



There is scarcely an establishment in Mumbai that cannot claim to have witnessed or participated in India's war for independence, but few have a claim bigger than Mani Bhavan, an unassuming two-storey house on Laburnum Road in the quiet Gamdevi neighbourhood. Matching the occupant himself in its simplicity, Mani Bhavan served as the home of Mahatma Gandhi while he was in Bombay from 1917 to 1934. It was the headquarters for spirited meetings of the Indian National Congress and a foundation from which nationwide movements were launched (Mehta 2020, 74).

Gandhi's first brush with Bombay was as a young lawyer in 1891. He was overwhelmed with stage fright in his first court case and vowed not to practise law until he gained confidence. He would walk from his house in Girgaum to the High Court everyday only to doze off in the stands like many others. In 1893, he left to join a law firm in South Africa, where he found his footing. By the time he returned to Bombay in 1915, he was known as a triumphant revolutionary and was welcomed with such adulation that he was nearly buried under garlands (Lopez 2019). He was hosted at Mani Bhavan by Revashankar Jhaveri, a jeweller and devoted friend who shared his principles of non-violence, truth and satyagraha.

By 1915, Bombay had emerged as a centre for commerce, manufacturing, trade and banking, attracting various communities and a populace that was a mix of resourceful elite families, a conscientious working class, and bright young minds, making it just the right place for Gandhi to inextricably involve himself in the social, economic and political fabric of India. He launched the first nationwide satyagraha from Mani Bhavan on 6th April 1919 against the barbaric Rowlatt Act. In the early hours of dawn, Gandhi walked from the mansion to Girgaon Chowpatty to initiate satyagraha by bathing in the sea, offering prayers to God and beginning his fast, joined by thousands of people. The next day, he issued a newspaper titled 'Satyagrahi' from Mani Bhavan (Mehta 2020, 78). The President of Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya and Historian, Dr. Usha Thakkar, sums up the critical role of Mani Bhavan quite simply. She says, "Gandhiji's major political campaigns were related to Mumbai and so, to Mani Bhavan." Mani Bhavan is the place from which he departed for the Round Table Conferences and the place to which he returned.

Gandhi also declared the Non-Cooperation Movement from Mani Bhavan and encouraged people to boycott Government institutions like offices, schools and courts. He was supposed to launch the movement on 1st August 1920, but tragedy struck when India lost Lokmanya Tilak on the same day. Gandhi addressed the people of India from his desk at Mani Bhavan, speaking of the loss to the country and declaring the Tilak Swaraj Fund. It aimed to raise one crore rupees across the nation by the end of the year to contribute to freedom efforts. Bombay alone contributed 37.5 lakh rupees to the total sum, leading Gandhi to affectionately refer to the city as 'Bombay the Beautiful' (D'souza 2017).

On 17th November 1921, Prince Edward of Wales arrived in Bombay and was welcomed with a majestic ceremony. Gandhi responded by declaring a complete boycott of the celebrations and lighting bonfires of foreign cloth. However, riots broke out in parts of the city with misguided supporters of Gandhi attacking Parsis and other communities they considered guilty of breaking the hartal. Aggrieved by the turn in events, Gandhi pledged an indefinite fast in Mani Bhavan until law and order returned to the city (Ram 2021). On 22nd November 1921, he broke his fast in Mani Bhavan with representatives from various communities of Bombay to showcase their solidarity (Mehta 2020, 79).



Mani Bhavan also hosted eminent personalities like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, and Maulana Abul Kalam. On 9th June 1931, the Congress Working Committee met at Mani Bhavan and decided to send Gandhi as their representative to the Second Round Table Conference in London. The conference proved unsuccessful, but on his return to Bombay on 28th December 1931, crowds so eager for a glimpse of the Mahatma gathered outside Mani Bhavan that it prompted him to appear on the balcony (Mehta 2020, 84).

On 4th January 1932, Gandhi was arrested from Mani Bhavan's terrace and jailed without parole. His family, friends and admirers may have wept and expressed their distress, but Gandhi placidly accepted his fate and allowed the arrest after leaving a few instructions for his followers and fellow freedom fighters, including Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (Elwin 1964). Gandhi moved to the nearby Birla Bhavan. His attendance at the Congress Working Committee meeting on 18th June 1934 was his last day at Mani Bhavan.



On 2nd October 1955, the Indian National Congress established the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi to carry on Gandhi's legacy and sustain the causes that mattered so deeply to him such as national unity, communal harmony and promotion of cottage industries. In the same year, they immortalised history that lingers within Mani Bhavan's walls by preserving the space as a museum. The ground floor is a library, housing an extensive collection of more than 50,000 books on and by Gandhi and Gandhian thought. It was inaugurated in 1959 by the then President Dr. Rajendra Prasad (The Times of India 1994). The stairs showcase images of Gandhi, a young man who initially struggled to speak in court but later, in paramount circumstances, transformed into the satyagrahi who led a nation to freedom. The first floor contains an auditorium that periodically screens Gandhi's speeches or films about him. It also displays a more extensive photo gallery with life events and letters written by Gandhi to other world leaders.

