

SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL: A CAESER OF INDIAN POLITICS

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While writing the story of his time, Athenian historian Thucydides (460-400 BC) said that men and events should not be judged earlier than 100 years after their happening in order to give a right perspective to the story. Sardar Patel does not meet that historical deadline and may be for this reason his role in the making of modern India is not fairly judged. It may not be right to ask what would have happened to the US without Washington, to Turkey without Ataturk, to Germany without Bismarck and to Italy without Garibaldi. But we owe it to history to answer what would have happened to India without Sardar Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel (October 31, 1875 to December 15, 1950), a man with stern, rough hewn face, the dhoti clad Gujarati lawyer whose education and training at bar in London did not change the Indianness which was in his blood.

But for Patel, India would never have been united. The creation of Pakistan was the beginning of the division of Indian Territory, but further splitting was firmly checked by Patel, who persuaded and forced the Indian princes to merge with the Indian Union. Those who resisted had to face the consequences, as for example, the police action in Hyderabad.

The accession of the princely states to the Indian Union was a dramatic affair. For, some rulers, appending their signature to the Instrument of Accession was a cruel tragedy. One Raja of Central India collapsed and died of a heart attack seconds after signing. The Raja of Dholpur told Mountbatten with tears in his eyes: "This breaks an alliance between my ancestors and your King's ancestors which has existed since 1765". The Gaekwar of Baroda, collapsed weeping like a child. One ruler of a tiny state hesitated for days before appending his signature because he still believed in the divine right of kings. The eight maharajas of the Punjab signed their instrument together during a formal ceremony in the state banquet hall at Patiala where Sir Bhupinder Singh "the Magnificent" had once lavished the most lavish hospitality in India on his guests. This time, one participant recalled, "the atmosphere was so tragic we might have been at a cremation".

A handful of rulers resisted. The Nawab of Bhopal, claimed the rulers were being invited like slaves, to attend the tea party. Udaipur tried to form a federation with a number of fellow princes whose states adjoined his. So, too, did Gwalior, the son of the man with a mania for electric trains. The Maharaja of Travancore a southern state with a seaport and rich uranium reserves, clamoured for independence. The pressures to herd these last reluctant resisters into Patel's basket became intense as 15th August drew near. Demonstrations and street agitations were being organised to force their hands. The Maharaja of Orissa was trapped in his palace by a mob which refused to let him leave until he had signed. Travancore's forceful Prime Minister was stabbed in the face by a Congress demonstrator. Shaken, the Maharaja cabled Delhi his accession.

None of the accessions was quite as tempestuous as that of the young Maharaja of Jodhpur. Jodhpur had just ascended his throne on his father's death. He was given to a number of expensive hobbies like flying, women and conjuring tricks; none of them, he realised, likely to stir the sympathy of Congress's Socialists. Together with his colleague, the Maharaja of Jaisalmer, he arranged a secret meeting in Delhi with Jinnah to enquire of the Muslim leader what sort of reception they might expect if they took their primarily Hindu states into his dominion. The Nizam of Hyderabad strove in vain to force Great Britain to recognise his state as an independent dominion. From his palace the miserly ruler had not ceased to complain at being "abandoned by his oldest ally", and seeing "the bonds of long devotion" linking him to the King Emperor broken. The Nawab of Junagadh had decided either to proclaim independence or join Pakistan, despite the fact that his tiny Hindu state would share no borders with the Muslim nation. However, Patel overpowered all of them to fall in line which they did.

Many Bosnias

India had many 'Bosnias' which could split apart. India has 18 major languages and thousands of sub-groups of different cultural practices and faiths which divided the people. If Patel had lived longer, there perhaps would have been no Kashmir problem, nor disturbances of big magnitude in the North East. Patel lived in the age of Garibaldi (1807-82) who united Italy; Bismarck (1815-98) who United Germany and Atatürk (1881-1938) who reformed Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman empire after World War I. Patel is not only in that league of world leaders, but, greater than each of them in many ways.

