

SARDAR PATEL- A HERO FOR ALL AGES

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I

Prologue- Birth of a hero

On a pleasant June morning in 1895, 20-year-old Vallabh walks roughly 17 Km, from his home in Karamsad to his school in Petlad. He left home at 5 am to just be in time for the school assembly. On the way to his classroom, he notices that one of his classmates is pulled out of the assembly by a strict teacher and barred from attending classes, till he clears the fine imposed on him for an earlier mischief. The young boy pleads forgiveness and expresses his inability to pay the fine because of the poor financial condition of his family. The disciplinarian teacher refuses to give head and bars him from entering the classroom. Vallabh watches the exchange quietly from a distance as a storm starts to brew in his head.

He was aware of the financial difficulties faced by most families in rural India. The British government took very high taxes and there was hardly any money left with the poor farmers to spare for educating their brood. His own father, a farmer was struggling to educate his six kids as a result. Vallabh had to wait his turn for formal education and as a consequence now at 20, he was still in 8th standard. The indignity that his fellow student had to face because of lack of money and the injustice of education denied so moved Vallabh that he decided to go on a strike with his fellow classmates.

For three days he walked 17 kilometers to school and 17 kilometers back to sit under a tree and protest this injustice with his classmate. The principal of the school had to intervene to put an end to the impasse. He reprimanded Vallabh for creating nuisance and promoting indiscipline amongst the students. At 20 he was the eldest in the class and this was not expected from him.

Vallabh heard his principal without flinching. He had his arguments ready. Yes, he was the eldest in the class, but that was precisely why it was his

responsibility to protect the right to education of his younger, fellow classmates. He explained the financial situation of his fellow classmate who was punished and highlighted his intent to study despite the hardships. He argued that it was unfair to judge their protest for the right of the fellow classmates as an act of indiscipline. In fact, the Principal should be proud that he has imparted the value of solidarity to his pupil.

After hearing Vallabh's to the point and lucid arguments the Principal cancelled the fine imposed on the poor student and asked their teacher to be polite with his students.

After school that day the relieved poor student hugged Vallabh and thanked him profusely for standing up for him. Not the kind to gloat on his achievements Vallabh made light of his role in the affair but this incident left a mark on his mind.

Couple of years later, Vallabh, his brothers and father were sitting on the floor in their modest house enjoying the celebratory lunch served to them by Ladba Devi. Vallabh had just cleared his 10th standard Matriculation exam. During the course of the meal, he surprised everyone by expressing a desire to study further. They were surprised because in the 22 years he took to clear matriculation he had shown no great passion or ambition. Today an average student completes his post-graduation by the time he turns 22. Gandhiji, who was six years elder than Vallabh had completed his matriculation at age 17. Considering these facts his parents couldn't be faulted for being shocked at his decision. The elders in his family had no high hopes from young Vallabh and thought that he was destined for a commonplace job.

To put things in perspective, at this point his father Jhaverbhai and mother Ladba Devi, landed Patidar farmers from Nandiad, parents of six kids, had no inkling whatsoever that one day their fourth son, Vallabh, would be commemorated with the highest standing statue on Planet earth. How could they? Yes, Vallabh was tough and possessed strong willpower but that was expected of boys brought up on a farm.

They had completely failed to read that the stoic Vallabh harbored plans to study further and become a lawyer. The incident in the school had clearly played its part in his choice. He had found confidence in his ability to argue the poor boy's case and take the matter to a just and logical end. The hero within Vallabh had raised its head that day and now he had found a way to look for his place in the world.

II

A hero's journey is full of trials and tribulations and he is defined by the way he deals with these challenges.

Moral dilemma

Vallabhbhai Patel had gotten married at age 16 to a 12-year-old Jhaverba, as fixed by their parents. As was the custom in those days the girl mostly stayed in her parents' house till the boy comes of age and was ready to be a man. Now, at 26, after clearing his bar exam young advocate Vallabh was mentally prepared to take the responsibility of a householder. He moved to Godhra with his wife Jhaverba and enrolled himself at the bar as a pleader. Vallabhbhai Patel turned out to be an efficient, skillful lawyer.

