# Repression, Protest, and Tragedy: The Rowlatt Agitation of 1919

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#### Abstract

This paper reviews the background and events of a pivotal moment in the history of the movement for Indian (Pakistan and Bangladesh included) independence from colonial Britain—April 1919. It seems a timely topic in light of the current clash of Islamic and western cultures.

Repression, protest, violence, and tragedy have become common fare in current news articles and programs, particularly in news from the Middle East. The most notable recent example is the assassination of Benazir Bhutto [1954–2007] in the Punjab of Pakistan following a political rally at Liaquat National Bagh. In this paper I would like to publish my research into that troubled region of the world. It presents similar issues in a historical context—British India shortly after World War I.

#### The Great War

During the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson [1856–1924] of the United States inculcated his doctrine of the self-determination of nations. This was to be the war to make the world safe for democracy. To many Indians, longing for self-government, this came as an answer to their prayers. Mohandas Gandhi [1869–1948], among others, began recruiting stretcher bearers and soldiers to fight for the British Empire. Once the British experienced the loyal support and sacrifice of the Indian masses, he reasoned, they would certainly reward India with responsible government.

Over these four years India responded generously with about 1.3 million men (Wales et al., 2007a) and a considerable amount of food and materials. Had Indians been allowed to accept commissioned ranks, even more Indians would probably have enlisted. Muslim soldiers faced an especially painful conflict of loyalty. Their British ruler was waging war against Caliph Mehmed V [1844–1918], Sultan of Ottoman Turkey and religious leader to all Muslims. Despite this fact, many Muslims joined the British Indian army.

In the summer of 1917, when English troops suffered a serious set back in the war, the government of India established Central and Provincial Recruiting Boards with a quota system. Very soon quota pressures transformed voluntary recruitment into something worse than conscription.

"Recruits were compelled to enlist through punishments in the form of fines, dismissal or suspension from office, increased taxes upon individuals and villages, general ill-treatment of villagers and threats to withhold, and the actual withholding of, irrigation privileges (Datta, 1969, p. 19)."

Such actions contributed to ill-feelings between Indians and their British government, particularly in the Punjab, which provided 60% of the recruits.

# **Movements for Independence**

The war years witnessed a number of revolutionary Indian groups forming abroad (see Datta, 1969 and Ram, 1969). On August 18, 1913 Indian expatriates on the west coast of North America gathered together in San Francisco. They founded the Hindustani Workers of the Pacific Coast, later known as the *Ghadar Party* (English translation: Mutiny Party). Within three months they began publication of a weekly paper entitled Ghadar and maintained a headquarters, the Yugantan Ashram, at 436 Hill Street in San Francisco. For two months in the summer of 1914 this group agitated on behalf of the *Komagata Maru* (駒形丸) passengers, whom the Canadian government had prevented from landing at Vancouver. Their efforts failed and the ship returned to Calcutta, India, where police awaited the passengers. When they refused to board trains that would take them back to the Punjab, police opened fire and made arrests. *Baba Gurdit Singh* [1860–1954] and twenty-eight others escaped, while eighteen passengers received fatal wounds and 200 went to prison.

By February 1915 as many as 8,000 Ghadarites had returned to India intent on revolution. Lacking arms and ammunition, which had been intercepted, they passed out instruments to destroy telegraph wires and derail trains, before the government crushed their uprising. The government hanged twenty, exiled fifty-eight of them for life, and imprisoned another fifty-eight. That finished the Ghadar Party.

Until the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 the British government sympathized with the Pan-Islamic movement and the Caliph. Toward the end of October 1914 Ottoman Turkey entered into the Great War on the side of Germany. Two weeks later Caliph Mehmed V, in his role as the head of the Muslim religion, called for a Jihad (the last genuine jihad—called by a

Caliph) against British and Russian forces. About a month later Mahendra Pratap [1886–1979] left India to visit world leaders—including Kaiser Wilhelm II [1859–1941], Abbas Hilmi Pasha [1874–1944] the deposed Khedive of Egypt, and Enver Bey Pasha [1881–1922] of Ottoman Turkey—in order to get support from Britain's enemies for his opposition to colonial rule (Wales et al., 2007b). He ended up a year later at a meeting of Indian Nationalists in Kabul, Afghanistan. There they formed the Provisional Government of India with himself as President and Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi [1872–1944] as Home Minister. Ubaidullah caused a stir in the Indian government over the Silk Letter Conspiracy. August 1916 the government intercepted three letters from him "written on lengths of yellow silk and sewn into the lining of messengers' coats (Datta, 1969, p. 6)." Among other things the letters disclosed the formation of the Army of God. The Punjab government promptly proceeded to round-up suspects.