Reared in a traditional atmosphere, he attended primary school at Karamasad and high school at Petlad, but was mainly self-taught. In contrast to many of his fellow-students, Patel had strong constitution and enjoyed athletics as was manifest in his self-confident and stubborn leadership. He was married at 16. He had a son and a daughter. He matriculated at 22, and

passed the district pleader's examination which enabled him to practice law. In 1900, he set up an independent office as district pleader in Godhra, and two years later he moved to Borsad in Kheda District. He was informed about the death of his wife in 1908, while he was in a Bombay court-room summing up his case for the jury. He glanced at the telegram, thrust it into his pocket, and continued his argument. That incident forms part of the legend of Vallabhbhai Patel and was a measure of the man. If at times emotion played a part in his life he did not allow it to overpower him. He was practical, decisive, and ruthless when required to be so and the British recognised him as such. He did not believe in theatrics.

Patel went to London in August 1910 to study at the Middle Temple, where he passed the final examinations with honours. Returning to India in February 1913, he settled in Ahmedabad and became a leading barrister in criminal law. In 1917, he found the course of his life changed after having been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. Patel adhered to Gandhi's *Satyagraha* in so far as it furthered the Indian struggle against the British. But, he did not identify himself with Gandhi's moral convictions and ideals, and he regarded Gandhi's emphasis on their universal application as irrelevant to India's immediate, political, economic, and social problems. Nevertheless having resolved to follow Gandhi, Patel changed his life-style and appearance. He quit the Gujarat Club, dressed in the white cloth of the Indian peasant, and continue to live like a peasant. Between 1917 and 1924, Patel served as the first Indian Municipal Commissioner of Ahmedabad and stayed municipal president from 1924 to 1928.

Bardoli made him Sardar

He made his first political mark in 1918, when he planned a mass campaign of peasants, farmers, and landowners of Kaira District of Gujarat against the decision of the Bombay government to collect the full revenue taxes despite crop failures caused by heavy rain. In 1928, Patel led the landowners of Bardoli in their resistance against increased taxes. Patel offered Gandhiji his services. In 1922, Gandhiji was anxious to see what civil disobedience might achieve and asked Patel to organise an experimental campaign among 87,000 people in 137 villages in the region of Bardoli, north of Bombay. His organisation was so comprehensive and so complete, that the campaign succeeded beyond even Gandhi's hopes. From that moment on, Patel shared with Nehru the place just below Gandhi's in the independence movement. Employing his special genius he had assembled the Congress Party's machine, spreading it into the remotest corners of India. With his khadi *dhoti* whirled about his shoulders like a toga, his glowing bald head, his scowling demeanour, the man looked to the Viceroy more like a Roman Senator than an Indian politician. Vallabhbhai Patel, was the top Congress politician who ran the machinery of the party with a firm and ruthless hand.

“Why, this man is trying to bully me”! Louis Mountbatten said once while talking about him. Mountbatten’s arrogance came to a sudden halt when he saw the rock like figure planted opposite him. Patel was a hard bargainer and never gave in to Mountbatten’s charm which Nehru found hard to resist. No wonder tension with Nehru, was so real, that at times Mountbatten could notice that.

His daughter, Maniben, who had been his constant companion since his wife’s death, rarely exchanged ten sentences with him a day. When Patel did talk, however, people listened. He was the only Indian leader who sprang from the soil. His father had been a peasant farmer in Gujarat province near Bombay and Patel still lived his life like a peasant. He rose faithfully at 4 a.m. and was in bed at 9.30 pm. He did the bulk of his reading, thirty newspapers were sent to him daily, in the morning.

Sources of his Nationalism

Patel’s nationalism had come from his father who had fought the British in the 1857 Mutiny. He would spend the winter nights of his boyhood in the peasant’s hut, listening to his father’s tales. Soon after, he left the land for good to work in the great textile mills of Ahmedabad where Gandhiji was to found his first Indian Ashram. He studied at night, saved almost every rupee he earned until, at 33, he was able to go to London to study law. He never saw the London of the Mayfair drawing-rooms where Nehru had been an admired guest. The London he knew best was the library of the Inns of Court. He walked twice a day the ten miles separating the courts from his lodging to save the bus fare. The day he was called to the bar, he booked a passage for home. Once he returned, he never left India again.

Patel had always been wary of Nehru—their ideas of what independent India should be were markedly different. Patel had no use for Nehru’s Utopian dream of building a new society. He dismissed his visions of a brave new Socialist world as ‘this parrot cry of Socialism.’ Capitalist society worked, he maintained; the problem was to Indianise it, to make it work better, not jettison it for an impracticable ideal. Patel came from an industrial town, a centre for machines, factories and textiles. Nehru came from a place where they grew flowers and fruits - Kashmir.

