

Quit India Movement 60 Years On

'There was absolute chaos in the country'

M V Kamath, the well-known journalist and member, Prasar Bharati Board and Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, reminiscences about the Quit India movement.

I had finished college and was working as a chemist at Kemp's Corner [near Gowalia Tank, since renamed August Kranti Maidan, in south Mumbai]. The year was 1942. I was 21 years old. Patriotism was in the air and the Congress for us could do no wrong.

On the night of August 8, all senior Congress leaders -- including Mahatma Gandhi -- were arrested. Kasturba Gandhi, the Mahatma's wife, who was supposed to address a meeting at Shivaji Park (a few kilometres away) the next day, was also arrested before the meeting could take place. Thousands of people had already begun to gather there, leading to utter confusion the whole day.

There was a *lathi*-charge -- I think even tear gas was used -- by the police at Gowalia Tank, where people had again gathered in huge numbers. The streets were choked with people.

We didn't know what to do next. Nobody had any idea what was going on. Gandhiji had given no directions; I think he never expected he would be arrested. Some people cut off the telegraph wires and disrupted rail traffic. There was absolute chaos in the country.

I remember the confusion over the slogan, *Kareng ya mareng*. I think this confusion arose because Gandhiji was arrested. People used to wonder: What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to die? How are we to fight the British?

I had noted down in my diary that, with Mahatma Gandhi's arrest, the British had endangered his life. I felt there would be labour strikes, mills would close and, shortly thereafter, there would be bloodshed. A torch of rebellion was lit and the fire would soon spread all over India and arouse 40 crore (400 million) Indians. All of them will have only one slogan, 'Do or Die.'

After August 9, someone dropped 50 news bulletins giving information about the Quit India movement at my house by 5.30 am. I would distribute them at different houses and run away. I did that for some 30 days; then, the whole thing stopped.

On August 25, I came across a pamphlet listing the tasks before students. It said:

(Passive): Be Indian in both culture and life.

Boycott schools and colleges.

Boycott foreigners on our soil.

Boycott anti-national newspapers.

Organise the freedom movement in towns and villages.

Educate the children and the public.

(Active): Paralyse government services.

Persuade government servants to quit their jobs.

Damage lorries carrying troops and war goods.

Cut communication wires and remove rails.

The tasks before the workers were:

(Passive): Cease working in mills, factories and workshops.

Establish villages.

Produce village-made articles.

Spin and weave.

(Active): Same as items meant for students.

The tasks before the ladies were:

(Passive): Spin and weave.

Educate the children.

Nurse the wounded and injured.

Collect funds for patriots.

(Active): Organise women in towns and villages.

Persuade government servants to give up their jobs.

Gain support for our movement by all honourable means.

Paralyse government services.

The Quit India Movement was different from Gandhiji's earlier movements in the sense that, earlier, everybody knew what they had to do. For example, during the Salt Satyagraha, people knew they had to go to sea, manufacture salt and sell it.

But on August 9 there was no such directive. I still don't know who gave those instructions. It was very secretive. I don't even know who printed the news bulletins that I distributed.

Aruna Asaf Ali and Jayaprakash Narayan were two important leaders of the Quit India movement. Asaf Ali, whose form of protest was violent, was finally arrested. When she was released, she took charge of the naval mutiny. Jayaprakash too was arrested, but escaped from jail. Both of them were great heroes of our time.

We had no clue then that we were so close to Independence. Even in 1946, we were not sure if we would be free.

M V Kamath spoke to Syed Firdaus Ashraf



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'I know this place as Gowalia Tank and I don't need to know more'

Syed Firdaus Ashraf visits the August Kranti Maidan and finds that few visitors know, or care, about the ground's association with India's freedom struggle.

"August Kranti Maidan? In Mumbai? No, I have not heard of that name."

This is the response to the location where, just 60 years ago, Mahatma Gandhi first gave the call for the Quit India movement. Earlier known as Gowalia Tank, it has been rechristened August Kranti Maidan in honour of its historical status. Today's generation, however, is not aware of the new name or its significance.

Dharmendra Singh, 22, continues: "I cannot recollect what happened yesterday. How do you expect me to remember what happened 60 years ago?" When asked if he had heard of the Quit India movement, which led to India's Independence, he said, "I read about it, but I cannot recollect anything now."