In close touch with the Ghadar Party and the Pan-Islamic movement, a group of experienced Indian revolutionaries in Berlin, known as the *Indian Independence Committee*, coordinated the activities of Indian rebels throughout the world. *Har Dayal* [1884–1939], President of the Ghadar Party, joined the committee after jumping bail in the United States, where he was arrested for anarchist activities, and fleeing to Germany. They arranged with the German government to ship arms to Asia in order to carry out attacks on British interests, but all attempts at this scheme failed.

The year 1916 marked a shift from attempts at armed rebellion to more moderate political activity. *Bal Gangadhar Tilak* [1856–1920] and *Annie Besant* [1847–1933] each organized cooperating *Home Rule* Leagues, drawn from the Irish model. This new movement provided the Indian masses with a national spirit and a much needed political education.

#### **British Rule**

The war-time crisis gave birth to broad executive powers in the form of the *Defense of India Act of 1915*. This act conferred upon the Governor-General the authority to create new offenses, to control the press, and to confine and deport people. Under these provisions the government of India

ordered the arrests of many revolutionary and political suspects. Besant, in addition to those mentioned above, was interned in June 1917. A great public outcry followed and some talk of passive resistance.

Suddenly, confronted with growing political agitation in India and a grave military situation in Mesopotamia, the British government changed its attitude. August 20 Great Britain announced that *Edwin Montagu* [1879–1924], the Secretary of State, would be visiting India to gather material for a Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms and that

"the policy of His Majesty's Government, with which the Government of India [is] in complete accord, is that of increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible Government in India as an integral part of the British Empire (Ghose, 1921, p. 4)."

When the report finally emerged, the white community regarded the concessions as too wide, while the Indian community thought them too narrow. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, as they came to be called, featured a system of diarchy (This led some punsters to refer to martial law in the Punjab in 1919 as Dyer-archy) whereby Indians would begin self-government at the local level and work towards total self-government at all levels.

Concurrently with this report, Sir Sydney Rowlatt [1862–1945], a Judge on the English High Court, and his committee prepared a report concerning anarchical and revolutionary crimes in India. The Rowlatt Committee conducted its meetings behind closed doors, listening almost exclusively to government witnesses. In its report, submitted April 15, 1918,

"facts and figures were distorted in such a manner as to make the image of India's freedom movement look as a sum-total of dacoities, robberies, arsons and murders. ... The Report appeared to be a thesis written to prove that Indian nationalists were anarchists of the worst order and as much a danger to society as to It concluded with a recommendation that the government enact strong legislation to replace the Defense of India Act, which would expire six months after the war's end. This inspired the Amritsar *Wagt* to print a cartoon showing "Montagu handing India a charter of freedom, while Mr. Justice Rowlatt opened a basket to release a cobra which bites her (Swinson, 1964, p. 13)."

# War Ends, But Peace Proves Elusive

Even when war ended on November 11, 1918, economic conditions did not improve. From July 1914 to January 1919 the cost of living had risen 83%, as opposed to a 21.5% increase in wages (Ram, 1969, p. 34). Aware that big landlords, trading firms, and merchants had earned high profits from the war, the labor class became restless. The world-wide flu epidemic had taken a high toll of lives, and the failure of the monsoons heralded in a disastrous crop harvest. When victors at the Paris Peace Conference threatened Ottoman Turkey with dismemberment, Muslims commenced a Khilafat agitation.

February 6, 1919 the *Emergency Powers Bill* went to the Imperial Council for debate. Also know as the Rowlatt Bill, this measure provided for the power to arrest and confine suspects, the expeditious trial of revolutionaries with no right of appeal, and the authority to limit people's residences. Despite wide-spread, popular opposition among the masses, the press, and the (unofficial) Indian members of the Imperial Council, the colonial government enacted the bill for a period of three years starting March 18.

