

# Rao Bahadur Yeshwantrao Harishchandra Desai

1876 - 1927



Mumbai Legacy Project  
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The builder of the Gateway of India, General Post Office (GPO) and Prince of Wales Museum, Rao Bahadur Yeshwantrao Harishchandra Desai constructed prominent structures of modern Bombay (Mahale 2011). He was born on 11th December 1876 in Bombay. His father was Harishchandra Desai, an Honorary Assistant Engineer at the Public Works Department of Bombay. However, he passed away when his son was only two.

After completing his primary education at Jagannath Shankarseth's school, Yeshwantrao completed his matriculation from Wilson High School. Dr. Mackinnic, the Principal of the school, was fond of Yeshwantrao and offered to sponsor his higher education abroad (Gandhi 2014). However, his family did not accept the offer. Yeshwantrao started assisting his uncle, Shaligram Jagannathji, an Honorary Assistant Engineer at the Public Works Department. A British Officer once saw him surveying a plot perfectly and was so impressed by the 16-year-old boy that he offered a job to the boy at the Public Works Department with a salary of Rs. 10. He became the third generation to continue contributing to the field (Dahisarkar 2020).

After obtaining various degrees in architecture from the Sir J. J. School of Art, he earned a promotion to Assistant Engineer. In 1910, he became the Overseer of the construction of the General Post Office (G. P. O.) in Bombay. The Annual Report on Architectural Work in India credited him for superintending this difficult work ably. In 1905, King George V, the Prince of Wales, came to Bombay and laid the foundation stone of The Prince of Wales Museum of Western India. This building was completed quickly by Yeshwantrao, for which he was thanked in public by Governor Lord Willingdon (Dahisarkar 2020). Dressed in a dhoti, white shirt, black coat, a patka (piece of cloth worn on the head), and a bhikbali (men's ear ornament), Yeshwantrao reflected simplicity. On 5th June 1918, he was honoured with the title of 'Rao Sahib' by the Bombay Collector in the Town Hall (Dahisarkar 2020).



In 1911, when King George V visited Bombay for the second time, various arches across the city were constructed to welcome him. The costliest of them was the Cotton Arch, built under Yeshwantrao's supervision. The Bombay Royal Visit Committee presented him with an inscribed Waltham Gold Watch for his services. The proposal to construct the Gateway of India to welcome the King and his consort was also underway. However, the royalty only saw a cardboard model as the construction hadn't begun yet (Dupée 2008, 114).

The King and his consort arrived at a white pavilion designed by the British architect George Wittet. Later, Wittet redesigned and replaced it with a permanent pavilion in stone that stands today. This magnificent structure, known as the Gateway of India, took 11 years to complete. The entire construction happened under the supervision of Yeshwantrao Desai. Interestingly, there is a miniature replica (Bakshi 2013) in the Yashwant Siddhi Co. Op. Housing Society near his original residence in the Bhendi Galli of Gamdevi (Mahale 2011). This four-foot copy uses the same stone as the original structure (Gandhi 2014). It was perhaps a reference model for the main gateway.





Yeshwantrao also worked on other buildings designed by Wittet, like the Royal Institute of Science. Wittet presented him with a handwritten certificate for his contribution. Dated 30th October 1919, it reads, "... I am glad to see in my long experience of Mr. Yeshwant, I have never known him at a loss in his untiring energy and quick grasp of essentials overcoming all difficulties. His tact and skill in managing the works and the work people have been important factors in the success of the buildings, and I wish to record my appreciation of Mr. Yeshwant's high abilities and sterling qualities (Dahisarkar 2020)". He was also a part of several other projects like Sir Cowasji Jehangir Public Hall, New Custom House and the New Technical Block of Sir J. J. School of Art. He also assisted Sir George Sydenham Clark in unveiling the statues of the Prince of Wales and Half Portrait Bust of J. N. Tata at the Prince of Wales Museum and Sir George Lloyd in unveiling the statue of Lord Hardinge at the Apollo Bunder.

He earned the 'Silver Peace Medal' (1919) and the titles of 'Rao Bahadur' (1922) and Justice of Peace (1924) (Gandhi 2014). He took his last breath at the age of 51 on 17th July 1927 at Panchgani. In 1991, years after his death, the lane beside the Taj Mahal Hotel near Gateway of India was named

Rao Bahadur Yeshwantrao Desai Chowk by the then Mayor Diwakar Raote (Gandhi 2014). The Yashwant Siddhi Co-operative Society, where his descendants still reside, lies where the ancestral palace of Raobahadur Yeshwantrao Harishchandra Desai once stood (Chandrasekharan 2014). Yeshwantrao was the executing hand behind significant monumental structures of South Bombay.

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