While practicing law at Godhra, Borsad and Anand in Gujarat, Vallabh saved enough money to fulfil his long-cherished dream of travelling to England and becoming a Barrister. He applied for a pass and ticket to do the same but destiny had other plans. As luck would have it, his ticket and other papers identifying him as V.J. Patel, short for Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel landed in the hands of his elder brother Vithalbhai Jhaverbhai Patel. The elder brother had also nurtured dreams of travelling to England and studying law. He saw an opening for himself in this confusion of V.J. Patels and chided his younger brother for wanting to achieve his dream before his elder brother.

Being a practicing lawyer Vallabhbhai was totally aware that what his elder brother wanted was ethically wrong and legally incorrect, but for a lad who had grown up on *Ram Katha*, who had imbibed the essence of brotherly love from the epic, it created a moment of serious moral dilemma. Eventually, for the sake of his brotherly love, he decided to let Vithalbhai fulfil his ambition and fill his place as V.J. Patel while he himself continued to slog at the bar. Though it was a conservative decision this incident also left a deep mark on his personality and would influence his attitude towards his kith and kin when he came to power later in life.

III

The cycle of Life and death...

In 1903 Jhaverba gave birth to a daughter they named Maniben and in 1905 to a son called Dahyabhai. Vallabhbhai's family was complete and his practice was flourishing. He was highly regarded in the legal fraternity as a fierce and skillful lawyer. He was earning well enough to also look after his homestead in Karamsad. His concern for familial and social bonds would once again land him in trouble when Bubonic plague swept through the states of Gujarat. A close friend of Vallabhbhai contacted the plague and was left unattended due to the fear of the contagious, killer disease. When young Vallabhbhai heard about his condition he was deeply moved. He was shocked to see how the fear of death can make people abandon their own loved ones. Without wasting time he took the responsibility of caring for his friend against all advice. While caring for him Vallabhbhai himself contacted the deadly Bubonic Plague.

Vallabhbhai immediately sent his family away and self-isolated himself in a secluded, abandoned temple. Bereft of physical energy and devoid of any caregivers he stared at his own death. He experienced the fragility of human life and came to the conclusion that one must make good use of one's life by working hard for their objectives. In time he fully regained his vigour but found out that his wife Jhaverba was suffering from cancer.

Jhaverba, now 29 had fallen ill with an intestinal problem. At the end of 1908, Vallabh took her and the children to Bombay, where, Jhaverba was admitted to the Cama Hospital. A surgery seemed necessary, but Jhaverba was too weak to be operated upon, and the doctors decided to postpone surgery until she recovered some strength. After staying with her for a few days Vallabhbhai had to go to Anand. He had to appear for a client who was accused of murder. He left Bombay with instructions that he should be summoned once the date for the operation was fixed.

However, Jhaverba's condition worsened after Vallabhbhai left. An immediate surgery seemed the only option. She was operated and showed signs of recovery. A wire was sent to Vallabhbhai informing him about the developments. He was already in the court in Anand at the time. After getting the wire, a reassured Vallabhbhai started to cross-examine a key witness. He was brutally ripping apart the witness with all his might in the courtroom when, at 2 p.m. on January 11, another telegram was handed to him. He opened it, saw that it announced Jhaverba's death. He folded it, put it in his pocket, and continued to pound the witness until the latter broke down.

After the adjournment of the court, the judge asked him 'what was that you got during the proceedings and interrupted the court? Did you get another evidence in the case?' He calmly told him 'no my lord, it was a telegram that conveyed the demise of my wife'.

His *will had triumphed over grief*, and he had won the battle in the courtroom but lost the love of his life. It was the end of his short conjugal life of less than ten years. He had experienced a full cycle of life and death in a short period of time. He could feel that something had changed inside him. He refused to remarry despite facing pressure from his family and instead decided to bring up his children with the help of his family while he himself chose to focus on his professional goals so as to make a lot of material wealth and secure the future of his family.

IV

The turning point

Next year, 36-year-old Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel travelled to England and enrolled in the Middle Temple Inn, a school for barristers. He finished a 36-month course within just 30 months and topped the final examination

despite having no previous college experience. For a boy who completed 10th standard at age 22, he had surely made up for the lost time and how. The English sojourn also left an indelible mark on Vallabhbhai's personality. He developed a taste for the fine things in life and was especially taken in by the English attire and wine.

By the time he turned 40 Vallabhbhai Patel was a successful lawyer in Ahmedabad. He had amassed a decent fortune and made sure his kids went to English medium school and got a modern education. His own personal style had assumed a sophisticated western attribute. In a very short time, Vallabhbhai had achieved all that he had set his eyes on. It was time to enjoy the fruits of his labour.

