

SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL: THE TALLEST MAN

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In the state of Gujarat hitherto unknown, a place called Nadiyar has now become a place for tourists coming wide-eyed to see the statue. One of the tallest in the world—Sardar Patel, who was not only universally regarded but also a stalwart in freedom movement. The statue is visible to miles and if anyone asks as to who was, people looked at him in utter surprise. He was not only a great freedom fighter and incomparable organiser, a good speaker and a hard worker, but also a suave and persuasive man. At the same time, he was a no-nonsense hard-liner who for the sake of the country could go to any length. A great devotee of Gandhiji, Patel sometimes differed with him and had the courage to tell it on his face. But when it came to the question of personal interest unlike Subhas Bose, Pandit Nehru differed with Gandhiji. Netaji Subhas Bose even contested for the post of President of Indian National Congress against Gandhiji's nominee Pattavi Sitaramaya and won. Whereas in 1928 after his victory in Bordoli, Patel came to break the news to everyone. He earned approbation everywhere and obviously he was the choice for almost all leaders for the post of Chairman of Indian National Congress. Motilal Nehru who was sick, pleaded for his son Jawaharlal. Gandhiji asked the Sardar to recuse and like a good obedient student that the Sardar withdrew. When again in 1946 the question of choosing the Prime Minister arose, out of 12 state Congress Committees, 9 were in favour of Sardar Patel and 3 for Pt. Nehru. Yet Mahatma Gandhi opted for Pt. Nehru and asked Sardar Patel to withdraw. The reason for this decision by Gandhiji is yet to be known. Had Patel been the Prime Minister of India, many historians guess that, maybe Tibet would not have been lost and Kashmir not vivisected. Anyway conjectures are propositions but what really happened is placed before historians for scrutiny.

Sardar Patel was born in a Patidar family, belonged to a middle class but he and his elder brother, Vithalbai Patel studied well and passed matriculation. Vithal became a lawyer, Sardar Patel followed him. Because of his high qualification, he was offered a seat in Middle Temple in London but he handed over the letter to his elder brother who in his place got educated and returned as

a Barrister. He was followed by Sardar Patel who secured first division in the examination and got the degree 6 months prior to the scheduled time. With flying colours, he returned to India and was offered a professor post in a law college by the Chief Justice of Bombay High Court. Sardar Patel politely refused and came to Ahmedabad for Legal practice. Soon he became a famous barrister and had a roaring practice. He was so dedicated to his job that while arguing a case before a judge, a telegram was delivered informing him about the death of his wife. He read it and kept it in his pocket, was startled for a moment but composed himself and went on arguing and won the case. An inquisitive judge asked him about the telegram and the answer of Barrister Patel puzzled him. He said- "It was about the death of my wife. Had I stopped arguing I would have gone and seen her before the cremation but my client, a poor man accused of heinous charges would have gone to jail. And his children would have gone to street for begging. By stopping the argument I could not have gotten my wife back to life. However, I will bring my client to freedom". The judge was amazed. Sardar Patel's client was acquitted. Thus Sardar Patel earned thereputation as the Iron man with a tender heart, a man of determination and a disciplinarian.

The famous club in Ahmedabad had Patel as its member. It was once visited by Gandhiji who by then had become famous after his achievement in South Africa. Gandhiji amazed everyone because being an Indian Citizen, he went to another country and taught the theory of non-violence and partially won the battle. When he visited the club, Sardar Patel and Mavlankar (who subsequently became the Speaker of Parliament) and 2 others were playing cards in the corner. Mavlankar went to see Gandhiji from close quarters but Patel refused saying Gandhiji's theories are nonsense. But after Gandhiji's non-violence agitation against European Blue Indigo farmers, he earned name and fame everywhere and Sardar Patel became his devotee.

