

SARDAR PATEL'S TRYST WITH DISASTER GOVERNANCE

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Introduction

The unprecedented floods in Ahmedabad in the last week of July, 1927 was the first acid test of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's politico-administrative skills to deal with a climate-related disaster. He was the President of Ahmedabad Municipality when one of the worst climate-related disasters in India's pre-independence history struck the city. It followed incessant rainfall in Ahmedabad for seven consecutive days, starting in the evening of July 23 and continuing till July 29, 1927. 'Meteorological records show that Ahmedabad received more rainfall during this week than the average rainfall it normally received in a year. According to the Monthly Weather Report of the Indian Meteorological Department, 1270 mm of rainfall was recorded in Ahmedabad during six days of which 737 mm were recorded in just 48 hours'.¹

The scale of devastation unleashed by heavy rainfall and the consequent floods were so huge that, at one point of time, almost the entire city had got submerged in a few feet of water. In his biography on Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, his close political aide, Narhari B. Parikh has given a graphic description of the panic and fear in Ahmedabad when the heavy downpour was accompanied by very strong winds on July 24, forcing Vallabhbhai Patel to walk-out of his home late in the night with just an umbrella to take stock of the worsening situation:

"Vallabhbhai had also begun to be anxious from that evening. He could not sleep and went out at midnight to tour around the city. It was a night and the rain was pouring to the accompaniment of thunder and heavy wind... He walked along the Gandhi road. He felt that it would be wise to take someone with him. So he called on the way to the house of Harilal Kapadia, as it happened to be the nearest. Kapadia was a merchant... Kapadia set out with Vallabhbhai on this midnight tour. Right until dawn, they moved about the city; and as Vallabhbhai felt that immediate steps would be necessary for the drainage and disposal of the rainwater, he went straight to the Municipal Engineer's house, woke him up and proceeded to the municipal office".²

Vallabhbhai Patel followed his midnight tour of the rain-affected Ahmedabad with a series of instructions to municipal officials to immediately launch rescue and relief work on a war-footing. As houses started collapsing and the heavy downpour continued on the third consecutive day, Vallabhbhai Patel and Municipal Engineer Mr. Gore started a daily assessment tour of the worst affected parts of Ahmedabad city. This alerted them to the herculean task which laid ahead. The exceptionally high intensity of rainfall and floods destroyed a large part of the civic infrastructure and completely cut off Ahmedabad from other parts of Gujarat. This had made it impossible to seek any kind of flood relief or assistance from neighboring districts, which were also struggling to cope with the calamity.

Collapse of Transport and Communication Network

The absence of disaster management institutions or emergency management machinery further complicated the situation. There was no trained disaster relief force to rescue people and shift them to safer places. Nor did any official agency exist to distribute relief materials in flood-affected parts of the city and nearby flood-affected villages. Further, the floods had made the road network, rail services, postal traffic and telegraphic services dysfunctional for several days, incapacitating the movement of both goods and people. As the municipal authorities tried to reach out to the flood-affected parts of Ahmedabad, the exact quantum of the devastation unleashed by nature's fury was almost impossible to ascertain. In an appeal issued in 'Navajivan' to Gujarati people living outside Gujarat to generously donate for flood relief, Vallabhbhai Patel painted a first-hand account of the extent of damage in Ahmedabad city:

“In Ahmedabad, the average annual rainfall is estimated at 30 inches. There was 52 inches of rainfall during the last week. In Ahmedabad alone, thousands of people have been rendered homeless and have lost their property, movable and immovable. Many a worker and poor man must have been drowned, without leaving a trace. It is almost impossible to hazard a guess as to the condition of village people, their fields and their cultivation. It is not possible to obtain a true idea of the calamity until trains start running and telegraph service is restored”.³

The scale of devastation caused by this disaster incident was so huge that it attracted the attention of both national and world's leading media organisations. ‘International media projected it as one of the worst climate-related disasters in the world. New York Times reported on July 29, 1927 that Ahmedabad had received a record twenty-nine inches of rainfall within just forty-eight hours leading to this deluge’.⁴ The leading New Zealand daily, Haware Star highlighted how trains had got stranded on rail tracts submerged in floodwaters:

“A sudden rise in the River Sabarmati caused alarm at Ahmedabad, where the suburbs were evacuated... The damage is estimated at £ 50,000... During

six days the Sabarmati river rose 50 ft"...Rail passengers, after being marooned for three days, were rescued in boats".⁵

'Apocalyptic' Floods

Large parts of Ahmedabad and nearby towns and villages remained submerged in floodwaters for several days. With bodies of dead animals floating in stagnant waters, there were fears about the spread of an epidemic. With the district administration in disarray, tens of thousands of people remained homeless for many days. 'Official records show that around 5,098 houses had collapsed in Ahmedabad city alone, causing an estimated loss of twenty-two lakh rupees. Around 40,000 people, most mill workers and their families were rendered homeless during the flood tragedy'.⁶ The government of India's Meteorological Department published the official estimates of the overall losses flood tragedy had caused in its 'India Weather Review' (1927) stating that, "The total damage by the flood (in Gujarat) amounted to about 2 crores of rupees of which half was suffered by Ahmedabad".⁷

