Chauri Chaura Centenary

Why in news?

2021 marks the Centenary year of the Chauri Chaura incident, a violent event with far-reaching consequences during the freedom struggle.

What are the events planned?

- Chauri Chaura (name derives from that of two villages) is a town in Gorakhpur district in Uttar Pradesh.
- Indian PM recently inaugurated the Chauri Chaura Centenary Celebrations.
- A postage stamp was also released to mark the event.
- The UP government has planned a year of celebrations through February 4, 2022 in all 75 districts of the state.

What happened back then?

- On February 4, 1922, a large crowd of peasants set on fire the police station in Chauri Chaura, killing 22 policemen.
- Shahid Amin's Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992 is the best-known historical reconstruction of the incident and its aftermath.
- According to it, this is what happened:
- On August 1, 1920, Gandhi had launched the Non-Cooperation (Asahayog) Movement against the government.
- It involved a boycott of foreign goods, especially machine-made cloth, and legal, educational and administrative institutions.
- Essentially, the idea is "refusing to assist a ruler who misrules".
- As the movement gathered momentum over the next year and a half, large numbers of volunteers became active across the country.
- In the winter of 1921-22, volunteers of the Congress and the Khilafat movement were organised into a national volunteer corps.
- In mid-January 1922, peasant "officers" were appointed to -
    i. fill out pledges of non-cooperation
    ii. collect subscriptions
    iii. lead the picketing of shops selling foreign items
- Volunteers were trying to stop trade in foreign cloth, and enforce a just price for meat and fish.
- A few days before the February 4 incident, police cracked down on these

volunteers.
- They severely beat up one Bhagwan Ahir, a demobilised soldier from the British Indian Army.

What happened on February 4?

- On February 4, volunteers congregated in the town.
- After a meeting, they proceeded in a procession to the local police station, to picket the nearby Mundera bazaar.
- They ignored warning shots fired in the air by police and pelted the police with stones.
- The police fired into the crowd, killing three people and injuring many others.
- A volcano of anger then erupted, there was heavy brickbatting, and the policemen were forced to flee inside the station.
- The crowd proceeded to douse the building with kerosene and to set it on fire.
- Some of the policemen who tried to escape were caught and battered to death.
- Some others managed to escape by throwing away their conspicuous red turbans, which the angry crowd tore to shreds.
- A lot of police property, including weapons, was destroyed.
- The volunteers saw the abolition of the station as a sign of the arrival of "Gandhi raj".

What was the British response?

- The severely rattled establishment of the Raj prosecuted the accused aggressively.
- Raids and repression followed immediately, lists of volunteers were compiled, and large numbers of suspects were rounded up.
- A sessions court quickly sentenced as many as 172 of the 225 accused to death.
- Ultimately, 19 of those convicted were sent to the gallows.

How did Gandhi react?

- Gandhi's non-violence strategy was based on the premise that the use of repressive force against non-violent protesters would expose and weaken the semi-hegemonic character of the colonial state.
- So, incidents such as Chauri Chaura defeated that strategy.
- Gandhi was deeply disturbed by the incident. He condemned the "crime" of the policemen's killing.

- The volunteer groups in the nearby villages were disbanded.
- A Chauri Chaura Support Fund was set up to demonstrate “genuine sympathy” and seek prayashchit (atonement).
- Gandhi decided to stop the Non-Cooperation Movement, which he saw as having been tainted by unforgivable violence.
- He bent the Congress Working Committee to his will, and on February 12, 1922, the satyagraha was formally suspended.
- He justified himself on grounds of his unshakeable faith in non-violence:
    - “I would suffer every humiliation, every torture, absolute ostracism and death itself to prevent the movement from becoming violent.”

How was the decision received?

- Most of the leaders of the national movement were disappointed with Gandhi’s decision.
- The disillusionment made many of the younger Indian nationalists to come to a conclusion that India would not be able to throw off the colonial yoke through non-violence.
- It was from the ranks of these impatient patriots that some of India’s most beloved revolutionaries were to arise in the years to come.
- These include Jogesh Chatterjee, Ramprasad Bismil, Sachin Sanyal, Ashfaqulla Khan, Jatin Das, Bhagat Singh, Bhagwati Charan Vohra, Masterda Surya Sen, and many others.

Source: The Indian Express

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