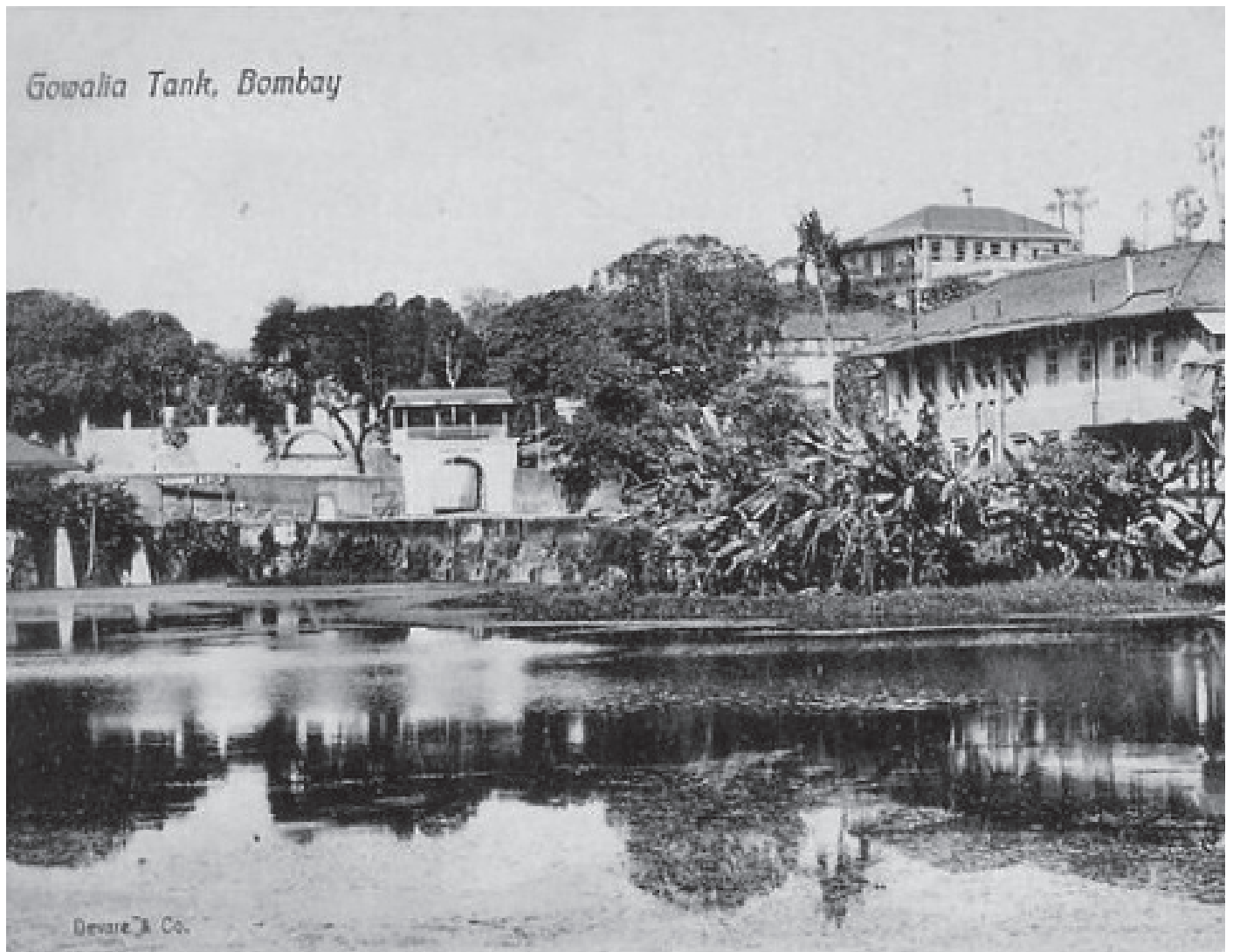




Near the road joining Grant Road railway station and Kemps Corner lies an open ground not more than half a kilometre in length, where Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement in Bombay. On 8th August 1942, thousands gathered on this ground to listen to Mahatma Gandhi say, “Do or Die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt”. But before these words were enshrined here, the Gowalia Tank Ground, known as the August Kranti Maidan, was familiar to those living in Bombay for a different reason.

Gowalia Tank, part of the August Kranti Maidan, got its name from a combination of two words found in Marathi and Gujarati languages – ‘gau’, meaning cow or cattle, and ‘wala’, meaning owner or gawali, hence referring to the cattle owners of South Bombay who would bring their cows to an underground public tank to clean them and would return home when the bells of the nearby Gamdevi temple rang for the evening aarti (Patel 2021). The road was built next to it during the 18th century. The land was said to have been owned by the Readymoneys under Cowasji Jehangir Readymoney.



