and elsewhere in the Punjab the Congress condemned the most shameful barbarities. Resolution was passed urging the government for immediate removal of General Dyer and immediate recall of the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford. It was also decided to acquire the site of Jallianwalla Bagh and to build a memorial to perpetuate the memory of those who were killed.

In Ahmedabad public meeting was organised to protest against the Rowlatt legislation. Under the auspices of the Home Rule League and the Satyagraha Sabha preparations were made to observe 6 April as protest day against the Rowlatt Act. Later, following the news of Gandhi's arrest people came out in the street and workers stopped works in the mills. The police resorted to firing to control the crowd and violence spread in the city. Vallabhbhai Patel, Indulal Yajnik and others appealed for peace. Despite the appeal for restraint disturbances continued, government buildings were attacked, houses were looted. To control the crowd city was virtually placed under martial law. In an estimate it is suggested that about 28 were killed and 123 were wounded in the firing. Gandhi on his return to Ahmedabad on 13 April taking permission from the government organised public meeting and urged upon people to go for fast and confess their guilt. Besides Ahmedabad, the disturbances also spread to Viramgam, Kheda and other places. In United Provinces demonstrations were held in most of the large towns, shops remained closed and public transport came to a halt. Most noticeable was the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims in public gatherings. In Bihar also hartal was confined to mostly in large towns. Bombay, Calcutta, Madras also witnessed hartals but there was restraint on violence. The government report on the Rowlatt Satyagraha in the city of Calcutta stated that in many areas of Calcutta shops were completely closed, cars and trams were stopped; leaflets were distributed asking people to agitate for the release of Gandhi. A large crowd of Hindus and Muslims gathered at the Nakhoda Mosque and from there they went to attend a public gathering of about 6,000 people. 'Enquiries are being made into these matters, but so far, the indications seem to be that the disturbances were organized from outside Bengal, and the attempts to rouse the mass of the people against Government have certainly been less successful here than elsewhere.' Although the movement was confined mostly to cities but small towns and villages in some parts of India also witnessed popular agitation. However violence which broke out in course of the Satyagraha movement compelled Gandhi to call off the Satyagraha. Gandhi wrote:

'It is a matter of the deepest humiliation and regret for me. I see that I overcalculated the measure of permeation of Satyagraha amongst the people. I underrated the power of hatred and ill will. My faith in Satyagraha remains undiminished, but I am only a poor creature just as liable to err as any other. I am correcting the error. I have somewhat retracted my steps for the time being. Until I feel convinced that my co-workers can regulate and restrain crowds, and keep them peaceful, I promise to refrain from seeking to enter Delhi or the other parts of the Punjab. My satyagraha, therefore, will, at the present moment, be directed against my own countrymen.' (14 April 1919, CWMG, Vol. XV).

He advised all Satyagrahis to temporarily suspend civil disobedience and asked them to adhere to the fundamental principles of Satyagraha which rejects any form of violence. The momentum that the Satyagraha created among various classes very soon lost its tempo. But anti-British sentiment that it generated did

not go waste completely. The movement might not have succeeded in forcing the government to repeal the Rowlatt Act but in many ways the Rowlatt Satyagraha proved to be a turning point in history of Indian national movement. In the following section we will introduce you to the nature and significance of this movement.

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## 11.5 IMPORTANCE OF THE SATYAGRAHA

