

On August 15, 1947, where was Bapu?

How Mahatma Gandhi spent his day at the time of India's Independence



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While Delhi, the national capital, was being decked up for the grand celebration of Independence and the transfer of power, and Indians geared up to celebrate Independence, where was the man who had helmed the fight for Independence? Where was Bapu?

In Beliaghata

He was far away, in Calcutta, resolute in his efforts to bring peace and calm to a place that was burning with violence and hatred. The words and actions of Bapu doused the flames.

The historic events bear recounting as India celebrates a landmark anniversary of Independence. The conditions were anything but peaceful then; today, 75 years down the line, conditions are not far from reigniting the fires that burned then. This is then a day to reflect on how far we have travelled. Or have we travelled far?

On the evening of August 6, Bapu boarded the Calcutta Mail at Lahore; it would take him to Patna and then **Calcutta from where he planned to leave for Noakhali (now in Bangladesh), where he had promised the minority community that he would shield them when Partition happened and East Bengal became East Pakistan.**

Bapu arrived in Calcutta on August 9, 1947. A delegation of Muslims, led by the chief of Calcutta District Muslim League, Mohammad Usman, pleaded with Bapu to remain in Calcutta to ensure the safety of Muslims. Bapu told them he would delay going to Noakhali if they guaranteed the safety and wellbeing of the minority community in Noakhali. If, despite their promise, there was violence in Noakhali, he would go on an unconditional fast unto death.

On August 11, Bapu met with H.S. Suhrawardy, the former Premier of Bengal. Suhrawardy too voiced his concern about the safety of Muslims. Bapu asked him to stand guarantee for the safety of the Hindus in Noakhali if he wished for him to stay back



Gandhi at a prayer meeting at Calcutta Maidan on August 26, 1947 on the occasion of Id-ul-Fitr. ■ GETTY IMAGES

in Calcutta. Suhrawardy promised. Bapu told him, "I will remain if you and I are prepared to live together. We shall have to work till every Hindu and Mussalman in Calcutta safely returns to the place where he was before. We shall continue in our effort till our last breath..."

It was decided that Bapu and Suhrawardy would meet and live in Hyderi Mansion (now preserved as Gandhi Bhawan) in Beliaghata, the dilapidated and abandoned home of a Muslim family, in a densely populated neighbourhood of very poor Muslims.

Bapu and Suhrawardy were greeted by an angry mob of young Hindu hotheads who were furious with Bapu for coming to the rescue of Muslims. Bapu tried to pacify them, but they persisted; their angry protest continued the next day, too.

Bapu told them, "I am going to put myself under your protection. You are welcome to play the opposite role if you so choose. I have nearly reached the end of my life's journey. I have not much farther to go. But let me tell you that if you again go mad, I will not be a living witness to it. I have given the same ultimatum to the Muslims of Noakhali, too; I have earned the right. Before there is another outbreak of Muslim madness in Noakhali, they will find me dead."

Speaking at the prayer meeting at Beliaghata on the evening of August 14, Bapu invited everyone to observe a 24-hour fast and pray for the wellbeing of India and to spend the day hand-spinning.

After the prayers, Hyderi Mansion was again attacked. Stones crashed

against the windows, shattering glass panes and showering Bapu and the occupants with fragments of glass. The wooden shutters were hurriedly closed. Finally, in order to pacify the mob Bapu stood at a window and spoke with them. When he felt that he had calmed the mob, he called Suhrawardy. Suhrawardy stood next to Bapu, framed in the window illuminated by streetlights, Bapu placed a hand on Suhrawardy's shoulder; Suhrawardy unequivocally accepted responsibility for the Calcutta killings and expressed his sincere regrets for the tragedy he had caused. This had a profound effect on the crowd. "It was the turning point," Bapu said. "It had a cleansing effect."

It was around 11 when the rooms occupied by Bapu and his tiny retinue were cleaned. After spinning his regulation quota of khadi yarn, his daily bread labour, Bapu lay down to rest; soon he was fast asleep.

At midnight on August 14-15, 1947, Indians rejoiced. **India was free. In the Central Hall of Parliament, in a grand ceremony, the British relinquished power and the interim government took charge. India heard the "tryst with destiny" speech made by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, which would be oft-quoted later in India's history, a testimony to its soul-stirring narrative of what India set out to achieve. But the man who had made that tryst possible was fast asleep, on a thin mattress, in a dilapidated home, in the densely populated poor neighbourhood of Beliaghata in Calcutta, oblivious to all the rejoicing and the celebration.**

On August 15, 1947, Independence Day, Bapu woke up at 3:45 a.m. He

followed his usual daily routine. He received several messages of congratulations, but he was not celebrating. He was praying, fasting and spinning khadi. **On Independence Day itself, a large crowd gathered around the Governor's mansion in Calcutta and laid siege to it, unmindful that now its occupant was an Indian, C. Rajagopalachari. The newly appointed Governor of Bengal was held hostage in the Raj Bhavan for several hours by Indians on Independence Day.**

Bapu sent a message to the ministers of the cabinet of West Bengal. He wrote, "From today, you have to wear the crown of thorns. Strive ceaselessly to cultivate truth and non-violence. Be humble. Be forbearing. Now, you will be tested through and through. Beware of power; power corrupts. Do not let yourselves be entrapped by its pomp and pageantry. Remember, you are in office to serve the poor in India's villages."

Together in joy

At the prayer meeting that evening, Bapu congratulated Calcutta for the camaraderie displayed by Hindus and Muslims. Muslims shouted the same slogans of joy as the Hindus. They flew the tricolour without the slightest hesitation. What was more, the Hindus were admitted to mosques and Muslims were admitted to mandirs. Bapu had hoped that Calcutta would be entirely free from the communal virus forever. Then, indeed, they need have no fear about East Bengal and the rest of India.

"Shaheed and I are living together in a Muslim Manzil in Beliaghata where Muslims have been reported to be sufferers. Now, it seemed as if there never had been bad blood between the Hindus and the Muslims. As I have said above, we are living in a Muslim's house and Muslim volunteers are attending to our comforts with the greatest attention... Is this to be called a miracle or an accident? I only ask myself whether the dream of my youth is to be realised in the evening of my life..."

This is the wish with which Bapu ended his day, the day that India became independent in 1947.

Tushar A. Gandhi is a peace activist who heads the Mahatma Gandhi Foundation which is involved in advocating and spreading Gandhian values