In the late 1880s, the lake was reclaimed, and Goculdas Tejpal purchased a portion of the land to establish a temple and a Sanskrit paathshala. Allan Octavian Hume founded the Indian National Congress (INC) at the same location in 1885. He held its first session from 28th to 31st December, and welcomed 74 delegates. Hume liked the area immensely as he was a bird-watcher. The land was surrounded by Alexandra Road, now called Kashibai Nowrange Marg, Laburnum Road, and Wacha Gandhi Road, which hosts the Sethna House, the Laburnum House, Anand Ashram, Diamond House, Anchorage, and the Alexandra House and Home Villa. On the Gamdevi side, the J. K. Building and Kopol Niwas are famous chawls, along with the Saraswat Housing Colony, founded in 1915, and the oldest existing cooperative housing society in Asia (Mistry 1991). The tank's purpose underwent a transformation only after the Quit India Movement, shifting from providing livelihood to serving as a ground for rebellion.



The area known as Malabar Hill, located near the tank, was a dense jungle in the 1800s, used by British officers as a hunting lodge. It boasted so many prospects for the hunt that many called it the 'Wild West' of Bombay. An interesting anecdote in the Bombay Courier, dated 10th February 1822, notes one of the last sightings of a tiger in Bombay city in the area. The animal reportedly trotted down Malabar Hill the previous day, quenched its thirst at the Gowalia Tank, and then ventured back up the hill, walking alongside the Hermitage and Prospect Lodges. The proof of his quick sojourn was made evident the next day in the form of footprints in the sand.

The current maidan or ground was built over the tank. There was also a tram terminus here, built in the late 19th century, which allowed passengers to travel to the Prince of Wales Museum, now known as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, at the price of one anna. Reportedly, the ground was also where a young wounded soldier sowed the seeds of the Azad Hind Yuvak Sena on 23rd January 1925, inspired by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. He had planned a walk from Girgaum Chowpatty to Gowalia Tank but was intercepted and beaten by the police before reaching the destination.

However, the incident that made this small ground the birthplace of the Indian freedom struggle took place on 7th and 8th August 1942. In an interview with Dr. Gaurav Gadgil, Assistant Professor of History at the K. J. Somaiya College of Arts and Commerce, he says, "Perhaps it was historical destiny, if one has to believe in such a thing, that the penultimate struggle for India's independence under the leadership of the Congress would begin from the very point where the Congress started its journey. Perhaps the leaders of the Congress must have thought that this would be the coming together of memory and history in the making, which can be seen wonderfully".

Under the presidency of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the All-India Congress Committee organised a session on August 7th, which lasted well past midnight and ended the next day (Ali 1989). Mahatma Gandhi was to speak about the Sir Stafford Cripps Mission by the British Government and the request for independence from the British. A huge number of people had gathered around a specially erected pandal for the Congress leaders, with many others listening to it from outside the ground through loudspeakers, according to police records. Due to the gathering crowd, a ring of "half a dozen hefty Sikhs linking their arms and forming a human fence" surrounded Mahatma Gandhi and escorted him to the stage (Koppikar 2017).



Then, he delivered the speech in which he said, “Here is a mantra, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The mantra is: “Do or Die”. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery”. He also gave the slogan ‘Quit India’, which was suggested to him by Yusuf Meherally, the then Mayor of Bombay. The next day, all prominent Congress leaders got arrested under Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, including Jawaharlal Nehru, who was supposed to give a speech at the maidan that day and hoist India’s flag, symbolising freedom. To protest against the arrests, a multitude of people, including traders, housewives, and students, mobilised. This mobilisation eventually took a violent turn (Pillai 2017). During this melee, a 33-year-old Aruna Asaf Ali unfurled the tricolour flag just when “the police lobbed tear-gas shells into the crowd” (Thakkar 2021). During this incident, eight people died, and around 170 were injured, yet the protests did not die down. The people charged back with attacks on government property and railway lines. Usha Mehta and her colleagues also established an underground radio station. This revolution gave the ground its new name, August Kranti Maidan.

After Independence, the authorities developed the ground into a recreational space in 1972, and divided it into five smaller grounds. The largest ground became a children’s playground, surrounded by a promenade for walking, while another section served as a private ground for the Fellowship School. The remaining grounds held team sports such as cricket, volleyball, and football. The maidan also features a memorial erected by the Bombay Municipal Commission in 1970 for the martyrs and participants of the Quit India Movement, which includes a tall pillar of white marble with a pink lotus on top.

Although the fight for freedom from the British ended in 1947, protests persisted, and the maidan has witnessed many of them. Over its lifetime, the August Kranti Maidan saw numerous strikes and protests, including 2008’s Queer Azadi March, Anna Hazare’s fast against corruption and in favour of the Jan Lokpal Bill in 2011, and the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019.

Every year, on the anniversary of the Quit India Movement, a large crowd gathers at the foot of the statue of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak at the Girgaum Chowpatty and walks to the August Kranti Maidan (Dandavate 2010). A ‘Freedom Trail’ was built, commemorating this pathway on the 80th anniversary of the Quit India Movement and the 75th Independence Day in 2022 (Chitnis 2022). The August Kranti Maidan, a historic land of around five acres, remains today with soil that holds the memory of literal and metaphorical tigers.



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