In late February Gandhi and a group of followers met at *Ahmedabad* and took a solemn vow of *Satyagraha*, which he later released to the press with an accompanying letter (full text reprinted in Ram, 1969, pp. 51–53). Among those who took the oath, *Saifuddin Kitchlew* [1888–1963] and *Satya-Pal* would play important roles in the subsequent agitation. Gandhi established the Satyagraha Sabha in Bombay (now called *Mumbai*) as his headquarters and laid plans for a *hartal* strike set originally for March 30, then changed to

### **Events in Delhi**

In *Delhi* the Rowlett agitation began on Sunday, March 30, 1919 with a day of humiliation and prayer. Although many shops closed in sympathy with the passive resistance movement, this did not satisfy some "passive" resisters, who proceeded to coerce the rest of the shops to close. Then mobs began pulling people out of tramcars and carriages. They even stopped British officials in motor-cars, calling out to the occupants to get out and walk.

About midday a gang of resisters proceeded to the railway station to compel sweetmeat vendors in the third class waiting hall to stop business. The vendors, being under contract to the railway company, objected to these demands. In response the crowd dragged the contractor, a deaf old man, out of the station (Swinson, 1964, p. 15). Later when the crowd sought to force its way onto the station platform, the police arrested one man, who was then forcibly rescued outside the station ("Rioting at Delhi", 1919, p. 16 quoting Lord Chelmsford's telegram to the Secretary of State Montagu. A later, more detailed article, "Delhi Riots", 1919, p. 11, claimed two arrests.). A crowd of 5,000 gathered to demand his release and were informed that the man had already been released. But the crowd, refusing to disperse, tried to force the gates open and threw brickbats everywhere. Owing to the threatening attitude of the mob, the police obtained military assistance. When the crowd, in Queen's Garden, still refused to disperse, police fired upon them.

The crowd rallied at Clock Tower in *Chandni Chowk*, the principle thoroughfare in Delhi, and tried to rush the Town Hall. Here again the military dispersed them with small arms fire. These two incidents took the lives of six people and left sixteen wounded. Large crowds attended the victims' funerals. On Monday morning most shops had reopened, while large crowds and military forces remained in Delhi's streets. The city had temporarily quieted down.

The government of India blamed "the high state of excitement prevalent among the crowds" on misleading accounts of the effects of the Rowlatt

Act "sedulously propagated by evilly disposed persons (quoted from a communiqué by the Government of India reported in London Times, 1919 April 11, p. 11)." The government went on to state that many people believed that the act empowered any police officer to arrest any three Indians seen engaging in conversation or search any house without the need of a warrant. Disclaiming any such provisions, the government pointed out that "no part of the Act is yet in force, nor can be brought into force unless and until the Governor-General of India in Council is satisfied that an anarchical or revolutionary movement is being promoted (London Times, 1919 April 11, p. 11)."

The London *Times* correspondent in Bombay observed that "the passive resistance movement has passed out of the control of honest, if misguided men, like Mr. Gandhi to those anxious to use it to embarrass the authorities and create trouble ("Delhi Riots", 1919, p. 11)."

# **Events in the Presidency of Bombay**

In Bombay the Satyagraha Sabha proclaimed Sunday, April 6 to be a day of humiliation and prayer throughout India (London *Times*, 1919 April 11, p. 11). Owing to the Delhi tragedy, the Sabha enjoined all demonstrations and pleaded for absolute silence. It discouraged passive resisters from pressuring those who would not fast or suspend work and asked people to obey all police instructions.

In the city of Bombay "Humiliation Day" commenced with bathing in the sea, for which a crowd of 20,000, mostly spectators, assembled ("Humiliation Day' Reports", 1919, p. 12). Sarojini Naidu [1879–1949], a poet turned political agitator, and Gandhi addressed a meeting of Muslims, reportedly using inflammatory language in regards to the insurrection in Egypt. This gathering went peacefully, but another crowd of Muslims suffered some injuries when police dispersed it. Later in the day a crowd of unprecedented magnitude met at French Bridge to hear Gandhi and other leaders exhort them to refrain from using any violence.

In the course of the day a few mills stopped work and the workers attempted to compel other mills to shut down, but the police dispersed them.