One day in June 1916, Vallabhbhai Patel was playing bridge and smoking cigars - his favourite pastime at that time - at the Barrister's club along with his friend Chimanlal Thakore, when somebody invited the members to meet and listen to one M. K. Gandhi who had come to expound his ideas.

Patel turned down the invite and went on with his game, he remarked, "I have been told he (Gandhi) comes from South Africa. Honestly, I think he is a crank, and as you know, I have no use for such people." That evening Gandhiji talked - and Patel smoked. However, after inadvertently listening to Gandhi, Patel got interested in the man and decided to check up on him.

In his probe what impressed Vallabhbhai most about Gandhiji was his quality of walking the talk. He could clearly see that Gandhiji did practice what he said should be done. Soon he realised that "this man was not a mere windbag - he was out for action".

Patel himself says that in those early days "I was not concerned with his principles or with *himsa* and *ahimsa*. All that mattered to me was that he was sincere; that he had dedicated his whole life, and all he had, to the cause he served, that he was possessed with a desire to free his country from bondage, and that he knew his job thoroughly. I wanted nothing more". So after meeting Gandhiji in the Gujrat Political Conference in Godhra, when he heard the latter call for strong full-time volunteers, Vallabhbhai Patel decided to enroll.

The quality that Gandhiji liked in Vallabhbhai was exactly what the latter had admired Gandhiji for, that there was the difference in his *kathni* and *karni*; word and action. He did what he said. The two men had found their match, a perfect counterfoil who they understood intuitively and respected immensely.

This marked the beginning of a relationship that not only brought a revolutionary change in Vallabhbhai's life but was perhaps the greatest single factor responsible for the success of the Indian political struggle for Independence.

V

The final plunge...

On Gandhi's encouragement, Patel became the secretary of the Gujarat Sabha, a public body that would become the Gujarati arm of the Congress. Soon they were presented with a big challenge.

The peasants from the Kheda district of Gujarat had made a plea to the British government for exemption from taxation due to drought but they were turned down by the authorities. Gandhi endorsed waging a struggle there, but could not lead it himself because he was leading a similar peasant movement in Champaran. When Gandhi asked for a Gujarati activist who could devote himself completely to the assignment, Patel volunteered, much to Gandhi's delight.

Though his decision was made on the spot, Patel later said that his desire and commitment came after intense personal contemplation, as he realised he would have to abandon his career and material ambitions.

A leader, a hero is the one who knows how to deal with his inner confusions. Normal people with basic intelligence get flustered when they encounter a crossroad at any juncture. But, a hero sees these things as an opportunity to choose between two things. Vallabhbhai knew that by using hard thinking, coupled with increased clarity on objectives and vision he could use this crossroad in making a clear decision about his priorities. That day he decided to empower his inner belief that the concern for our fellow mate and nation must come before personal wellbeing. Once he arrived at the conclusion he marched the path that his mind showed with clarity and did so fearlessly.

Though a late bloomer early on in his life Vallabhbhai had picked speed and how. First up, he had surprised everyone by what he had achieved, in education, professionally, materially and then like a true hero he had chosen to give up everything, even his personal dreams and welfare of his family by dedicating his life to the cause of nationalism.

VI

Learning the ropes...

On January 5, 1917 Vallabhbhai was elected councillor of the Ahmedabad municipality for the first time. He had contested from Dariyapur seat then and had won by just one vote. He was subsequently elected president of Ahmedabad municipality in 1922, 1924 and 1927. He totally dedicated himself to the task and achieved remarkable feats within a short period of time.

During his terms, he oversaw infrastructure improvements: the supply of electricity was increased, drainage and sanitation systems were extended throughout the city. The school system underwent major reforms. Vallabhbhai

happened to be the first to pitch for removing “sexual disqualification” in the district municipal Act. As per this Act, women were barred from contesting elections. A resolution was passed in this regard in the Ahmedabad municipality general board. Vallabhbhai had argued that keeping women out of the elected body was equivalent to eliminating the representation of half of the urban population. In 1926, Section 15(1)(c) was abolished.