The villages situated in low-lying areas in Ahmedabad district were the worst affected, as many had got completely submerged in the overflowing rivers. Parikh has recounted a horrifying story of death and destruction reported in a small village:

"On the bank of the river Dhadhar, in a little village of seven cottages there lived 61 Bhils. The village had a Samdi tree and two small Nim trees. On these trees, these 61 persons climbed up and remained. For four days, the people were able to continue in this manner but on the fifth day, children and old people started falling through sheer exhaustion and were dragged away by the current. In this way, 31 out of the 61 lives were lost. In a village of Dholka Taluka, 18 persons, small and big, were carried away".⁸

In fact, the villages bore the brunt of the flood tragedy. 'It is estimated that floods destroyed 75,000 houses in the State and around 4,000 villages got submerged in the deluge'.⁹ Many far-flung villages remained cut-off from Ahmedabad for several days.

Patel's Telegram to Gandhi

As the crisis worsened, Vallabhbhai Patel sent an urgent telegram to Gandhiji, who was visiting Mysore on a pre-scheduled visit, detailing the unprecedented loss of life and property in Ahmedabad:

"Most part Gujarat North of Narmada and Kathiawar devastated. People rendered homeless. Cattle and belongings washed away. Total damage in crores. Loss of life is small except in Baroda. Kheda district is worst with 100 inches of rain. Borsad is still isolated. Piteous appeals for help coming from all parts of Gujarat and Kathiawar... The immediate problem is one

of saving lives by the timely supply of foodstuffs. Local resources are inadequate. Pray issue a general appeal to all India for succour without delay".¹⁰

Gandhiji offered to immediately cut short his visit and return to Ahmedabad to assist in flood-relief work but Patel refused. As Gandhiji wrote in 'Navajivan' on August 21, 1927:

"I wired to him informing him of the insistent calls I had received and asking him to let me know if he thought my presence necessary. Vallabhbai at once wired me in reply, that though the distress of the people was beyond words, it was not advisable for me to come over to Gujarat in the present state of my health..."¹¹

Villagers as First Responders

The floods caused unimaginable destruction in villages. It destroyed crops in thousands of acres of land, causing acute financial distress among the peasants. But despite facing exceptional hardship and duress, villagers showed exceptional courage and indomitable will to survive. They selflessly helped each other across caste and religious lines and showed a remarkable humanitarian approach during this crisis. Parikh has narrated in detail how villagers emerged as first responders to help fellow flood victims across caste and religious lines:

"People forgot caste differences and Harijans were given shelter and were fed by high caste people in their homes and in public buildings...In a few places, it so happened that the Harijan houses were located in higher areas and there the position was reversed. The higher caste villagers had then to go and take shelter in the Harijan area...In many a place, Muslims were given shelter in Hindu and Jain temples...For years Gandhiji had been practicing this lesson to Gujarat and it seemed as if it had at last found acceptance!"¹²

Though Gandhiji put up a brave face and continued with his tour of Mysore during the flood crisis as advised by Vallabhbai, he was deeply disturbed and anguished by reports of heavy destruction in Ahmedabad. He expressed his helplessness and despair in 'Navajivan' on August 7, 1927:

"God alone knows whether this flood is a punishment for some sins of ours or some event which, on certain conditions being fulfilled, may give us some needed benefit. We would do well to regard it as a punishment for our sins...If, however, we wait doing nothing till we know our sins better and take no steps to relieve the people's losses which we see with our naked eyes, we would be reckoned fools".¹³

Historical records show that the water level in the Sabarmati river had risen upto seven meters by July 28, 1927¹⁴. The first big challenge was to deal

with the problem of waterlogging in many parts of Ahmedabad. The drainage system had become congested and dysfunctional, exacerbating the flood crisis. The blockages in the stormwater drain made it impossible to flush out water, leading to waterlogging in large parts of the city. Vallabhbhai Patel ordered officials to take urgent steps to decongest the drains. On his orders, a culvert was broken to allow floodwaters flow into Sabarmati river¹⁵.

As Vallabhbhai Patel grappled with the enormous challenge of fighting an unprecedented flood disaster, he showed no signs of nervousness or despair. A former British Indian Police Officer, C.W.E. U'ren, who worked as ASP of Ahmedabad when floods first hit the city, has highlighted this while recounting the details of a meeting of senior municipal officials chaired by Vallabhbhai Patel during the floods crisis:

“He kept discussions strictly to the point, having heard the various opinions expressed, made up his mind on the spot. He impressed us all by his extreme calmness and dignity at this crucial juncture. Just before we left, he said he hoped, one day, Ahmedabad would be modelled on the lines of a western city – particularly in so far as its municipal services were concerned. In other words, even in a crisis, he was able to look forward to better days for the City he was administering”.¹⁶

