

Gamdevi Police Station



For an urban landscape transforming ahead of its time, Bombay would have certainly been incomplete without law and order establishments. Given the due importance in the Bombay Town Planning Scheme of 1917, the Gamdevi Police Station was established on Harvey Road, now Pandita Ramabai Road. The events that followed the conviction of Bal Gangadhar Tilak became the catalyst for reforms in the city's police infrastructure.

Had it not been for the conviction of Tilak, charged with sedition for six years, the rights of the textile mill workers would have gone unnoticed in Bombay. The city plunged into the Tilak Riots, anglicised as Tilak Trial Disturbances of 1908, when over 85 mills employing more than four lakh textile mill workers took the streets for six days in areas such as Tardeo, Parel, Dadar and Chinchpugli (Chinchpokli), turning them into hotspots and shutting the city down.

The Bombay City Police could not handle the violence, and an army was called, which comprised of Bombay Garrison consisting of three companies of Royal Garrison Artillery, half a Battalion of British Infantry, one Regiment of Native Infantry, supplemented by a force of 1,274 volunteers composed of Foot, Mounted and Artillery (Maharashtra State Gazetteers 1908). After the riots in September 1908, Governor Sir George Sydenham Clarke appointed a special committee of three officials, namely Sir William Morison and Mr S. M. Edwardes of the Indian Civil Service and Mr Pheroze H. Dastur, 2nd Presidency Magistrate, to consider the urban police administration and make proposals for its future (Edwardes 1923, 123).



Bombay Police commanded equivalent reverence as the Scotland Yard in London. At the time, Commissioner of Police S. M. Edwardes was appointed to the team. He had earlier taken on roles of Acting Municipal Commissioner, Census Officer for 1901, and Compiler of the Gazetteer. The responsibility of a police force which was in shambles with a decaying physical infrastructure rested upon his shoulders. The Morrison Committee had emphasised the provision of well-equipped police stations of a definite type, comprising the necessary offices, charge-room, cells, quarters for the European and Indian staff, and barracks for the constabulary, which led to the enactment of the Police Accommodation Scheme for Modern Bombay (1909). At the date when Mr Edwardes was appointed Commissioner, none of the existing police stations fulfilled these requirements. However, by the end of 1910, structural alterations and additions had commenced in newer police stations at Colaba, Nagpada and Agripada (Edwardes 1923, 155-156).

The Gamdevi precinct was well ahead of its time as it had a combination of low-rise buildings and high-density development and accommodated the needs of the people. It was a self-contained neighbourhood with a range of public spaces and institutions such as the adjoining municipal market, Gowalia Tank Maidan, institutions of learning like the Wilson College and temples like Walkeshwar and Babulnath. Communities such as the Konkani-speaking Brahmins from Chitrapur built the Saraswat Co-operative Housing Society in 1915, the oldest such society in Asia, which reflects upon the urban cohesiveness that Gamdevi offered (Patel 2020).

In 1917, at the foothills of Malabar rose the guardian of Gamdevi, its very own police station, the first in Bombay that was built as per the provisions of the Gamdevi Police Accommodation Scheme of 1909, making it the first 'old modern' police station in the city, erected at a sum of 3,62,096 rupees. It accommodated five officers and 105 men with their families (Trust 1911, 32). The senior inspector's cabin was to the left of the entrance, directly in the line of vision of the charge room opposite his cabin, which let him see who was being brought and charged with offences. The senior inspector had his lodgings on the first floor in line with the Scotland Yard model. The staff was housed in police lines on the premises to report for duty immediately in case of an emergency (Kulkarni 2022). Moreover, for a long time, only the police station could have boats housed in the premises for coastal operations.

The air around Gamdevi at the time carried fervent speeches, clandestine meetings, and the spirit of yearning for freedom as important structures stood 100 metres away, such as Mani Bhawan, the residence of Mahatma Gandhi and the Gowalia Tank Maidan, a venue for several activities of the Congress. In the chilling winter of 1932, Bombay was engulfed by the fires of resistance. The arrest of Mahatma Gandhi on 4th January 1932 led to the onset of the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement, which continued for several years. It converged with the Independence Day Celebrations, as stated in the Purna Swaraj Resolution of the Lahore Session of Congress. At the junction of Girgaum Back Road and Prarthana Samaj, foreign cloth bonfires flickered in defiance of imperial rule. On the sands of Chowpatty, opposite Wilson College, the air resonated with the anthems of freedom. Hundreds carrying the national flag yelled "Zenda Uncha Rahe Humara" in fervent unison when the Gamdevi Police arrived at the scene and resorted to lathi charges to disperse the crowd. The unwavering perseverance of the crowd continued until midnight. Over 100 arrests were made (Chronicle, Armed Police Patrol Streets till Midnight; Record Arrests In Bombay: Bonfires And Lathi Charges; "Independence" Day Incidents 1932).

On 4th February 1932, a month after Gandhi's arrest, Congress observed Gandhi Day and led a procession from Mandvi to Mani Bhavan. The Gamdevi Police intercepted the procession at every possible juncture, and subsequent arrests were made. However, the crowd made it to Mani Bhavan, where the national flag rose over the gates as a symbol of resilience and unbroken spirits. As the day turned to dusk, the emblem of defiance was lowered by the police. In the silence that followed, the streets of Gamdevi echoed resistance. In the face of adversity, the flame of freedom refused to be extinguished (Chronicle 1932).

The vast jurisdiction of Gamdevi comprises a sprawling land beginning at the peak of the hill, the Government House (present-day Raj Bhawan), and descending gracefully until the Nepean Sea (present-day Lady Laxmibai Jagmohandas Marg). Police historian Deepak Rao says that the custodians of this expansive territory, Gamdevi



Police Station, bore the weight of the intricate dance of VVIP security arrangements and ministerial affairs up until 1995 when the Malabar Hill ceased to be a part of its jurisdiction when Malabar Hill Police Station came up.

As the sun dips below the Malabar Hill skyline, the Gamdevi Police Station remains more than bricks and mortar. As former Commissioner of Police A N Roy says, “The sun may have set, but for the police, the day never ends”. The Gamdevi Police Station stands as a testament to the resilience of duty, the endurance of pride, and despite the shifting tides of time, continues to be an unwavering commitment of **सदरक्षणाय खालनिग्रणाय**, which translates to protecting the good, for eliminating the evil (Rao 2006).

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