Singh is a Mumbaikar. He completed his graduation at Bhavan's College, located barely a kilometre away from August Kranti Maidan. He has walked through this ground innumerable times, but has never felt the need to know its history.

Ganesh Sampat, a Pune resident who was relaxing at the Maidan, didn't even know its name. "I thought this was Gowalia Tank. I am glad you told me this is August Kranti Maidan."

Sampat's friend Deepak Makar added cynically, "How does it matter whether it is August Kranti Maidan or Gowalia Tank? We are poor labourers. We needed to rest so we stopped here for a while."

A huge commemorative pillar in the centre of the garden -- raised on a few steps and guarded by a gate -- identifies the ground as the place that hosted the All India Congress Committee meeting where Gandhi gave the call for freedom and announced the beginning of the Quit India movement. The pillar, which was built in 1970, was inaugurated by V S Page, then chairman, Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, Bombay (now Mumbai); the *bhoomi puja* was performed by Dr M N Desai, then municipal commissioner, Greater Bombay.

However, there is no statue of Gandhi in the garden. Nor are there any board elaborating the Maidan's unique history. In fact, the only board placed at its entrance bans smoking, playing of cards or throwing rubbish within the Maidan's precincts.

Gautam Rao of Hyderabad, who lives with his aunt in Mumbai, was to meet a friend at the Maidan. His friend had referred to it as Gowalia Tank. When asked whether he knew where August Kranti Maidan was located, he said he had never heard of the place. Pressed for its history, he said politely, "I have no idea, boss. Will you please excuse me?"

He was stunned to discover he was waiting for his friend at a historical location. "Oh! Is it? I didn't know this place has so much relevance to our lives. I am glad you informed me. I can go back to Hyderabad and tell my friends I have visited the historic place where Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India movement."

Priya Badkar, on the other hand, felt there was no need for her to know the name of the ground. "Anyone who is interested can get the details from the pillar. I know this place as Gowalia Tank and I don't need to know more." When told of its historical significance in India's Independence movement, she shrugged, "So? Will it make a difference to my life? If yes, I am interested. Otherwise I am not."

Usha Thakkar, honorary secretary, Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya, says, "The new generation has little sense of history. Therefore they don't know much about the significance of this historic place."

Mani Bhavan, where Gandhi stayed whenever he was in Mumbai, is organising various functions -- including debates, quiz programmes and the singing of national songs -- on August 9 to make the younger generation realise the importance of the occasion. Besides, it will screen Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*.

It was heartening to note that the students of Fellowship School, who were playing in the garden, were not as blasé as most bystanders. Some of them knew the importance of the Maidan; others knew it had something to do with India's freedom struggle.

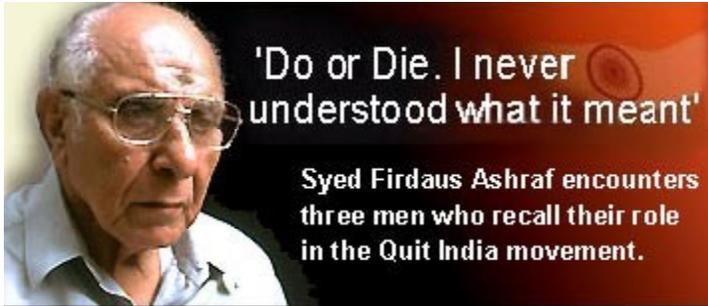
Girish Bokadia, a Class VIII student, Fellowship School, says, "August Kranti Maidan is associated with the freedom struggle and it is from this place that Mahatma Gandhi gave a call for the Quit India movement."

His friend Hemang Joshi was not as aware of the details. "But I know this place has got to do something with the Independence movement."

Meanwhile, at the narrow entrance to the Maidan, the *chaiwalla* continues to brew hot cups of tea. The *vada-pav* and ice-cream sellers do brisk business. People relax in the Maidan's garden, dozing on the grass or sitting on the scattered benches. Others take brisk walks. Two gardeners are busy trimming the lawn and weeding the potted decorative plants.

On one side of the ground, a few cricket matches are in full swing, watched by a small audience of elderly men. On the other side, school children play various games. In secluded corners, couples coo sweet nothings in each other's ears. Lost, in all this noise, is the once-passionate cry that roused the whole of India: *Karengé ya Marengé!*

Photographs: A R Vijayan



Dr Madhavdas Thackersay

When I recall the Quit India movement, I find the youth in me resurfacing," says Dr Madhavdas Thackersay.