A proud Gujarati, Vallabhbhai wanted government work in Gujarat to be done in their mother tongue. To further this cause, the assembly of the first Gujarati typewriter was commissioned by Vallabhbhai in 1924. The Ahmedabad municipality had approached Remington company and paid it Rs 4,000 for putting together the first typewriter in the Gujarati language on his instructions. The foresight that Vallabhbhai displayed can only be appreciated if we put it in context. Coming to think of it, now we’ve been independent for the last 75 years, we are in the 21st century yet it is still difficult to procure a good computer with a keyboard in Hindi or other regional Indian languages.

At this point, India had just two public health laboratories - in Pune and in Karachi in 1921. Vallabhbhai felt the need for more such laboratories that could track diseases and keep a check on the quality of drinking water supply and food supplies. The third laboratory was set up within Dudheshwar waterworks compound at Shahibaugh.

While on the one hand, Vallabhbhai was learning the ropes of administration at the Ahmedabad municipality on the other hand he had become a big supporter of Gandhi’s. The more he got to know, the more he admired him. He fully supported Gandhi’s call for the Non-Cooperation movement. He toured the state and recruited more than 300,000 members and raised Rs.1.5 Million in funds. He also helped in organising bonfires in Ahmedabad in which British goods were burnt. He threw in all his English-style clothes and along with his son and daughter vowed to only wear hand-spun Khadi. When Gandhi called off the non-cooperation movement in wake of the violence in the Chauri-Chaura incident Patel stood by him. He dedicated the following years fighting the social evils of untouchability and caste discrimination. By now Vallabhbhai had completely reassigned priorities in life and put the cause of Indian nationalism and the welfare of his fellow countrymen right at the top of the list.

VII

Vallabhbhai as Sardar

On a still, hot May day, in 1925, a group of farmers led by Gujarati activists Narhari Parikh, Ravi Shankar Vyas and Mohanlal Pandya approached Vallabhbhai, who was by now widely respected for his guidance to the farmers during ‘Kheda’ struggle and his good work as the Ahmedabad Municipal president. They described their hopeless situation to Vallabhbhai.

That year the government of Bombay Presidency had raised the tax rates by 30 per cent. The taluka of Bardoli was facing a serious calamity as farmers barely had any crop or property to pay off the tax. They were facing an existential crisis and wanted Vallabhbhai to lead them.

Vallabhbhai had turned 50 that year. He was a wise man of experience who was not known to mince his words. Vallabhbhai asked the delegation of farmers frankly if they fully realised what a revolt implied for them? Refusing to pay the taxes could lead to their property being confiscated, including their lands, and many would go to jail. They could face complete decimation. He would not lead them unless he had the understanding and agreement of all the villages involved. The villagers replied that they were prepared for the worst but definitely could not accept the government's injustice.

Vallabhbhai then asked Gandhi to consider the matter, but Gandhiji merely asked what he thought, and when the latter replied with confidence about the prospects of a revolt, Gandhiji gave his blessing. However, Gandhi and Patel agreed that neither the Congress nor Gandhiji would directly involve themselves, and the struggle be left entirely to the people of Bardoli taluka.

After cross-examining and talking to village representatives, emphasising the potential hardship and need for non-violence and cohesion, Patel initiated the struggle with a complete denial of taxes. Patel organised volunteers, camps, and an information network across affected areas and many sympathy *satyagrahas* across Gujarat. Despite arrests, seizures of property and land the farmers refused to back down. The struggle intensified.

The situation came to a head and finally in 1928 through sympathetic Parsi intermediaries in the Bombay Presidency Vallabhbhai negotiated a settlement that included repealing the tax hike, reinstating village officials who had resigned in protest, and returning seized property and land.

It was a big victory for a local farmers' movement against the might of the British Empire without intervention from the rest of the country. It was during this struggle that the women of Bardoli bestowed the title Sardar to Vallabhbhai for his innate leadership qualities. The Self-confidence and momentum gained from the Bardoli victory aided in the resurrection of the Indian freedom struggle nationwide. Inspired, the Indian National Congress gave a call for Indian independence in 1930, and the salt *satyagraha* was launched by Gandhi with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, his trusted lieutenant by his side.

Like a true hero, Vallabhbhai excelled at what he chose to pursue. Everyone who worked with him could see that he had assumed the role of a leader effortlessly and unassumingly. The leadership of the Indian freedom movement was going to throw its own set of challenges but Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was up for the summon.