The second floor is truly the jewel of the house as it contains the room in which Gandhi resided for seventeen years, preserved in its original state. The floor-bed in which he slept, the desk from which he wrote letters to Franklin Roosevelt and Leo Tolstoy, and the charkha on which he placed so much importance all quietly await visitors. The adjoining room contains an exhibition that chronicles Gandhi's life in models, from a young boy leaving for England to a brave revolutionary standing trial for sedition (Tahseen 2019).

Mani Bhavan has welcomed many visitors over the years, from thousands of students visiting on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti, Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on 2nd October, to foreign dignitaries like Martin Luther King Jr., the spearhead of the Civil Rights Movement in America, and Barack Obama, the former President of the United States of America (Rebello and Johari, 2010). Martin Luther King Jr. also insisted on staying at Mani Bhavan, refusing the comforts of his hotel room (Thakkar 2023). Mani Bhavan is a preserved piece of history that provides insight into a crucial time of the nation's fight for freedom. Perhaps, most importantly, it is a piece of the soul of India, in the heart of its busiest city, that Gandhi previously believed could be found only in villages. It also holds significance as the site where Gandhi developed the concept of swadeshi. (The Times of India 1999) Furthermore, for seventeen years, it also served as the pivotal centre where Gandhi and other leaders decided the nation's fate. As Dr. Usha Thakkar says, "Mani Bhavan is not just a house of stones or a heritage building, it is a monument of freedom and Gandhian values. It keeps reminding us of the everlasting legacy of Gandhi". Even today, Mani Bhavan continues to influence the country by hosting charkha classes and organising competitions that inspire and challenge young minds.



References

- Alok, Rohit. "Mani Bhavan: Archiving the Life of Mahatma Gandhi." *The Indian Express*, 11th March 2017. www.indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/mani-bhavan-archiving-the-life-of-mahatma-gandhi-4565919/.
- Elwin, Verrier. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Gandhi, M K. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai, 8th ed. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 119-120. 1993. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/An-Autobiography.pdf>.
- Kochhar, Rishabh. "History Has a Home on Laburnum Road." *The Hindu*, 30th January 2021. www.thehindu.com/society/history-has-a-home-on-laburnum-road/article33703213.ece
- Lentin, Sifra. "Gandhi's Bombay Years". Gateway House, Indian Council on Global Relations, 1st October 2019, www.gatewayhouse.in/gandhi-bombay-monuments/
- Lopez, Rachel. "Gandhi's Bombay Days in Mumbai." *Hindustan Times*, 22nd September 2019. www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/gandhi-s-bombay-days-in-mumbai/story-TqobiuOMBuoRLU2aaSCKnN.html
- Mehta, Sandhya. "Gandhi and Mani Bhavan." *Sambhasan*, vol. 1, no. 7. 73–88, 2020. <https://mu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/73-89.pdf>.
- Mishra, Ambarish. "Mani Bhavan Treasures History". *The Times of India (1861-2010)*. ProQuest. 2nd October 1994. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mani-bhavan-treasures-history/docview/595343966/se-2>.
- Ram, Sharmila Ganesan. "Mahatma Gandhi: Many Firsts and Fasts Began in Mumbai" *The Times of India*. 2nd October 2019. www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mahatma-gandhi-many-firsts-and-fasts-began-in-mumbai/articleshow/71401763.cms
- Ram, Sharmila Ganesan. "Mumbai: A Century Ago, an Unwelcome Royal Guest Left a Trail of Riots in Bombay: Mumbai News - Times of India." *The Times of India*, 14th November 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-a-century-ago-an-unwelcome-royal-guest-left-a-trail-of-riots-in-bombay/articleshow/87692227.cms>.
- Rebello, Snehal, and Aarefa Johari. "Obama Pays Tribute to Mahatma Gandhi at Mani Bhavan". *Hindustan Times*. 6th November 2010. www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai/obama-pays-tribute-to-mahatma-gandhi-at-mani-bhavan/story-OEOBBUTzQXdhIMeY8oXi8M.html.
- Singh, Anil. "In Mumbai, Gandhi's Long-Time Home Receives Few Indian Visitors." *Scroll.In*. 2nd October 2015. <https://scroll.in/article/759307/in-mumbai-gandhis-long-time-home-receives-few-indian-visitors>.
- Singh, Anil. "This Simple Abode Simply Humbles: Mani Bhavan Shaped India's Destiny, but it Wears the Mahatma's Modesty." *The Times of India (1861-2010)*. 2nd October 1999. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/this-simple-abode-simply-humbles/docview/613502862/se-2>.
- Tahseen, Ismat. "A Walk through Mani Bhavan on Gandhi Jayanti: Mumbai News - Times of India." *The Times of India*, 2nd October 2019. www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/a-walk-through-mani-bhavan-on-gandhi-jayanti/articleshow/71392832.cms.