In contrast to the mills, 80% of Bombay's shops remained shut for the day, partly on account of the fear of rioting. Similarly, Victoria carriages and taxis ceased work. Two Victorias which attempted to pick up passengers were smashed, yet the trams were not interrupted. Throughout India, as in Bombay, "Humiliation Day" occurred with very little disturbance.

Since the Rowlatt Act was nowhere in effect in India, the passive resistance committee in Bombay proceeded to select other measures for resistance in order that the passive resistance movement might be more than just "a blow in the air" (London *Times*, 1919 April 16, p. 12). Early in the week it announced that the laws concerning prohibited literature and the registration of newspapers would be civilly disobeyed. People in Bombay and *Ahmedabad* subsequently reprinted and sold or distributed freely considerable amounts of prohibited literature.

On Thursday April 10 the first issue of Gandhi's newspaper, the *Satyagraha*, "made its appearance in cyclostyle so bad as to be almost illegible ("Punjab Disorder", 1919, p. 12)." Gandhi predicted that as editor he was likely to be arrested at any time, but assured his readers of a continuous supply of substitute editors. Curiously he pointed to "the millhands celebration of Sunday by remaining at work" as the greatest of recent events.

On that same Thursday afternoon at Ahmedabad (see "How Indian Riots Began", 1919, pp. 10, 12), where there had been a good deal of labor unrest in the mills, shops closed upon hearing of Gandhi's detention at Palwal station on the Punjab frontier (Ghose, 1921, p. 15). The unemployed mill hands paraded through the town compelling open shops to close and all people driving in vehicles to walk. The demonstration almost immediately became anti-British. In fact, the demonstrators handled two English mill experts so roughly that the pair had to take refuge in some Indian flour mills (cotton mills according to "Humiliation Day' Reports", 1919, p. 13). The mob, then, poured gasoline over the woodwork and set fire to the mills. When the crowd refused to disperse, armed force was used and an Indian constable killed.

In the evening, local passive resisters held a meeting urging orderliness

and continuance of work. But the next day the mill hands resumed their practices. They compelled shops to close, smashed street lamps, and cut electric and telephone wires. Furthermore, they destroyed two Government buildings, damaged the electric company's installation, burned the University examination pavilion, and destroyed the fire engines that came to extinguish flames. Shortly before noon they set fire to the telegraph office. The Government responded, sending troops and an armored train to Ahmedabad. When the crowds overpowered the police, small military parties firing to disperse the rioters, restored order. By nightfall the disturbances had degenerated to the looting of some liquor shops.

Saturday in the City of Bombay brought with it some minor disorders, as a rowdy crowd of merchants and their assistants pulled people from tramcars and placed large stones on the line to stop the cars (London *Times*, 1919, April 17, p. 12). An immense, unmanageable crowd held an open-air meeting on Chowpatli Sands at the foot of Malabar Hill with all attempts to carry out the program collapsing. Gandhi, whom just the day before police had returned to Bombay, read a message from one of the four platforms, but it was inaudible beyond a few yards. The London *Times* (1919, April 17, p. 12) noted that "Mr. Gandhi has evidently awakened to the realization ... that while it is easy to start an emotional campaign in India it is quite another matter to control its course. ... Mr. Gandhi now finds that his idealism is exploited by the agitator, the [hooligan] and the hot-headed student."

Sunday, April 13 Gandhi left for Ahmedabad. And by Wednesday that city had almost returned to normal with the mill hands returning to work after a one-day fast Gandhi had ordered as a penance (London Times, 1919 April 19, p. 10; April 21, p. 10; and April 24, p. 13). Two days later the *Satyagraha* Committee acting on the advice of its president and vice-president, Gandhi and Mr. Horniman resolved to suspend civil disobedience to the laws. Gandhi explained that he had underrated the forces of evil and now advised followers to cooperate with the government. For his part, Horniman felt that unscrupulous elements with objectives entirely opposed to Satyagraha had corrupted the passive resistance movement.

# Events in the Punjab

A Gurkha general once remarked that "every revolutionary eruption in India endeavors to establish itself in the Punjab (Woodyatt, 1922, p. 287)." And so it was with the Rowlatt agitation in April 1919 that the worst of the rioting occurred there.