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Despite limited organisational support and confined mostly in cities and towns the Rowlatt Satyagraha succeeded in creating a storm against the British which took the character of mass movement. Although the movement did not evoke same response from all parts of India but different classes and communities responded to Gandhi's call. Leaders before Gandhi ignored the plural character of Indian society and also did not pay much attention to mobilise common people against the British. Gandhi realised the importance of bringing people cutting across caste, class and community together to raise voice against the colonial rule. Analysing the reason for Gandhi's success in mobilising masses Ravinder Kumar argued that it was not simply 'skillful exploitation of popular religious symbols' as some scholars attributed to Gandhi's success. According to Kumar 'to the extent that Gandhi's charisma rested upon the use of a religious idiom in politics, to a corresponding extent was it the result of a perceptive insight into the social loyalties of the individual and into the manner these loyalties could be invoked for political action....Gandhi...looked upon the peoples of India as a loose constellation of classes, communities, and religious groups, and because he had no illusions about the nature of political society in the country, he was able to unite it in a way it had never been united before'. The way Gandhi tactfully used hurt sentiments of the Muslims on the issue of the treatment towards Turkey by the British helped him in winning the support of the Muslims. In a speech Gandhi said, 'It may be asked why I, a Hindu, bother my head about the Mahomedan question. The answer is that as you are my neighbours and my countrymen, it is my duty to share your sorrows. I cannot talk about Hindu-Muslim unity and fail in giving effect to the idea when the test has arrived'. (9 May 1919, CWMG Vol. XV). From his reading of India's social reality Gandhi realised that only emotive issue was suited for mass political movement in India and that was his reason for raising voice against the repressive Rowlatt legislation. At the same time it needs to be noted that it was difficult to control such diverse masses in a movement which is non-violent. Provocations as well as the government repression may result in violence and this happened in the case of the Rowlatt Satyagraha.

Judith M. Brown has viewed the Rowlatt Satyagraha as Gandhi's 'transition from peripheral to committed participation in politics'. Gandhi emerged as an all India leader of immense potential and his novel approach to politics succeeded in getting mass support. Judith Brown suggested that the success of the Rowlatt Satyagraha 'depended on local conditions and the support of local political leaders....In every place where hartal was well observed and Gandhi's propaganda welcomed it seems that the tinder of unrest had been drying for months and Gandhi's campaign was merely the spark which started the conflagration'. Despite discontent and strain in public life Central Provinces, Madras, Marathi-speaking Bombay and Bengal did not respond much to the call of Satyagraha because the local leaders did not channelise the discontent into the movement. The Rowlatt

Satyagraha failed in repealing the Rowlatt Act, violence broke out although the essence of the movement was non-violence. ‘Nonetheless,’ according to Judith Brown, ‘as Gandhi’s first essay in all-India leadership it was remarkably instructive to those who could read it correctly, since it showed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Mahatma in politics’.

Seeing the tone of India’s national movement in the years 1920 to 1942 under Gandhi’s leadership it is not difficult to assume that the Rowlatt Satyagraha provided the ideology and the method of political struggle. Gandhi being a firm believer in the ideology of non-violence never hesitated in spite of criticism to call off the movement whenever it turned violent. The movement also helped Gandhi in gaining the centre stage of national politics and the commanding position in the Congress.

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## 11.6 SUMMARY

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The Rowlatt Satyagraha is considered as the turning point in the movement against the British Raj. In response to India’s support to the British war effort the British government promised to bring certain reforms but at the same time the British government was not fully confident to assuage the growing discontent among Indians against the British. This prompted them to pass the repressive Rowlatt legislation empowering the British government to curb anti-British agitation. Gandhi from his successful intervention through Satyagraha to redress the grievances of peasants and workers of Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad found an opportunity in the Rowlatt legislation to mobilize public opinion at the national level against the British government. He took the organisational support from the Home Rule Leagues, Pan-Islamist groups in India and the Satyagraha Sabha that he formed to organise Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act. People in various parts of India who were aggrieved for various reasons found in this Satyagraha an opportunity to express their discontent against the British. In spite of Gandhi’s appeal for not to resort to violence in some places because of police firing and instigation violence broke out and innocent people lost their life. This forced Gandhi to call off the movement. The movement failed to compel the British government to repeal the Rowlatt Act. But the kind of mass mobilisation cutting across caste, class and community identities witnessed during the movement was unprecedented. The movement was a lesson for many to mobilise common people against the British and paved the way for Gandhi’s commanding position over the Congress and national politics.

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## 11.7 EXERCISES

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- 1) In what sense can the events described in this Unit can be said to form a turning point in Indian nationalist politics?
- 2) Write a note on the events related to the Jallianwala Bagh.
- 3) What was Rowlatt Act? Why was it unpopular among the nationalists?