"I was 22 years old on August 9, 1942, when I went to Gowalia Tank [now the August Kranti Maidan]. I was curious; I wanted to see what was going to happen as Gandhiji had called for the British to quit India."

"The ground was packed with thousands of people but, to my surprise, none of the big leaders were there. The crowd was beginning to get impatient, but there was still no sign of the senior Congress leaders. Suddenly, everyone started running helter-skelter. There was a *lathi* charge. I started running as well but I could not escape the police who hit me on my back."

That was 60 years ago. The blows to his back changed his life forever as Dr Thackersay felt the need to contribute to the freedom struggle and become more involved in the Congress party.

His tragedy, however, lay in the fact that neither he nor his friends who wanted to participate in the Quit India movement knew what to do. Unlike previous movements, this time Mahatma Gandhi had not laid down any clear guidelines as to what the people should do to fight the British.

Dr Thackersay's hands automatically spin the *charkha* to make *khadi* in keeping with the promise he had made to himself that he would only wear *khadi* all his life and would follow the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi.

"There was a slogan," he recalls, "Do or Die. I never understood what it meant. But I started going to different schools and colleges with my friends to tell the students that they should boycott all British institutions. I also started distributing pro-freedom pamphlets. I did that on my own because I felt it was the best way I could serve my country's cause."

Not far from Dr Thackersay's house lives Dr G G Parikh, who participated in the Quit India movement as a Congress volunteer. He was just 18 years old and a student at St Xavier's College. His life too changed after August 9, 1942; he vowed to be a political worker all his life and to fight for Independence.

"I learnt how to save my eyes when the police fired tear gas shells; my colleagues in the Congress told me to wet my handkerchief and apply it over my eyes," he recalls.

He had Communist leanings in his early teens, but felt betrayed after they decided to boycott the Quit India movement and support Great Britain during World War II. He was determined to get the British out of the country and started organising anti-British movements in his college and among the youth.

On August 12, 1942, he was arrested for carrying the flag of the Indian National Congress and distributing pamphlets exhorting the people to rise against the British government. "I was detained under the Defence of India rules because the police thought I was a big student leader. I was

shifted to a temporary jail in Worli where 15 of us were put in a small room. I was kept there for 10 months."

It was in jail that he came in contact with many senior Congress leaders, who exposed him to different philosophies. Once, they shouted pro-freedom slogans in their small prison room. The beating that he received as punishment only strengthened his resolve to fight the British.

Aloo Dastur, president, Gandhi Samarak Nidhi and Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangralay, who then lectured at Mumbai's Sophia College, says, "As I was walking towards the Maidan, I got a feeling that the British would not be able to hold on to their power in our country for long. Time proved us right; they had to quit India five years after the Quit India movement.

"It was the first time anyone who took part in the Independence struggle was on his own. There were no leaders, nor were there any directions given to the people. It was a self-driven movement." Dastur comes from a family with a strong Gandhian background. The atmosphere at home was full of national pride; her elder brother had been jailed several times because of his participation in the freedom struggle.

"Had we not launched the Quit India movement, we would have never got our freedom. Many people say its timing was not right, but I don't agree," she says. Like [M.V Kamath](#), Dastur believes Gandhi and the other Congress leaders never anticipated they would be arrested before the launch of the Quit India movement. "Gandhiji left no instructions to the public and everyone was in quandary. Still, people took the movement in their hands and spread Gandhiji's message peacefully."

Dastur recalls how the Congress party launched Congress Radio on a special wavelength and how they would all wait eagerly to listen to the speeches and directions. "Ushaben Mehta (*the wellknown Gandhian*) used to speak on the radio; we would get news and instructions from her."

But the sparkle in their eyes fades when they review the situation today. All three freedom fighters are disillusioned because they feel the gora sahibs have been replaced by the brown sahibs. And India has gone from bad to worse.

"It is sad that Gandhiji's relevance is felt more in other countries than in India. Time and again, different political parties have tried to stop Gandhi's message from spreading but they could never succeed. Gandhiji's message will always be alive because truth and non-violence are everlasting," says Dastur.

"Nothing we dreamt of is visible today," says Dr Parikh. "In fact, I am sad to be alive today. I wish I had died much earlier. We were told there would be no poverty in India after freedom but poverty still exists. We were told the leaders would function as servants of people, but that has not happened either."