Gandhiji non-violence non-cooperation war against the Indigo farmers brought the latter down to their knees. Immediately the news spread all over the world and Sardar Patel who the other day expressed his disdain towards Gandhiji and became his devoted follower. He toured most of the places of India and spread the news about Gandhiji. In Gujarat, he spread the message of non-violence and non-cooperation. In 1921 he sent messages everywhere to wear Khadi instead of the imported machine-made clothes. Gandhiji was pleased. He found a brilliant go-getter in Sardar Patel. Sardar Patel became the Chairman of Ahmedabad Municipality and immediately became famous as a top relentless Chairman who brought about considerable changes in Ahmedabad. When in 1917 plague became pandemic the Sardar risking his life went about and ensured treatment of patients and a hygienic atmosphere. He came to loggerheads with the British administration which had expected the Municipality Chairman to kowtow before the British senior officers. His administrative ability was acknowledged by everyone.

The district of Bordoli was a dry area and was inhabited by poor farmers. Once there was famine but the government was adamant about collecting taxes. Sardar vehemently opposed, representing before the Collector, Commissioner and Governor but nobody paid heed to his request. Inspired by Champaran agitation by Gandhiji, he asked the villagers not to pay tax. The British government responded by confiscating the properties of the farmers and tried to auction it. Sardar requested the people not to join the auction, hence the government brought some Pathans and rich men from Bombay who bought the property at a throw-away price. But transport was not available. The properties were lying on the roads. The Government failed to find any way to meet the non-violent and non-cooperation agitation and waived the tax. Sardar Patel became taller in stature and was conferred the title of Sardar. Thereafter he was called Sardar Patel. If Champaran was the beginning of *Satyagraha* at a big scale, Bordoli was the second one. Nobody in Congress had achieved such results. Sardar Patel impressed others so much that Rajagopalachari (CR) invited him to Madras to stage another Bordoli and the Sardar obliged.

The Sardar wore simple clothes of *dhoti* and *kurta*. After becoming the disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, the Sardar gave up western clothes and habits. Wearing *chappals*, he visited village to village, speaking with poor people and became another Gandhiji. In the meanwhile, Pandit Nehru entered the political arena. He had studied in London's Harrow School, then Cambridge and did Bar-at-Law in London and returned to India. He was a full Sahib but after joining Congress, he changed his dress to *Achkan* and long coat. He was half Indian and half British in his style. But Sardar Patel was like a typical village man who not only was a learned person but also a hardworking political leader. He could work tirelessly for 18-20 hours per day. With his Bordoli fame, he could have easily become the President of the Congress party. But Gandhiji's choice was otherwise, he wanted Nehru and persuaded Sardar Patel not to contest. Sardar Patel's obedience to Gandhiji's order raised his image immensely. Pandit Nehru who was 14 years junior to him in age could not compete with him in mobilising people. His plus points were handsome looks, erudition and oratory skills. He was a crowd-puller whereas, Sardar was a crowd mobiliser. Pandit Nehru's mesmerizing speeches were unbeatable. Whereas Sardar Patel's ability to organise meetings, mobilise people and convince them about the purpose of the meeting was unparalleled. Both were great in their own ways with fortune tilting towards Nehru because of Mahatma Gandhi's love and affection for him. Nehru was like a son to him whereas Patel was like a younger brother. Gandhiji was more favourable to Nehru and because of that Pandit Nehru became the Prime Minister. Sardar Patel did not object to this and supported Nehru and worked as his junior colleague though he was politically more mature and more advanced than Nehru. If anyone has made the maximum sacrifice in Congress Party, it was Sardar Patel.

Sardar Patel was a stern leader but with a soft heart. He was devoted to the task of unifying India. India was divided by the British- one ruled directly by them and the other ruled by Rajas and Maharajas. Rajas and Maharajas used to pay some amount as a tribute to the British Government as a token of accepting their sovereignty and ruled the people with a heavy hand. They were not answerable to anyone, they and their relations were above law.

If Champaran was a challenge for Mahatma Gandhi, Dandi was a bigger one. Poor people needed salt and they got it from the sea. Government imposed tax and went on raising it so that their revenue would increase at the cost of poor people. Having received complaints about the imposition of tax on salt Gandhiji decided to stop it. He wrote letters to higher authorities and got a lukewarm response. At last, he wrote to Lord Irwin who was the Governor-General of India. He received no answer. Left with no choice and the Mahatma decided to march to Dandi, a coastal village in Gujarat. He started from Ahmedabad with a few followers on a do-or-die mission. Sardar Patel went to the rural areas, inspired people to join the march and show the world what we are capable of. Soon he was arrested by the British Government but by that time he had hit the bull. As Gandhiji started proceeding people joined and by the time he reached Dandi the number had exceeded 1 lakh. The government of India was clueless about tackling the situation. The whole world looked at the situation with amazement. Press correspondents from Europe, the USA and other countries rushed to India to watch the operation of Satyagraha conducted by the Mahatma. While advancing, all Satyagrahis were given food and water by the villagers. Sardar Patel kept a watch on the situation from the confines of the jail. Gandhiji collected a fistful of salt and sent the message to whole of the country that Satyagraha has again succeeded as was in in Champaran and Bordoli.