Early Thursday morning, April 10, the government served two aggressive agitators at *Amritsar*, Saifuddin Kitchlew and Satya-Pal, with orders from the Lt. Governor restricting their residence under the provisions of the Defense of India Act ("Punjab Disorder", 1919, p. 12 and "Amritsar Outrages", 1919, p. 10). Accordingly, they were removed to *Dharamsala* for internment (Swinson, 1964, p. 18) by automobile and train shortly before 11 am. News of the arrests rapidly spread through the city.

A large crowd of 10,000 to 20,000 people collected and endeavored to break past the civil lines. They wanted to go to the Deputy Commissioner's residence and offer faryad prayers (Ghose, 1921, p. 20). Anticipating trouble, the government had already posted pickets at the railway over-bridge and the level crossing connecting the city with the lines. When the demonstrators arrived at the over-bridge they refused to disperse and threw stones at the pickets until the District Magistrate gave orders for the pickets to open fire. The mob turned back towards the city and divided into two.

One of these mobs, armed with wooden rails and similar weapons, attacked the railway station. They beat Mr. Robinson, a white guard at the station, to death. Only the timely arrival of a troop train filled with a *Gurkha* regiment prevented them from destroying the passenger station. Yet, the rioters set fire to the railway goods station, burned the sleepers, and attempted to cut the telegraph wires.

The second mob attacked and burned the Town Hall, several banks, and various other buildings inside the city. Rioters wrecked the telegraph office and attacked the Alliance Bank, where they killed the bank agent. Mr. Thomson had fired a revolver in self-defense, whereupon the crowd killed him and burned his corpse along with the bank furniture (Ghose, 1921, p. 22). They also burned and looted the Chartered Bank of India, China, and Australia and the National Bank of India. Two National Bank employees,

Mr. Stewart, the agent, and Mr. Scott, the accountant, burned to death in the incident. With the exception of these three bank employees, one of which appeared to have been clubbed to death prior to burning, nearly all other white residents of the city evaded the rioters.

Troops from Gobind Garth Fort eventually drove this mob out of the white residential area into the downtown area. One hundred British troops and two hundred Indian troops under the command of General *Reginald Dyer* [1864–1927] arrived from Lahore and Jullunder during the course of the evening. By nightfall they were camped at the city limits with Dyer's headquarters at Ram Bagh (Ghose, 1921, p. 23). The next day these troops entered the city with no resistance and began making arrests. Estimates of the rioters' death toll for the two-day period range from twenty to thirty.

On the same Thursday that Kitchlew and Satya-Pal were taken into custody, a sizable mob at Lahore formed a large procession and attempted to reach the white residential area ("'Humiliation Day' Reports", 1919, pp. 12, 14). They refused to turn back when confronted by police. The police responded twice with gunfire, killing one and wounding four.

Saturday morning British and Indian troops marched through Lahore (London *Times*, 1919 April 19, p. 10). In a fracas with a mob outside the city gate, troops fired killing two and wounding two. The excitement centered on the Badshar Mosque, where, it was reported, a Brahmin pleader addressed a praying crowd of Hidus and Muslims. The government ordered the closing of the Badshadi Mosque, which it subsequently guarded with British infantry and Indian cavalry.

The next day, back in Amritsar, Dyer issued the following proclamation:

"No procession of any kind is permitted to parade the city or any part of the city or outside of it any time. Any such procession or gathering of four men will be looked upon and treated as an unlawful assembly and dispersed by force of arms, if necessary (Ghose, 1921, pp. 23–24)."

It was read out at the main thoroughfares by an interpreter in Punjabee and Urdu. At 4 pm, soon after issuing his final proclamation of the day, Dyer discovered that a large gathering had assembled at *Jalianwala Bagh* gardens (Woodyatt, 1922, pp. 289–291). Perceiving the meeting as an open defiance of his order, he prepared for battle. He proceeded that afternoon to Jalianwala Bagh with two armored car and all the Indian troops he could spare—25 Gurkhas and 25 Sikhs armed with rifles and 40 Gurkhas armed with *khukri* knives (Ghose, 1921, p. 25).

