

Bombay was all lit up, and joyful like never before'

Adman, actor Gerson da Cunha, 92, recalls his tryst with destiny

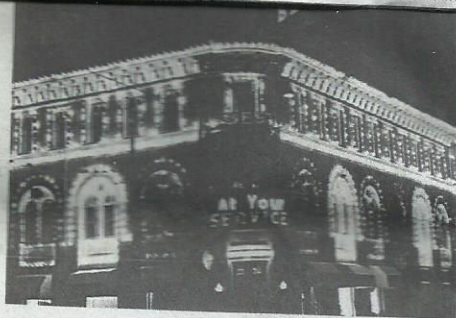
At 92, memory dims a bit but August 15, 1947 is hard to forget. Two things I remember sharply, both dramatic in their own ways. In the February of 1946, I recall how the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) was poised for mutiny. Sailors were wrenching neckties off men at Bori Bunder — then VT and now CSMT — though the link between ties, the mutineers and British officers, their real target, was somewhat unclear to me. In those days the armed forces were the rock on which the empire was built, and because of the mutiny, the foundations of the empire began to shake. And that's when I think they decided, well, we'll have to give up this race at some point, better do it now than never. Not long after that, Independence Day dawned.



On the evening of August 14, Bombay was a blaze of illumination. Public buildings, commercial houses, trams and buses told the world that India was now a master of its own destiny.

I was with a group of friends from college

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Bombay witnessed frenzied celebrations. Public buildings were illuminated, crowds thronged the streets singing and raising slogans and there were long processions of vehicles, which created traffic jams through the night

and we strode from VT to Flora Fountain with a sense that the land was truly ours. A Bengali among us broke into Jana Gana Mana and the rest of us, awkwardly but loudly, la-la-la'd the melody with him all the way. There was not to be another evening like it. Referee whistles, tom-toms stolen from many festivals, and sounds of joy were unconfined.

There was a joyousness that one had not sensed before in the city or ever again. The face of the city was squished into an enormous smile. We broke up just in time to catch the last train home from the terminus, in my case to Dockyard Road Station. But streets were still packed with a milling crowd

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out with no specific purpose or going nowhere. I wonder how anybody got home that night.

The newspaper headlines, our hearts and minds reverberated with the names of our leaders, Bapu, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Azad. The other subject occupying news space was the start of the killings in India and what was to be Pakistan and the early trickle that was to become tragic floods of refugees going both ways. We began to learn that joy often goes with a price to pay.

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