News spread everywhere and Lord Irwin invited Gandhiji for negotiation. The Mahatma in his usual dress went and his hater Churchill roared in British Parliament. "I was nauseated to learn Mr. Gandhi, an Inner Temple Lawyer now a naked fakir striding the steps of the Vice Regal Palace to negotiate on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor". In fact, it was a great achievement because an ordinary citizen signed a pact with representative of Kin-Emperor. This happened in 1215 when King John of England had to come and sign an agreement with the demonstrators. Gandhi's Yatra became as famous as John Magna Carta. The credit goes to Mahatma Gandhi but a substantial part of it goes to Sardar Patel. His organising capacity was widely acclaimed.

The Sardar presided over the Congress Committee meeting in 1931 when Fundamental Rights of Indian Citizens were discussed. In 1948 in the UNO resolution on human rights were written in our Constituent Assembly where the Sardar eloquently mentioned each provision and its implication. He was the

Chairman of the Committee for Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. When the Constituent Assembly sat, all bright stars of Indian political scene were there and the discussion went on for nearly 4 years but there was no dissension. In various committees there used to be dissension and voting. If there was difference the Sardar was solving the problem. All provisions of the proposed Constitution were discussed. The Sardar could always smell the quarters that may continue to dissent. He immediately acted, persuaded them and didn't allow the dissension to go far. There were many important issues such as language, ethnicity, reservation of seats etc. Usually, reticent Sardar intervened before the discussion turned sour. If Pandit Nehru was known as a brilliant and erudite speaker the Sardar was famous for his down-to-earth solutions.

Sardar Patel had the unique quality of anticipating danger and had incomparable ability to take precautionary measures. He was not agreeable with the decision of the foreign ministry working under Pt. Nehru, of taking the Kashmir issue to United Nations. He protested but by that time the issue had slipped through his fingers.

As a result, Kashmir remained like an ulcer in the stomach of new India. Sardar Patel annexed 564 princely states to India. Without it, the country would have been balkanised and India would have remained a weak nation. Only 1 princely state was handled by Pt. Nehru and consequences are still visible. When China annexed Tibet, Sardar Patel wrote to Pt. Nehru to be careful of China. Again his advice was brushed aside and India suffered defeat in 1962 War. Pt. Nehru was shattered and passed away soon.

Coming to the question of merger of Princely States one has to know the dimensions of a problem. States were merged with East India Company one after another by signing treaties. They paid a little amount to the company and remained safe. They ruled the state with Iron hands, tortured people without any retribution. When independence was imminent the problem of the princely states was given importance. The British government offered them 3 options- merge with Pakistan, merge with India or remain independent. Remaining independent was not practical in respect of some states. For example, a state like Mysore could not be an independent country because of geographical disadvantages. But some states like Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Travancore, Cochin, Kashmir could become independent country as they had access to Pakistan or to the sea.

The lead was taken by Maharaja of Jodhpur. The young Maharaja was vacillating and procrastinating. He was a hot-headed young man who even took out his revolver from his pocket and aimed at VP Menon, who was then secretary of State. Like his boss Sardar Patel, Menon was bold, could take risks and when needed was very persuasive. He asked the Prince not to be childish. The leader of Muslim league Jinnah invited the Prince of Jodhpur along with

the Maharaja of Jaisalmer and requested them to join Pakistan. They had a common border hence geopolitically there would not have had much problem except that majority of the subjects- Hindus. Jinnah cajoled them enough and even gave them a signed blank paper to write down their terms and conditions of joining Pakistan. By that time, the young Maharaja of Jodhpur had the benefit of advice of VP Menon and Governor-General Mountbatten. The Maharaja of Jaisalmer was about to fall into a trap but the king of Jodhpur prevented him and the deal was off. This was the beginning of the end of having several kingdoms in India. One after another, the Maharajas joined India thanks to Sardar Patel advice and mild admonition when necessary.