The man who had led Thursday's attack on the National Bank had convened the meeting (Woodyatt, 1922, pp. 289-291). Mr. Kanhya Lal was scheduled to preside (Ghose, 1921, p. 25). Prior to Dyer's arrival, Hans Raj (Ghose, 1921, pp. 26–27) and seven other speakers (Woodyatt, 1922, pp. 289–291), all leaders in the recent disturbanced, had addressed the meeting. Five of the eight were eventually sentenced to exile for life. Dyer's troops approached Jalianwala Bagh by a small alley, too narrow for the armored car, and so they left it on the main city street. At the end of the alley, overlooking the garden, Dyer saw political agitators haranguing an excited mob numbering about 20,000. He immediately gave the order to fire. A massacre ensued as people in the crowd tried to climb walls and jump into a well to escape the hail of bullets. The official death toll climbed to 397. General Nigel Woodyatt later defended this dire action saying, "I have heard it said that women and children were shot. This is incorrect, for there were none there. Moreover, of the 397 killed, 300 were lawless and desperate characters (Woodyatt, 1922, p. 291)."

The next day a disturbance occurred at Gujranwala (London *Times*, 1919 April 21, p. 10). Rioters burned the railway station and the church. The American missionaries were sent to Sialkot, while the other white residents took refuge at the Treasury. With police assistance the whites successfully defended themselves against the mob. An airplane arrived from Lahore and attacked the crowd at the railway station with bombs and machinegun fire. The plane came back again the next morning. The government also sent troops and arrested about twenty men, who were taken to Lahore.

Monday, April 14, two barristers—Mr. Dunichand and Mr. Harkishan—and pleader Pandit Rambhuj Datt Chaudhuri were expelled from Lahore. On Wednesday the General Officer Commanding gave notice that unless shops reopened with 48 hours, the government would auction off their goods. The rebellion had been crushed, but months passed before life returned to normal. Even then British brutality continued to "evoke feelings of deep anguish and anger ... and paved the way for [non-cooperation and Indian independence] (Wales et al., 2007a)."

# **A New Perspective**

Having reviewed this research that I carried out thirty-four years ago as an undergraduate at California Institute of Technology, I am struck by how little has changed in the political struggles for human rights and dignity and, at the same time, by how much has changed in our perspective in the information age and my own perspective as I get older. I still recall how I felt as I uncovered the names of these people and places. Events on the subcontinent in 1919 seemed very distant in time and space. The names—just isolated words dredged up from dusty old newspapers and books in the library—felt like exotic secrets from a past long dead.

Now, however, these names and events seem much closer and more connected to modern life. This is not simply because I have moved from North America to Asia. One actually gets a sense of déjà vu when reading about hotheaded revolutionaries gathered in Kabul to plan and organize armed resistance to westernized government. Terms like "jihad" no longer have to be explained in the footnotes. One can imagine the Rowlatt act as a predecessor to martial law in Pakistan or even America's Homeland Security Act.

Information technology has shrunk our world as well as adding an international perspective. Names of people and places come alive at the click of a hyperlink with pages of information great and small. My hard won secrets have become public information on a global network. You can easily discover that Sarojini Naidu used to call her friend Gandhi "Mickey Mouse" and that Har Dayal lived in Honolulu and found time to meditate on Waikiki

Beach. After the British government in India declared Mahendra Pratap to be a fugitive and put a price on his head, we learn, he remained abroad for thirty-two years, the last twenty of them in Japan. It all feels vaguely familiar to this Vietnam War era draft resister and People's Party activist from Hawaii that came to Japan almost thirty years ago.

Continuing on a personal level, I notice from the years of birth that these historical figures are contemporaries of my grandparents. George Blair [1879–1975], for example, was a young officer in the war that played such a central role in events reported here. I imagine he would have empathized with the law and order psychology of General Dyer, while I feel a bond with the philosophy of the protesters. History has become much more alive since 1973, exotic cultures much more familiar.

The tragedy that occurred in the Punjab in 1919 strengthened the resolve of the people of India to control their own government. It took another three decades to achieve independence. But more, much more than that, they accomplished change without resorting to violence. Let's hope that the tragic assassination at Liaquat National Bagh on December 27 will energize the movement for democracy in Pakistan.

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accessed at http://www3.aichi-gakuin.ac.jp/~jeffreyb/research/ index.html.

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