

PRAYAS 4 IAS

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Special Issue

August (Week 3)

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On August 15, 1947, where was Bapu?

(Source: [The Hindu](#))

Context: *While Delhi, the national capital, was being decked up for the grand celebration of Independence and the transfer of power, and Indians geared up to celebrate Independence, where was the man who had helmed the fight for Independence? Where was Bapu?*

In Beliaghata

- He was far away, in Calcutta, resolute in his efforts to bring peace and calm to a place that was burning with violence and hatred. The words and actions of Bapu doused the flames.
- The historic events bear recounting as India celebrates a landmark anniversary of Independence. The conditions were anything but peaceful then; today, 75 years down the line, conditions are not far from reigniting the fires that burned then. This is then a day to reflect on how far we have travelled. Or have we travelled far?
- On the evening of August 6, Bapu boarded the Calcutta Mail at Lahore; it would take him to Patna and then Calcutta from where he planned to leave for Noakhali (now in Bangladesh), where he had promised the minority community that he would shield them when Partition happened and East Bengal became East Pakistan.
- Bapu arrived in Calcutta on August 9, 1947. A delegation of Muslims, led by the chief of Calcutta District Muslim League, Mohammad Usman, pleaded with Bapu to remain in Calcutta to ensure the safety of Muslims.
- Bapu told them he would delay going to Noakhali if they guaranteed the safety and wellbeing of the minority community in Noakhali. If, despite their promise, there was violence in Noakhali, he would go on an unconditional fast unto death.
- On August 11, Bapu met with H.S. Suhrawardy, the former Premier of Bengal. Suhrawardy too voiced his concern about the safety of Muslims. Bapu asked him to stand guarantee for the safety of the Hindus in Noakhali if he wished for him to stay back in Calcutta. Suhrawardy promised.
- Bapu told him, “I will remain if you and I are prepared to live together. We shall have to work till every Hindu and Mussalman in Calcutta safely returns to the place where he was before. We shall continue in our effort till our last breath...”
- It was decided that Bapu and Suhrawardy would meet and live in Hyderi Mansion (now preserved as Gandhi Bhawan) in Beliaghata, the dilapidated and abandoned home of a Muslim family, in a densely populated neighbourhood of very poor Muslims.
- Bapu and Suhrawardy were greeted by an angry mob of young Hindu hotheads who were furious with Bapu for coming to the rescue of Muslims. Bapu tried to pacify them, but they persisted; their angry protest continued the next day, too.
- Bapu told them, “I am going to put myself under your protection. You are welcome to play the opposite role if you so choose. I have nearly reached the end of my life’s journey. I have not much farther to go. But let me tell you that if you again go mad, I will not be a living witness to it. I have given the same ultimatum to the Muslims of Noakhali, too; I have earned the right. Before there is another outbreak of Muslim madness in Noakhali, they will find me dead.”
- Speaking at the prayer meeting at Beliaghata on the evening of August 14, Bapu invited everyone to observe a 24-hour fast and pray for the wellbeing of India and to spend the day hand-spinning.
- After the prayers, Hyderi Mansion was again attacked. Stones crashed against the windows, shattering glass panes and showering Bapu and the occupants with fragments of glass. The wooden shutters were hurriedly closed.