But 3 states remained adamant- Junagarh, Hyderabad and Kashmir. Hyderabad was a huge princely state. The Nawab was the richest man of India and he had appointed a British legal luminary as his advisor. Laik Ali was his Diwan who was a diehard Muslim and a disciple of Jinnah. He was also a demagogue and even declared that Hindus can be finished very easily, if all Muslims unite. He was notorious for his rude behaviour and interruptions in discussions. The Nawab avoided interview with any Indian leader including Pt. Nehru. At the behest of Sardar Patel, Lord Mountbatten tried to persuade him but to no avail. The Nawab formed a group of so-called soldiers called Razkar's who oppressed Hindus, compelling them to run away to neighbouring states. He invited Muslims from Bombay Presidency and Nagpur to rush to Hyderabad and occupy houses vacated by Hindus. Hyderabad had signed a treaty with Congress Government to maintain standstill position but his policy was such that the Government saw imminent danger to the integrity of the country. It was decided to take Police action against Hyderabad. Under a Major General army entered the state, killed many Razkars and restored the property of the Hindus. The Nawab found it impossible to sustain, he declared Razkars as illegal and signed the agreement of annexation.

Pakistan was furious learning that this happened 2 days after the death of Jinnah. Jinnah had declared that if the Indian soldiers enter Hyderabad then 10 crore Muslims shall unite and smash the Hindu population. The Diwan of Hyderabad Laik Ali, a cantakerous and demagogue had echoed what Jinnah had said. But now Laik Ali was nowhere and Hyderabad became a cakewalk for Indian soldiers. Sardar Patel went to Hyderabad and keeping aside his arrogance the Nawab went to the airport to receive him. Though a hardliner Sardar Patel demonstrated his tender heart and treated the Nawab with utmost courtesy. He received approbation from many Rajas, Maharajas and Nawabs. A well-known Pakistani leader even congratulated the Sardar. Enthused by this, he cast his eyes on Junagarh. Junagarh had 80% Hindu population, but the ruler was a Muslim who had kept 2000 pedigree dogs. He even got 1 dog married to a bitch and spent more than 1 lac rupees (then a huge sum). And adamantly informed Govt. of India that he wished to join Pakistan. From geopolitical

point of view this was against his interest, for Junagarh's only port Veraval was about 300 nautical miles off Karachi. People of Junagarh were opposed to the idea of merger with Pakistan and a Peoples Government led by Sardar Patel's nephew was formed in Bombay. The Peoples Government demanded merger with India. The Nawabs had gone to Europe to play polo and his Diwan Bhutto (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's father) was running the administration. He could see the disaster approaching and advised the Nawab to return immediately. The Nawab with his dogs and a couple of queens left for Karachi and thereafter did not return to India. He knew that the Government will not assault the ladies. True to his anticipation Sardar Patel sent an aeroplane that carried the assets of the nawab to Karachi. His large-heartedness earned him fame. The soldiers of India when entered Hyderabad had not touched a single property of the Nizam and the same generosity was extended to the Nawab of Junagarh.

