

Bhulabhai Desai

(1877-1916)

Mumbai Legacy Project
D Ward



89, Bhulabhai Desai Road, the sea-embracing stretch from St. Stephen's Church to Cadbury Junction, is named in honour of the freedom fighter and eminent lawyer Bhulabhai J Desai. This street housed a beautiful one-storey bungalow with a lush green lawn, which came to be known as the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute. Apart from the blue metal signs, no trace of Desai remains on the street after the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute gave way five decades ago to the skyscraper Akash Ganga (Speeches of Bhulabhai J. Desai, 1934-1938 1938, i, ii).

Mr. Bhulabhai Desai was born in a Brahmin family on 13th October 1877 at Bulsar in the Surat district of Gujarat. After completing his primary education in his hometown, he joined Elphinstone College in Bombay and graduated in English Literature and History with first-class honours. He won the Wordsworth Prize and the Government of India scholarship to pursue the Indian civil service in England, but his father's ill health prevented him from availing this opportunity. Nevertheless, he acquired an M.A. in English from the University of Mumbai and became a Professor of English and History at the Gujarat College in Ahmedabad. He discontinued this profession after two years and pursued his education in law. He enrolled as an Advocate at the Bombay High Court in 1905 and eventually made a mark in this career (Setalvad, M.C., 1981, 4-8). Sir Jamshedji Kanga, Desai's contemporary and older than him in age, expressed that in their generation, Bhulabhai Desai was the finest advocate in Bombay (Nariman 2010, xx).



Bhulabhai's entry into the political horizon of India was due to Chimanlal Setalvad, who considered him his 'guru guide, philosopher and friend' and ultimately dragged Desai into politics. Bhulabhai began his political career when he participated actively in Annie Besant's Home Rule movement that commenced in 1916. He was a progressive liberal. His association with the Indian National Congress began when he represented the farmers of Gujarat in the inquiry by the British government following the Bardoli Satyagraha (No Tax campaign) in 1928 by the farmers of Gujarat who protested against the oppressive taxation policies during the famine, under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhai Patel. Bhulabhai formidably represented the farmers' case and eventually succeeded in this struggle. He appeared on behalf of the peasants of Bardoli before two special committees in 1928 and 1931. However, it was not until 1930 that he formally joined the Congress. When Mahatma Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement in March 1930, convinced about the significance of the boycott of foreign goods, Bhulabhai formed the Swadeshi Sabha, persuading 80 textile workers to join and boycott foreign goods by Indian companies. The Sabha was declared illegal, and the authorities arrested Bhulabhai in 1932. In November 1934, he was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly from Gujarat (Setalvad, M.C., 1981, 46, 126-129).

During the Quit India Movement 1942 – 1945, many of the Congress leaders were arrested, except Desai. He was the leader of the Congress in the Central Legislative Assembly and a friend of the Muslim League leader Liaquat Ali Khan in 1944. He met Gandhi in January 1945 and drafted a proposal for forming an interim government with the consensus of Hindus and Muslims. After the discussions became public, the Congress Working Committee disowned Desai for inking the Desai-Liaquat Ali pact. They rejected Bhulabhai as a candidate for the Central legislature as his proposal was not acceptable to some of the members of the Congress working committee (Chakravarty 2003, 99, 100; Debadutta Chakravarty Muslim Separatism and the Partition of India: New Delhi, Atlantic 2003; Indian Express 6th March 2017).

The Congress had initially turned to Desai when three soldiers of the Indian National Army were put on trial from 1944 to 1946 in New Delhi by the British government on charges of treason. Gandhi had asked Desai to organise a free legal aid movement and lead the defence. Setalvad wrote that Desai had "conducted the trial brilliantly; it gripped the public imagination and became the sole topic of conversation", adding that "Bhulabhai was far from well during the trial, but his handling of the trial and the publicity restored his reputation". The soldiers that were convicted did not receive a death sentence (Setalvad, M.C.1981, 338; Indian Express 6th March 2017).

After Bhulabhai arrived in Bombay in January 1946, his health deteriorated, and he passed away on 6th May 1946. On his passing, Rajendra Prasad said, "Trust Bombay will never forget the services rendered to India by Bhulabhai and will raise a fitting memorial for one of India's and Bombay's noblest sons". Later, an auditorium was erected on the reclamation grounds in Bombay out of the funds collected to perpetuate his memory, known as the Bhulabhai Auditorium and became the centre of frequent public gatherings (Setalvad 1981, 342). His legacy remains in the form of the establishment of The Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute. The institute was set up in 1946 by Madhuri Desai in memory of her father-in-law, Bhulabhai Desai. It was managed by Desai's aide, Soli Batliwala, a friend of Bhulabhai's son, Dhirubhai Desai. This institute became a melting pot of different art forms, where artists of various disciplines mingled with each other. Danseuse Meenakshi Raja practised her classical dance, Thespians Ebrahim Alkazi and Satyadev Dubey worked on their stagecraft, sitar maestro Ravi Shankar rehearsed in one room, Pilloo Pochkhanawala created her sculptures in another, V S Gaitonde, M F Husain, Nalini Malani and Nasrin Mohamedi created different works, nest Stage doyenne Vijaya Mehta, who considers herself a product of the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute, defines this osmotic experience as "a connection between paint, rhythm and tone". Collaborations with one another were inevitable. "Gaitonde, Kishori (Amonkar) and I were part of a big gang", recalls Mehta, whose noted experimental theatre lab Rangayan was begun here too.



Incidentally, the institute housed the city's first art gallery. In 1959, Bal Chhabda, a passionate art lover and an artist in his own right, started Gallery 59. It was here that the Bombay Progressive Artists Group found a formal representation. The artists, fortunate to get studios at the institute, paid only a nominal rent of a rupee a day. The artists recounted that the studios lacked locks on the doors, enabling them to move in and out of each other's spaces, exchanging ideas, sharing perspectives, collaborating, and thereby, creating history (Artists of the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute, Prinseps, 6th August 2020).

Bhulabhai Desai was a great intellectual, an erudite lawyer and advocate, an eloquent and skilful parliamentarian and an unstinting and devoted servant of the Motherland. Many noble and patriotic hands have laboured to establish the edifice of Free India. Bhulabhai's contribution to this great task was significant.

References:

"Artists of the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute." Prinseps, 6th August 2020, prinseps.com/research/bhulabhai-desai-memorial-institute-0820/. Accessed 8th December 2023.

Chakravarty, Debadutta. Muslim Separatism and the Partition of India: New Delhi, Atlantic. 2003.

The Indian Express, 6th March 2017.

Nariman, Fali. Before Memory Fades: An Autobiography. New Delhi, A house Publisher, 2010.

Setalvad, M.C., Bhulabhai Desai: New Delhi. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1981.

Speeches of Bhulabhai J. Desai, 1934-1938. Compiled by G. A. Natesan & Co., Madras, New Delhi: Hindustan Times Press, 1938.