VIII

Clash of ideas and faiths

Though Saradar Patel served Gandhiji like a true disciple it wasn't as if they did not have difference of opinion. When they were both thrown into Yervada Jail by the British government, to curb the Salt Satyagraha, Sardar would prepare Gandhiji's *neem datan*, lemon and honey water and did odd jobs for him. He tried to identify his life with that of Gandhiji. He gave up tea, as well as rice and took to boiled vegetables and milk and bread twice a day. Nevertheless, he did not shy away from debating issues of national importance and never missed an opportunity to express his opinion however divergent it may have been from Gandhiji's.

Stoic in personality but not dour by any standard Sardar Patel regaled Gandhi with his cheerful talks and pungent sense of humour. He did not even hesitate to make fun or reprimand him when needed. On one occasion when Gandhiji threatened to go on fast a second time on the issue of the place of Harijans in Hindu society, Vallabhbhai got angry and said, "I wish you would let people have some peace. Let those who have gathered there do what their wisdom tells them to do. Why do you want to hold a pistol again to their head and worry them. People will feel that this man has nothing to do and he keeps on talking of fasting in season and out of season." This deep, pragmatic understanding of the true character of the average Indian was Sardar Patel's greatest strength. He may have had his fascination for western ideals but he was truly invested in figuring out the best of Indian values and using them as his tools.

From 1934 onwards Sardar Patel's played an important role in the congress at an organisational level. He became the Congress's main fundraiser and chairman of its Central Parliamentary Board, playing the leading role in selecting and financing candidates for the elections. He did not contest a seat himself and focussed on guiding the congressmen elected in provinces and at the national level. His job was the maintain unity in the elected congressmen. He was also instrumental in determining the Congress's stance on issues and opponents. It was this role that got him into conflict with other congress leaders of his time like Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

He clashed with Nehru when the latter wanted declarations of the adoption of socialism at the 1936 Congress session. Sardar Patel believed that it was a diversion from their main goal of achieving independence. Sardar Patel was opposed to the "Parrot cry of socialism" and lashed out against socialists for their agitation on an issue, which he considered, was hampering the unity and strength of the country. A true pragmatist Patel had an apprehension as early as 1934 that borrowed methodology of socialism could be misused to establish

fascism. Patel asked the people to think, why England took a long time to become socialistic and why America made no mention of it even now.

In 1938 Patel organised the rank and file of Congress in opposition to the then-Congress president Subhash Chandra Bose's attempt to move away from Gandhi's principles of non-violent resistance. Patel saw Bose as wanting more power over the party. He led senior Congress leaders in a protest that resulted in Bose's resignation. But criticism arose from Bose's supporters, socialists, and other Congressmen that Patel himself was acting in an authoritarian manner in his defence of Gandhi's authority.

Beyond their political disagreements, Patel and Bose also had profound ideological differences. Rajmohan Gandhi notes in his book on Patel that he 'held a poor opinion of Subhas's efficiency'; moreover, 'his disagreements with Subhas were profound'. Patel wanted the Congress governments elected in 1937 to continue in office, whereas Bose wished 'to pull out all the Congress Ministries and war with the Raj, a course that appeared unwarranted and unwise to Patel'. Rajmohan Gandhi further notes that 'another difference was over Gandhi, who was dispensable in Subhas's eyes but absolutely necessary to the Sardar'.

As India inched towards independence the internal conflicts within the congress party also intensified.

While Nehru, Rajagopalachari and other leaders initially criticised Gandhi's proposal for an all-out campaign of civil disobedience to force the British to grant Indian independence, Patel was its most fervent supporter. Patel gave emotional speeches to large crowds across India, asking them to refuse to pay taxes and to participate in civil disobedience, mass protests, and a shutdown of all civil services. He raised funds and prepared a second tier of command as a precaution against the arrest of national leaders.

Historians believe that Patel's speeches was instrumental in electrifying nationalists, who up to then had been sceptical of the proposed rebellion. Even though the British colonial government had responded by imprisoning most of the leaders of Congress, the Quit India movement was "by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857", as the viceroy cabled to Winston Churchill. More than 100,000 people were arrested and Strikes, protests, and other revolutionary activities had broken out across India. When Patel was released on 15 June 1945, he realised that the British government was preparing proposals to transfer power to India.

Despite the clash of ideas and differences of opinions within its political class, India was standing at the doorsteps of independence. The nationalists were about to achieve their ultimate objective but they had to clear a final test. Sardar Patel was aware that this will be the most crucial chapter in the history of modern India.