Before coming to India, Mountbatten had been properly briefed about Sardar Patel. When the two met, Sardar Patel asked for a basket full of apples. When Mountbatten asked that few apples cannot be given to you, will you accept? A smiling Sardar said, "Yes" and Mountbatten rendered full support to the Sardar in merging the princely states. Thus, by hard work, persuasion and promise Sardar could annex 564 princely states. Pt. Nehru wanted to handle the case of Kashmir. He was a Kashmiri himself and he thought that Kashmir problem could become an international issue. Kashmir had a majority Muslim population and the King (Maharaja Hari Singh) was Hindu. He was lackadaisical and fond of luxury. Before coming to India Lord Mountbatten used to play polo with Hari Singh in London. But having come to India as Governor-General he trusted Pt. Nehru and Sardar Patel more than Maharaja Hari Singh. An indecisive Hari Singh was wavering between merger and independence. He signed a stand-still agreement with Pakistan. He was of firm belief that India will not attack Kashmir. But Pakistan attacked. And Sardar Patel came forward to help Pt. Nehru in solving the issue. They sent VP Menon to the Maharaja who persuaded him to sign the Instrument of Accession and army was immediately sent. By that time Pakistan army had come very close to Srinagar airport. The Indian Army got into action immediately and pushed back the invaders. The battle went on with Indians advancing and Pakistan retreating. In another 2-3 days the whole area occupied by Pakistan would have been recovered. Without the Sardar being consulted India asked for ceasefire and referred the matter to Security Council with the hope of getting remedial measures by the Security Council. Pt. Nehru's calculation was wrong, Adlai Stevenson of the US and Noel Baker of the UK supported Pakistan. They knew that India of Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Nehru and Sardar Patel will not be a vassal state, Pakistan will be. Hence it was better to earn the gratitude of Pakistan. Sardar Patel vehemently protested but his advice was not heeded. Kashmir was vivisected. The Paradise was lost and is yet to be regained.

Appreciating the move by Sardar Patel on the eve of his departure Lord Mountbatten wrote a letter giving full credit to the Sardar. Without his efforts 2/5 of the area and 1/3 of the population of India would have been lost, He brought about the unification of India as Bismarck did for Germany and Cavour for Italy. But they had to shed a lot of blood whereas the Sardar barring Hyderabad did not have to resort to violence. This quality of his remained unparalleled in World History but the respect he deserved was not given to him in full.

His contribution to the formation and development of Civil Services was immense. After independence, there was an outcry against the Indian Civil Service and the Imperial Police Service. But Sardar Patel held different views. Instead of ridiculing ICS as neither Indian nor Civil nor a Service, he explained their necessity. He thought of creating parallel services such as IAS and IPS and saw to it that they were mentioned in the constitution. So the IAS and IPS are constitutional posts. Sardar Patel selected right person for the right job and once he selected he allowed them freedom. In fact he told the secretaries "If I err, do not follow me blindly. I will welcome you to correct me". This enhanced his stature before the civil servants. He provided them enough protection for doing the right and not dancing to the tune of their bosses particularly political masters. In 1948 when Delhi was burning because of communal factors, the Government was in need of volunteers.

Lo and behold, more than 800 volunteers and policemen and nearly 20 volunteers and magistrates were selected by the Chief Commissioner at the behest of the Congress Party. This got the approval of the Prime Minister but as Home Minister and Dy. Prime Minister, Sardar Patel put his foot down and wrote to Pt. Nehru that this will augur the politicisation of Civil Service. He could prevail on Pt. Nehru and persons not committed to any party were selected. Politicisation of Civil Services has become a call of the day now but had Sardar Patel survived for another 10 years maybe our country would have been a country of different Civil Service and different kinds of politicians. He had written a letter to the Home Minister of a state who had turned down a transfer and posting proposal without giving any reason. In a very persuasive tone, he wrote not to demoralise the Inspector General of Police whose proposal had been turned down by the Home Minister. IG's recommendations prevailed.

The Sardar spoke less and spent his time working. He could anticipate problems unlike others and was ready with the solution. Not a single decision of his can be faulted. He was not a brilliant speaker like Pt. Nehru, he was not a crowd puller like him but he could feel the pulse of the people. He knew the problems faced by lower and middle class and came up with solutions.

This year on 31st October, we celebrate 146 years of his birth. Years shall pass by, he remains embedded in our memories. He richly deserves it. Lord Mountbatten before leaving India went to Dehradun and met him. He told

him “History will record that you have done the right thing for India” Another sentence by him was “The task of dealing with the Princes was formidable. But I am convinced that Sardar was the ONLY MAN who could have coped with it”. Others also maintain that it was India’s bad luck that the case of Jammu and Kashmir was differently treated and Sardar didn’t have the benefit of official say with regards to it. Otherwise, perhaps the question would not have survived and would not have been troubling us for the past 70 years. That is why many agree and will say that – when the country is facing the challenge of disintegration- we are remembering Sardar Patel, The Iron Man who gave us a consolidated Motherland. We remember Sardar Patel-the tallest man with great pride and accomplishment.