

Britain's Broken Promises after World War I and India's Freedom Struggle

Mains: *GS I - Indian History*

Why in News?

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany, automatically drawing colonial India into the First World War.

What is the contributions of India in the WWI?

- **Troop Strength** - Roughly 1.3 to 1.5 million Indian volunteers served as combatants and non-combatants.
- They served in various theatres of war, including Europe, Mesopotamia, East Africa, and the Middle East.
- **Casualties** - More than 60,000 to 74,000 Indian soldiers lost their lives, and tens of thousands more were wounded or missing.
- **Key Fronts** - Indian troops plugged critical gaps on the Western Front (such as at Ypres), and formed the bulk of the force in the Mesopotamian campaign.
- **Gallantry** - Indian soldiers earned thousands of decorations for bravery, including Victoria Crosses.
- **Supplies** - Provided over 3.7 million tonnes of supplies, equipment, and raw materials including jute for sandbags, cotton, iron, and manganese.
- **Animals** - Sent more-than 170,000 animals like horses and mules for transport.
- **Financial Aid** - Made direct cash contributions and huge loans to the British government worth hundreds of millions of pounds at the time (equivalent to billions today).

What are the demands of Indian people?

- **Expectations of Indians** - These sacrifices generated widespread expectations that Britain would reward India's loyalty with meaningful **constitutional reforms and self-government**.
- **Demands of INC** - At the Lucknow Session of 1916, the Indian National Congress (INC) called upon Britain to declare **self-government** as its objective.
- Britain's dependence on Indian manpower, particularly in campaigns against the Ottoman Empire, strengthened the belief among Indian leaders that substantial political concessions would follow the war.
- Leaders such as Madan Mohan Malaviya argued that the war had accelerated India's constitutional progress, raising hopes for responsible government.

What are the announcements of British?

- **Limited Constitutional Reforms** - Recognising growing political pressure, the British government announced the Montagu Declaration of 1917, promising the gradual development of self-governing institutions.
- This culminated in the Government of India Act, 1919, commonly known as the **Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms**.
- The reforms introduced several institutional changes, including:
 - A **bicameral central legislature** comprising the Legislative Assembly and the Council of State.
 - **Dyarchy** in the provinces, dividing subjects between elected Indian ministers and British executive officials.

What are the shortcomings of British offers?

- **No change in Powers** - Despite these changes, real political authority remained concentrated in the hands of the Governor-General and provincial Governors.
- They retained overriding powers to suspend legislatures, veto legislation, and control critical departments such as finance, police, and law and order.
- Consequently, the reforms fell far short of Indian expectations and exposed Britain's reluctance to transfer meaningful political power.
- **Continued Colonial Discrimination** - Britain's unequal treatment of Indian soldiers further deepened resentment.
- British war casualties were commemorated individually through the Imperial War Graves Commission.
- But thousands of Indian soldiers who died in campaigns such as Mesopotamia remained largely anonymous, with many memorials recording only their numbers rather than their names.
- Similarly, despite their outstanding wartime service, Indians continued to face discrimination within the armed forces.
- Opportunities for promotion remained severely restricted, and even by 1930, very few Indians had risen beyond the rank of captain.
- Such inequalities reinforced the perception that the colonial administration valued Indian sacrifices but denied Indians equal recognition and opportunity.

What are the post-war repressions of the British governments?

- Instead of expanding civil liberties after the war, the British government adopted increasingly repressive measures.
- **The Rowlatt Act of 1919** - It extended wartime emergency powers into peacetime, authorising **detention without trial**, restrictions on the press, and extraordinary powers to suppress political dissent.
- The legislation provoked widespread opposition across India.
- Mahatma Gandhi condemned it as the "**Black Act**" and launched his first nationwide Satyagraha, accompanied by a countrywide hartal in April 1919.
- **Jallianwala Bagh Incident** - The situation deteriorated further with the **Jallianwala Bagh Massacre on 13 April 1919**, when peaceful protesters in Amritsar were fired upon without warning under General Reginald Dyer's orders.

- The massacre destroyed whatever confidence remained in Britain's commitment to constitutional reform.
- It convinced many Indians that peaceful cooperation with the colonial government would not secure justice or political rights.

*The gap between British promises and post-war realities transformed the nature of India's freedom struggle, shifting it from demands for gradual reforms to **a mass movement for complete independence**.*

What are the impacts on the Indian National Movement?

- **Altered trajectory of the freedom struggle** - Moderate faith in constitutional negotiations steadily declined, while mass-based nationalist politics gained momentum under Gandhi's leadership.
- The experience of wartime sacrifice followed by limited reforms, political repression, and colonial violence united diverse sections of Indian society against British rule.
- **New movements** - The developments laid the foundation for subsequent nationwide movements, including:
 - The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22),
 - Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), and
 - The Quit India Movement (1942),
- Thus it transformed the freedom struggle into a broad-based mass movement.

Conclusion

- The First World War marked a decisive turning point in India's struggle for independence.
- India's immense military and economic contributions raised legitimate expectations of self-government, but Britain's limited constitutional concessions and harsh post-war repression exposed the contradictions of colonial rule.
- The betrayal of wartime promises, symbolised by the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, shattered Indian faith in British intentions and accelerated the demand for complete independence.
- Rather than preserving the Empire, Britain's failure to fulfil its commitments became one of the strongest catalysts for India's national movement.

Reference

[The Indian Express| WWI and INM](#)