IX

Loosing a battle

And yes, indeed, the following years were by far the most difficult phase in the life of Sardar Patel and the rest of India. They had by virtue of their strong, consistent and principled opposition forced the British authorities to grant Freedom to India but it was going to come at a great price. The British government's plan of 16 May 1946 proposed the partition of India on religious lines, with over 565 Princely states free to choose between independence or accession to either dominion. The Muslim League approved the plans while Congress flatly rejected the proposal as being inherently divisive.

Vallabhbhai Patel was one of the first Congress leaders to accept the partition of India as a solution to the rising Muslim separatist movement led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. He had been outraged by Jinnah's direct action plan campaign, which had provoked communal violence across India, but he was aware that Jinnah did enjoy popular support amongst Muslims, and that an open conflict between him and the nationalists could degenerate into a Hindu-Muslim civil war of disastrous consequences.

Communal violence in Bengal and Punjab in January and March 1947 further convinced Patel of the soundness of partition. When Lord Louis Mountbatten formally proposed the plan of partition on June 3, 1947, Patel gave his approval and lobbied Nehru and other Congress leaders to accept the proposal. Knowing Gandhi's deep anguish regarding proposals of partition, Patel engaged him in frank discussion in private meetings over what he saw as the practical unworkability of any Congress–League coalition, the rising violence, and the threat of civil war. At the All India Congress Committee meeting called to vote on the proposal, Patel said:

“I fully appreciate the fears of our brothers. Nobody likes the division of India and my heart is heavy. But the choice is between one division and many divisions. We must face facts. We cannot give way to emotionalism and sentimentality. The Working Committee has not acted out of fear. But I am afraid of one thing, that all our toil and hard work of these many years might go waste or prove unfruitful. My nine months in office has completely disillusioned me regarding the supposed merits of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Except for a few honourable exceptions, Muslim officials from the top down to the chaprasis are working for the League. The communal veto given to the League in the Mission Plan would have blocked India's progress at every stage. Whether we like it or not, de facto Pakistan already exists in the Punjab and Bengal. Under the circumstances, I would prefer a de jure Pakistan, which may make the League more responsible. Freedom is coming. We have 75 to 80 percent of India, which we can make strong with our own genius. The League can develop the rest of the country”.

Having accepted partition as a fate accomplice Sardar Patel publicly warned officials against partiality and neglect. It was very difficult for Patel to see his country burning and his countrymen fighting with each other on religious grounds. When reports reached Patel that large groups of Sikhs were preparing to attack Muslim convoys heading for Pakistan, Patel hurried to Amritsar and met Sikh and Hindu leaders. He assured the community leaders that if they worked to establish peace and order and guarantee the safety of Muslims, the Indian government would react forcefully to any failures of Pakistan to do the same. Additionally, Patel addressed a massive crowd of approximately 200,000 refugees who had surrounded his car after the meetings:

“Here, in this same city, the blood of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims mingled in the Jallianwala Bagh. I am grieved to think that things have come to such a pass that no Muslim can go about in Amritsar and no Hindu or Sikh can even think of living in Lahore. The butchery of innocent and defenceless men, women and children does not behove brave men ... I am quite certain that India’s interest lies in getting all her men and women across the border and sending out all Muslims from East Punjab. I have come to you with a specific appeal. Pledge the safety of Muslim refugees crossing the city. Any obstacles or hindrances will only worsen the plight of our refugees who are already performing prodigious feats of endurance. If we have to fight, we must fight clean. Such a fight must await an appropriate time and conditions and you must be watchful in choosing your ground. To fight against the refugees is no fight at all. No laws of humanity or war among honourable men permit the murder of people who have sought shelter and protection. Let there be truce for three months in which both sides can exchange their refugees. This sort of truce is permitted even by laws of war. Let us take the initiative in breaking this vicious circle of attacks and counter-attacks. Hold your hands for a week and see what happens. Make way for the refugees with your own force of volunteers and let them deliver the refugees safely at our frontier”.

Following his dialogue with community leaders and his speech, no further attacks occurred against Muslim refugees, and a wider peace and order was soon re-established over the entire area. In one meeting in Ahmedabad, Patel expressed his anxiety over the fate of the newly formed nation, “A snake grows a new skin to take place of the worn-out one it sheds.” Sardar further added, “We may become politically sovereign, but internally we lack the attributes of a free people, such as equality, cohesion and national character.” He asked, “Has India organised a new state and society to replace the old order which she wants to discard?”

