

THE HINDU

August 14, 2014

This day, that year, in Madras



The Hindu Archives

The front page view of The Hindu, dated August 15, 1947.

Deepa Alexander digs through editions of The Hindu of August 1947 and rediscovers the city's first dawn of freedom

Celebrate with Nehru guns, Freedom sparklers and Ashoka wheels for Rs. 5,” advertised T.S. Abdeally and Bros.

P. Orr & Sons sold Vertex pocket watches for a special price of Rs. 65. Frank Capra’s classic, *It’s A Wonderful Life*, was playing at New Elphinstone. Madras Theatres celebrated with no shows “and a special bonus to staff”.

There is more than a century of information in *The Hindu* archives and it threatens to wash over me. The staff hefts the big blue file with August 1947 emblazoned on it, and turn the chemically-treated yellowing pages to the edition dated August 14.

“Quit India.” “Jai Hind.” “Satyameva Jayate”. “Vande Mataram.” A million rallying cries. Momentous though it was, the memory of our first Independence Day has faded with time although its emotional resonance never lost its glow. These pages are a chronicle of its people, hallowed by history, embellished by the celebration of our freedom struggle.

August 15, 1947 was also a Friday, like this year, a day of thundershowers according to the weather report in *The Hindu*, priced then at 2 annas.

Advertisements and announcements meld into the tale. Historical figures flit in and out of the pages. But the festivities in the city and across India began a day earlier, on August 14.



A page from the August 17, 1947 edition. Photo: The Hindu Archives

The music lined up for the eve of Independence included concerts by Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar at Gokhale Hall and organist Handel Manuel and a BBC violinist at St. Andrew's Church. In an advertisement, Lady Colleen Nye, the Governor's wife and patroness of the Madras Provincial Welfare Fund, urged citizens to proudly wear the National Flag.

At another level, the edition was pure political narrative. The editorial on page 4 urged France and Portugal to also "give up their colonial possessions in India". The distribution of portfolios, the division of the Army between India and Pakistan and the renunciation of knighthoods and titles by S. Radhakrishnan, later the President, and R.K. Shanmukham Chetti, independent India's first Finance Minister, crowded the pages.

At the same time, to celebrate the founding of Pakistan, a grand reception was accorded in Karachi to the Mountbattens "who flew down in their personal York", even as fires raged in Lahore.



A BRIDGE TO THE PAST The Tricolour fluttering atop the flag mast at Fort St. George on August 15, 1947 was the first symbol of free India in Madras. Photo: V. Ganesan

Madras remained untouched by the epic spasms of the violence of Partition. Although prohibitory orders in the city “were to be enforced for bundobast”, radio sets were installed at various parks so that the public could listen to AIR broadcasting the assumption of power ceremonies, flag hoisting at India Gate, and poems by Hafeez Jullundhuri. In Mylapore, Rukmini Devi inaugurated the Fine Arts Society at Vivekananda College.

All through the evening and night, happy throngs of people visited places of worship, invoking the gods to bless their new nation. In a spirit of unity, people of all communities and castes wore the flag. “It is difficult to see even a single person without wearing a National Flag”, says an article. The Tricolour also fluttered atop almost every building in the city, Government or private, with the merchants of Madras taking the lead in illuminating the buildings.

On August 15, the newspaper brought out a free 20-page supplement, its cover page in the colours of the flag, with the words ‘Dominion of India’ proudly emblazoned. Inside was a collector’s edition of articles by eminent persons — ‘Birth of Great Asiatic Power’ by K.M. Munshi, ‘The Saga of the Nehrus’ by Krishna Huthee Singh and ‘Patriotism of India’s Press’ by Leonard W. Matters, the Australian-born London representative of *The Hindu*.

‘Free India is Born’, screamed the headline with the editorial ‘A Red Letter Day’ announcing “India enters the comity of free nations today, an equal among equals”. Texts of speeches by Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad ran alongside congratulatory messages from King George VI and other world leaders. While people in Delhi toasted the nation and the king, India Office, the seat of power for nearly a century, closed down unsung. Trains filled with refugees, the coaches smeared with taunts, were drawing in at stations in Punjab and Bengal.



The Chief Justice of Madras administering the Oath to H. E. Sir Archibald Edward Nye, the Governor of Madras, at the Secretariat, Fort St. George, on August 15, 1947. Photo: The Hindu Archives

Madras, however, heard the endless sweet echo of M.S. Subbulakshmi who performed on AIR that evening at 8. 'Freedom's Progress Through The Years', a photographic journey of the most iconic moments of our struggle was published alongside advertisements by Bosotto Hotel and Spencer and Co.

Independence brought freedom of a more visible nature to a whole category of people. Jail doors opened for many convicts who had been granted pardon. Many INA leaders were also released.

The celebrations of August 15 are reported in the August 17 edition: how trumpets that sundered the morning air when the Governor of Madras, Sir Archibald Nye, in a final burst of British pomp and glory, unfurled the Tricolour at Island Grounds; how O.P. Ramaswami Reddiar, Prime Minister (which was how the post of Chief Minister was then designated) hoisted the flag at Ripon Building, the headquarters of the Corporation, to cries of unrestrained happiness. This was after both were sworn into their new offices by the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, Frederick Gentle. The swearing-in was held at Fort St. George, in the crowded Cabinet Room, photographers capturing the moment in a blitz of flashbulbs.

Horsemen in glistening jackets and gold sashes stood amidst the large crowds that streamed along the beachfront to Fort. St George, to gaze with pride at the Indian flag fluttering over the first fort of the British East India Company. It is a picture that holds pride of place in that edition.

On that page is the story of how the world map was redrawn one night. It's a page that defines what India was, and is. It's a page that defines us.