- Finally, in order to pacify the mob Bapu stood at a window and spoke with them. When he felt that he had calmed the mob, he called Suhrawardy.
- Suhrawardy stood next to Bapu, framed in the window illuminated by streetlights, Bapu placed a hand on Suhrawardy's shoulder; Suhrawardy unequivocally accepted responsibility for the Calcutta killings and expressed his sincere regrets for the tragedy he had caused. This had a profound effect on the crowd. "It was the turning point," Bapu said. "It had a cleansing effect."
- It was around 11 when the rooms occupied by Bapu and his tiny retinue were cleaned. After spinning his regulation quota of khadi yarn, his daily bread labour, Bapu lay down to rest; soon he was fast asleep.
- At midnight on August 14-15, 1947, Indians rejoiced. India was free. In the Central Hall of Parliament, in a grand ceremony, the British relinquished power and the interim government took charge. India heard the "tryst with destiny" speech made by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, which would be oft-quoted later in India's history, a testimony to its soul-stirring narrative of what India set out to achieve.
- But the man who had made that tryst possible was fast asleep, on a thin mattress, in a dilapidated home, in the densely populated poor neighbourhood of Beliaghata in Calcutta, oblivious to all the rejoicing and the celebration.
- On August 15, 1947, Independence Day, Bapu woke up at 3:45 a.m. He followed his usual daily routine. He received several messages of congratulations, but he was not celebrating. He was praying, fasting and spinning khadi.
- On Independence Day itself, a large crowd gathered around the Governor's mansion in Calcutta and laid siege to it, unmindful that now its occupant was an Indian, C. Rajagopalachari. The newly appointed Governor of Bengal was held hostage in the Raj Bhavan for several hours by Indians on Independence Day.
- Bapu sent a message to the ministers of the cabinet of West Bengal. He wrote, "From today, you have to wear the crown of thorns. Strive ceaselessly to cultivate truth and non-violence. Be humble. Be forbearing. Now, you will be tested through and through. Beware of power; power corrupts. Do not let yourselves be entrapped by its pomp and pageantry. Remember, you are in office to serve the poor in India's villages."

Together in joy

- At the prayer meeting that evening, Bapu congratulated Calcutta for the camaraderie displayed by Hindus and Muslims. Muslims shouted the same slogans of joy as the Hindus. They flew the tricolour without the slightest hesitation.
- What was more, the Hindus were admitted to mosques and Muslims were admitted to mandirs. Bapu had hoped that Calcutta would be entirely free from the communal virus forever. Then, indeed, they need have no fear about East Bengal and the rest of India.
- "Shaheed and I are living together in a Muslim Manzil in Beliaghata where Muslims have been reported to be sufferers. Now, it seemed as if there never had been bad blood between the Hindus and the Muslims. As I have said above, we are living in a Muslim's house and Muslim volunteers are attending to our comforts with the greatest attention... Is this to be called a miracle or an accident? I only ask myself whether the dream of my youth is to be realised in the evening of my life..."
- This is the wish with which Bapu ended his day, the day that India became independent in 1947.

All about The Taliban

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *The Taliban entered Afghanistan's capital Kabul recently, following a week of rapid territorial gains from retreating government forces battling to hold off the Islamist militant group. Here are some key facts about the Taliban's history and ideology.*



A history of the Taliban

- The Taliban, which means “students” in the Pashto language, emerged in 1994 around the southern Afghan city of Kandahar.
- It was one of the factions fighting a civil war for control of the country following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and subsequent collapse of the government.\
- It originally drew members from so-called “mujahideen” fighters who, with support from the United States, repelled Soviet forces in the 1980s.
- Within the space of two years, the Taliban had gained sole control over most of the country, proclaiming an Islamic emirate in 1996 with a harsh interpretation of Islamic law. Other mujahideen groups retreated to the north of the country.
- Following the Sept 11, 2001 attacks in the United States by Al-Qaeda, US-backed forces in the north swept into Kabul in November under the cover of heavy US airstrikes.
- The Taliban melted away into remote areas, where it began a 20-year-long insurgency against the Afghan government and its Western allies.
- The Taliban’s founder and original leader was Mullah Mohammad Omar, who went into hiding after the Taliban was toppled. So secretive were his whereabouts that his death, in 2013, was only confirmed two years later by his son.

What is the Taliban’s ideology?

- During its five years in power, the Taliban enforced a strict version of sharia law. Women were predominantly barred from working or studying, and were confined to their homes unless accompanied by a male guardian.
- Public executions and floggings were common, Western films and books were banned, and cultural artefacts seen as blasphemous under Islam were destroyed.
- Opponents and Western countries accuse the Taliban of wanting to return to this style of governance in the areas it already controls – a claim the group denies.
- The Taliban said earlier this year it wanted a “genuine Islamic system” for Afghanistan that would make provisions for women’s and minority rights, in line with cultural traditions and religious rules.
- There are, however, signs the group has already started to prohibit women from working in some areas.