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel knew that it was a rhetorical question and the job of organising the new state that would be replacing the old order was resting squarely on his shoulders.

X

Winning the war

Notwithstanding the torrential monsoon rains and turbulent skies Sardar was flying across India in the months of June, July and August of 1947 in a Mysore Dakota VT-AXX, a second world war ‘work horse of the air’, owned by the Maharaja of Mysore. He was in charge of the integration of the princely states of India with the yet-to-be-formed republic. It was a complex and unenviable job as the princes were smelling an opportunity of being sovereign again.

There is no doubt that Sardar Patel was the correct man assigned the mammoth job. He was the man who had put his brother’s ambition before his own. He was the man who fought for his classmates’ rights. He was the man who worked tirelessly for the freedom of his country and upliftment of his fellow countrymen giving up the prospects of amassing a great material fortune. He was the hero of the moment. It was his moment of reckoning. Destiny and his karma had given him a unique opportunity to literally draw the map of India through his negotiation powers.

Patel used social meetings and unofficial surroundings to engage most of the monarchs, inviting them to lunch and tea at his home in Delhi. At these meetings, Patel explained that there was no inherent conflict between the Congress and the princely order. From invoking the patriotism of the princes to reminding them of the possibility of anarchy on event of their refusal to join, he kept trying to convince them to join India. He also introduced the concept of “privy purses” — a payment to be made to royal families for their agreement to merge with India.

Patel’s tireless efforts paid off when most of the rulers agreed to the dissolution of their respective states, surrendering control of thousands of villages, *jagirs*, palaces, and institutes, cash balances amounting to crores and a railway system of about 12,000 miles to the Indian government without receiving any compensation, writes historian Ramachandra Guha in his work, “*India after Gandhi*.”

By 15 August 1947, the process of integration of princely states was almost complete except for a few, who held out. Some simply delayed signing the Instrument of Accession — like Piploda, a small state in central India that did not accede to India until March 1948. The biggest problem, however, arose with Jodhpur, which tried to negotiate better deals with Pakistan. With Junagadh, which actually did accede to Pakistan and with Hyderabad and Kashmir, both of which declared their intent to remain independent. Everyone knows the tales of how Sardar Patel united Hyderabad, Junagarh and Kashmir with India but his dealing with Jodhpur is relatively unheard and equally unique.

In June 1947, with the transfer of power looming on the horizon, Maharaja Hanwant Singh ascended the throne of Jodhpur and began faltering in the commitment his predecessor Maharaja Umaid Singh had made with Sardar Patel about joining India. Young and inexperienced, he reckoned that he may get a better “deal” from Pakistan since his state was contiguous with the country.

So Hanwant Singh entered into negotiations with Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who is reported to have given the Maharaja a signed blank sheet of paper to list all his demands. From free access to the Karachi port to arms manufacturing and importing, the princely state of Jodhpur was allowed to accede to Pakistan on any terms it chose.

Fearing that Jodhpur will join Pakistan Sardar Patel flew down to Jodhpur in his Dakota and met Maharaja Hanwant Singh and assured him that he would be allowed to import arms, that Jodhpur would be connected by Rail and that it will be India that would supply grain to the Jodhpur state in the times of famine.

After the carrots, came the stick in the form of more important warnings — it was pointed out that the accession of a predominantly Hindu state to Pakistan would violate the basic tenet of the two-nation theory and was very likely to cause communal violence in the State. Thus, Jinnah’s blank cheque was quickly negated and Jodhpur acceded to India.

Sardar Patel had flown 100,000 miles in the tiny Dakota by the time he managed to persuade the princes of 565 states of the impossibility of independence from the Indian republic. After getting all of them to fall in line he had the grace to say that the Princes of India had shown rare patriotism and that it was this commendable spirit that made the achievement of liberty possible.

Governed by the goodness of his heart, an irrepressible spirit and unwavering moral commitment our hero Vallabhbhai had achieved what no one could even fathom. He had scaled the walls of his humble origins and faced every difficulty in the face, coming out a winner. He used the moral and physical challenge that came in his path as a ladder to rise higher time and again. His contribution to national integration in the newly independent country and the way he achieved it earned him the befitting sobriquet “**Iron Man of India**”.