Archbishop's Apology for Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

What is the issue?

- Many leaders from the United Kingdom (UK) tip-toed around giving a formal apology for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the past few years.
- The current Archbishop of Canterbury has spoken on the matter as he paid a visit to the Jallianwala Bagh memorial in Amritsar.

What happened now?

- The current Archbishop of Canterbury said that he was "ashamed and sorry for the massacre".
- He further added that he could not speak on behalf of the British government since he is a religious leader and not a politician.
- The reason why the UK hasn't apologised till now is that admitting blame could have legal and financial consequences.
- While a formal apology may be seen as an embarrassment for the UK in perpetuity, it could, at least in a court of law, imply admitting liability.

What is the story behind Jallianwala Bagh Massacre?

- The massacre took place on April 13, 1919, the day of Baisakhi, a festival observed in Punjab to mark the beginning of the harvest season.
- On this day, a group of unarmed civilians gathered at Jallianwala Bagh were fired at by British troops on the order of Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer.
- Over 400 were killed as a result which included children as well.

What is the history of reluctance in accepting blame?

- **Former British Prime Minister David Cameron** on his visit to India in February 2013 had described the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as a "deeply shameful event in British history".
- Cameron also invoked then secretary of state for war Winston Churchill, who in 1920 referred to the killings as monstrous.
- Even though he did not make a formal apology, Cameron's remarks were in contrast to what **Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Phillip** had said during their visit to the site in 1997.
- The Queen called it a distressing episode while the Prince questioned the credentials of the massacre saying that the incident was exaggerated.

- Even so, Cameron stopped short of making a formal apology when he visited the massacre site, the only British prime minister at that time to do so in the 94 years since the incident occurred in 1919.
- In November 2016, Shashi Tharoor had demanded an apology for the massacre to be delivered as part of the UK's reparations to India for the colonial exploitation by the British.
- In December 2017, after his visit to Amritsar, **London Mayor Sadiq Khan** had called for an apology from Britain for the massacre.
- After this, the UK Foreign Office released a statement that rightly condemned the deeply shameful act.
- During this time, veteran UK-Indian MP Virendra Sharma who was a member of the Labour Party at that time, revived his petition launched on the UK parliament's website earlier in 2017 calling for an apology.
- This year, the demand for an apology was revived since the year marks the centenary of the incident.
- In April 2019, **former Prime Minister Theresa May** expressed "regret" but did not deliver an absolute apology.
- A day after May's remarks, a Pakistani minister endorsed the demand saying that the British empire must apologise to the nations of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh on Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and Bengal famine.

What makes the Archbishop's apology significant?

- The Archbishop of Canterbury serves as the head of the Church of England, which is a position that goes back almost 1400 years.
- Two archbishops preside over the Church of England, one is the archbishop of the province of Canterbury and the other is the archbishop of the province of York.
- The kings and queens of England are crowned by the former and he is ranked just after the princes of royal blood.
- He is also regarded as the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion of churches and is referred to as the "primate of all England".
- Justin Welby holds this position since the year 2013. The Anglican Communion is spread all over the world, with over 85 million members.

Source: The Indian Express

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