He also scorned Nehru’s fascination with foreign affairs. As a Home Minister, he reformed India’s IAS, IPS and IFS, security, and information services making them loyal to India and not Britain. Nehru might wear Gandhi’s mantle but he walked with an uneasy tread, because he knew that the legions behind him had their loyalty to Caesar, Sardar Patel. However, the world focus was on Gandhi and Nehru. It was an error. Patel, one of his aides said, “was India’s last Moghul”, India’s Caesar without empire.

No Revolutionary

Patel was no revolutionary. In debates over the objectives of the Indian National Congress during 1928 and 1931, Patel believed (like Gandhi and Motilal Nehru, but unlike Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose) that the goal of the Indian National Congress should be dominion status within the British Commonwealth, not full independence. In contrast to Nehru, who condoned violence in the struggle for independence, Patel did not favour armed revolution, not on moral but on practical grounds. He held that it would be abortive and would entail severe repression. Patel, like Nehru, saw advantages in the participation of a free India in a British Commonwealth, provided that India was admitted as an equal member. He emphasised the need to foster Indian self-reliance and self-confidence, but, unlike Gandhi, he did not regard Hindu-Muslim unity as a pre-requisite for independence.

Patel was the second candidate after Gandhi to the presidency of the 1929 Lahore session of the Indian National Congress. Gandhiji shunned the presidency in an attempt to prevent the adoption of the resolution of independence and exerted pressure on Patel to withdraw. Jawaharlal Nehru was elected. During the 1930, Salt Satyagraha, Patel served three months imprisonment. In March 1931 Patel presided over the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress. He was imprisoned in January 1932. Having released in July 1934, he marshalled the organisation of the Congress party in the 1937 elections and was the main contender for the 1937-38 Congress Presidency. Again, because of Gandhi's pressure, Patel withdrew and Jawaharlal Nehru was elected. Along with other Congress leaders, Patel was imprisoned in October 1940, released in August 1941, and imprisoned once more from August 1942 until June 1945.

During the War, Patel rejected Gandhi's non-violence in the face of the then expected Japanese invasion of India. On the transfer of power, Patel differed with Gandhiji in realising that the partition of the subcontinent into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan was inevitable, and he asserted that it was in India's interests to part with Pakistan.

Patel was also the leading candidate for the 1945-46 presidency of the Congress, but Gandhiji intervened again for the election of Nehru who, as president of the Congress, was invited by the British Viceroy to form an interim government. Otherwise, in the normal course of events, Patel would have been the first Prime Minister of India.

During the first three years of independence, Patel was Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Information; above all his enduring fame rests on his achievement of the peaceful integration of the princely states into the Indian Union and the political unification of India.

The Sardar, despite his rough exterior, was a soft man; one could see tears in his eyes readily. Patel suffered terribly in the weeks following Gandhiji's assassination from a whispering campaign which insinuated that, as Home Minister, he shared the responsibility for the police's failure to apprehend the Mahatma's killers between January 20 and his murder 10 days later. Some of his political foes even circulated the wholly unfounded accusation that he had been indifferent to Gandhiji's fate because of his own differences with him. The strain of that campaign coming as it did, on top of the genuine grief the murder had produced in him, led to a major heart-attack. Patel recovered and resumed his work in March 1948. After Lord Mountbatten's departure, he organised and directed the 'police action' against Hyderabad which forcibly integrated the last of India's old princely states. His conflict with Nehru, temporarily shelved in the months following Gandhiji's assassination, broke out again in the beginning of 1950. Patel's death after a heart-attack on December 15, 1950, however, prevented it from the public parting of the ways between the two great leaders and founders of the Indian Republic.

He knew he would not survive this attack and called his daughter beside his sick/bed and said: "In those boxes, there are crores of rupees and jewellery given to me by Indian princes. After my death, give them to Nehru; they are people's property". The only assets that this greatest Indian leader had is now preserved in Ahmedabad as India's rich heritage—a pair of chappals, two pairs of khadi *kurtas* and *dhotis*, a writing pen and the Geeta—all packed in a dented tin-box. When Patel died, no star broke loose in the sky, but Indians were drowned in grief because they had lost their Sardar who had saved their country, their lives and future.