The Taliban: International recognition

- Only four countries, including neighbour Pakistan, recognised the Taliban government when it was in power.
- The vast majority of other countries, along with the United Nations, instead recognised a group holding provinces to the north of Kabul as the rightful government-in-waiting.
- The United States and the United Nations imposed sanctions on the Taliban, and most countries show little sign it will recognise the group diplomatically.
- US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said earlier this month Afghanistan risks becoming a pariah state if the Taliban takes power and commits atrocities.
- Other countries such as China have begun cautiously signalling they may recognise the Taliban as a legitimate regime.

Comparing withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan with the fall of Saigon

Context: *The United States, which had waged its longest-running conflict in history to drive the Taliban out from Afghanistan since 2001, was reduced to announcing emergency deployment in Kabul in a last-minute effort to evacuate its diplomats, citizens and soldiers, as the Taliban continued to advance. On social media,*



the withdrawal of forces by Washington is now being likened to the fall of Saigon, a somewhat similar catastrophe that befell the US almost half a century ago when Saigon, the capital of US-backed South Vietnam, fell to Communist-ruled North Vietnam two years after the withdrawal of the American military which had been in the country for 19 years.

Details:

- Saigon's capture on April 30, 1975 (it was later renamed after North leader Ho Chi Minh) signalled the end of the Vietnam War, and the Communists consolidated their hold over the entire country in the next few months.
- Similarly, many security analysts now fear that the Taliban could establish complete control over Afghanistan in the near future.

What happened on April 30, 1975?

- The Vietnam War—the first televised war in the world—was a bloody conflict that left 58,000 Americans and 2,50,000 Vietnamese dead, and ended with the US being thrown out of the Southeast Asian country.
- The war lasted from 1954, when North Vietnam's legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap defeated French colonial troops at the famous strategic spot, Dien Bien Phu, until 21 years later when the same military leader vanquished the Americans and their South Vietnamese protégés at Saigon.
- Because it was televised, people across the world saw its horrors on screens, and opposition to this so-called “dirty war” was global.
- At the height of its presence in the country, the US stationed almost 5 lakh soldiers in Vietnam (five times more than the peak US presence in Afghanistan in 2010).
- On April 30, 1975, when Saigon fell to the Communists, TV and the next morning's newspapers showed large groups of Americans, soldiers and civilians on the roof of the US embassy, waiting to be rescued by their country's military helicopters.
- As each helicopter was overfilled and rose a few feet, dozens clung to its skids and jumped down on aircraft carriers before the chopper could land.
- That very day, four hours after a US helicopter evacuated the last of a dozen Americans, the National Liberation Front (the Communists) captured the city. Saigon surrendered unconditionally, ending 120 years of foreign occupation.
- A report carried on the front page of The Indian Express on May 1, 1975 stated: “One street scene perhaps epitomised Saigon's abject fall today — a tank of the National Liberation Front smashed through the main gates of the presidential palace disregarding the attempts of an unarmed South Vietnamese soldier trying to open them first.
- Minutes later, the flag of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) — red and white with a gold star — was waving from the palace.”
- The report also carried a cartoon by the veteran journalist Abu Abraham (now deceased) depicting Vietnam as a butterfly emerging from its cocoon on an olive branch.
- Reuters's Saigon correspondent wrote then that the first NLF troops to enter the city centre were a Jeep load of barefoot, teenage guerrillas, followed by regular soldiers clad in jungle fatigues and carrying assault rifles and rocket launchers.
- In Washington, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told the media that the US hoped to crystallise a new Asia policy in the wake of the fall of Saigon.

What position did India take at that time?

- The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi congratulated the North on its victory and added that “the failure of the US policy” was “due to its propping up unrepresentative governments”.
- The Indian Express report at that time stated: “...in a veiled criticism of the foreign policy attitudes associated with Dr Henry Kissinger, Indira Gandhi said that the balance of power model certainly did



not provide an answer. The idea that four or five or six great powers interacting among themselves could preserve peace in the world was an extension of the ideas developed in Europe in the 19th century. The world has become extremely complex.”

- The statement by Indira Gandhi was not unexpected, and reflected what had been India’s position on Vietnam since she became prime minister nine years before that.
- In 1966, when she went on a state visit to the US just two months after her ascension to the top job in India, Gandhi refused to tell President Lyndon B Johnson that India “shared America’s agony over Vietnam”, as had been the wish of her top advisors. “All she was prepared to say to LBJ was: ‘India understands your agony’,”.

