

The Amritsar Massacre

India was one of Britain's largest possessions. It was the colony that many Britons treasured most, calling it the 'jewel in the crown' of the Empire. One of the reasons for this pride was their record of achievement.

By 1900, the British had built nearly 50 000 miles of railway through India. They built dams to help flood areas and dug nearly 70 000 miles of canal. They also introduced a new legal system and helped to settle old arguments between rival areas and regions... Whether the Indians wanted these things or not!

Around the same time, many educated Indians started to believe that India should be free from British control. A political group called the Indian National Congress (INC) was formed to bring this about. But despite holding meetings and organising demonstrations, the British ignored their demands.

In 1914, Indians fought alongside British soldiers in World War One. India itself gave Britain a huge amount of money, food and materials- and nearly 50,000 Indian soldiers died in the trenches.

In 1919, the British Government responded to Indian demands for a greater say in running their country and made slight changes to the way that the country was governed. Law- making councils were set up in each region and over 5 million wealthy Indians were given the vote. However the British Government still controlled tax, the police, the law courts, the armed forces, education and much more. So they still controlled the most important parts of Indian life.

Some Indians welcomed these small changes as a step in the right direction. However, others were bitterly disappointed. In response, the disappointed Indians organised a meeting in a small town called Amritsar to discuss how they felt. The area was quite contained with narrow entrances and exits. They were planning on using non- violent methods to get their message across to the British, such as marches and protests. This meeting was a calm and ordered affair and men, women and children attended.

However, the demonstration was put down with severe violence from British troops. The local British commander in charge of the soldiers ordered his men to fire into the crowd- killing 379 Indian men, women and children. His aim was to scare the Indians into not protesting against British rule.

The Amritsar incident was a turning point for the Indian National Congress and its leader, Gandhi. He wrote, '*when a government takes up arms against its unarmed subjects, then it has lost the right to govern*'. The Indian people were outraged that their own rulers had turned against their own people in such a brutal way. The Congress, more loudly than ever, demanded an independent India.