Challenge to Reconstruct Lives

When the rains finally stopped on July 29, 1927, the focus shifted on expediting relief and rehabilitation of flood victims. The challenge to reconstruct and rehabilitate lakhs of people was daunting. Tens of thousands of flood-affected people, who had shifted to temporary relief shelters, had to be shifted back to their homes. New livelihood opportunities had to be created, the civic infrastructure had to be restored. As the Administrator of Ahmedabad Municipality, this was perhaps the most difficult and complex administrative challenge Vallabhbhai Patel had faced in his political career. He had to grapple with a paucity of funds to launch a massive relief and rehabilitation work. On August 2, 1927, Vallabhbhai Patel organised a mass meeting and appealed to people to generously donate money for funding flood relief work. ‘It is estimated that he succeeded in collecting around Rs. 1.50-lakh rupees’.¹⁷

The absence of an institutional framework to deal with disaster management further complicated the challenges he faced. Public records show that Patel personally set up refugee centres in the worst flood-affected parts of the city, and raised a unit of volunteers to carry out rescue, relief and rehabilitation work. ‘In the absence of emergency/crisis management institutions, he had no option but to depend on an ad-hoc team of political volunteers to supply food, medicines, clothes and other relief materials to the flood victims’.¹⁸

Congress Volunteers as Flood Relief Workers

While setting up the Congress Organisation in Gujarat, Vallabhbhai Patel had focused on the importance of social work by Congress workers along with political agitation, especially during Satyagrah campaigns. In the absence of disaster management institutions and a disaster relief force, he chose to deploy Gujarat Congress workers as volunteers to lead disaster relief work. Gandhiji supported Vallabhbhai's decision to deploy Volunteers in flood-affected areas for leading flood relief work, though he issued a cautionary message to Volunteers in Navajivan on August 14, 1927:

“A large number of volunteers is required for distributing relief over a large area...it can certainly be expected of volunteers that they will have no greedy thoughts and, working wholly in a spirit of service, will win credit for themselves...The volunteers should know that even the poor are contributing, at some personal sacrifice, towards the fund which is being collected”.¹⁹

When the rains finally stopped on July 29, 1927, Vallabhbhai Patel started deploying trained and experienced volunteers in batches in the worst flood-affected areas, in both Ahmedabad and surrounding villages. ‘Within four days, the volunteers were stationed in relief centres to dispatch relief materials’²⁰. ‘Flood relief centres were set up at Anand, Nadiad and Mehmedabad’²¹. Many Congress volunteers had close linkages with villages, and they emerged as primary flood relief agents during the flood relief operations. Once they reached the worst flood-affected villages, they also started sending reports to Vallabhbhai Patel on the extent of damages caused by the floods and the nature of relief and rehabilitation work needed to rebuild and reconstruct lives. Based on these ground assessment reports, ‘Vallabhbhai Patel called a meeting of all volunteers and workers engaged in flood relief work on August 11, 1927 to chalk out a strategy to reconstruct lives and livelihood opportunities in disaster-affected areas.

Detailed flood relief and reconstruction plans were finalised for different categories of individuals and families. It was decided that those who had lost their homes and livelihood would be given free clothes, foodgrains and temporary shelter. Those who owned cultivable land were given financial assistance, including seeds at subsidised rates, till the new crop season began. Flood victims not engaged in agriculture were given employment/financial assistance instead of work-related with road repairs etc. This flood relief package was to be given for a limited period. In the worst-affected areas, the assistance was to be given for up to three months, while in less-affected areas, it was to be valid for two months. Importantly, those farmers who had lost bullocks in flood tragedy were provided loan facilities to purchase new stock’²². The Congress Committees played a signal role in implementing the resettlement plan for peasants.

Appeal for Flood Relief Fund

As flood relief work continued, Vallabhbhai Patel requested Bombay Government to urgently release emergency funds to carry forward the relief and rehabilitation work in flood-affected areas. He told the Commissioner of Northern Division when he visited Ahmedabad in the first week of August, 1927:

“You may not worry yourself about giving relief in regard to foodstuffs and other immediate necessities. It is clear, however, that the people will need a great deal of money in order to bring their land once again under cultivation and to rebuild their homes”.²³

Vallabhbhai suggested that funds worth Rs. 2.5 crore available under Famine Relief Fund should be made available for flood relief work in and around Ahmedabad. But his proposal was initially rejected by the provincial Accountant General who opined that it was meant primarily for famine relief-related work and could not be allotted for flood relief. A few weeks later, the Governor of Bombay visited the flood-affected areas of Gujarat between September 08 and September 15, 1927. He toured many worst affected villages and flood relief centres. After his official visit to survey the death and destruction caused by the floods, the British Government’s approach changed. Vallabhbhai Patel and members of the Central Flood relief Committee were invited to Poona to discuss a comprehensive flood relief package. Parikh writes that a relief package was approved by the Government on September 30, 1927 after several rounds of intense deliberations:

“It was further decided that sum of Rs.1,30,00,000/- would be made available for loans of this nature. Each loan was not to exceed Rs. 2,000/- and was to be repaid within 10 years at the most. The minimum annual instalment was to be Rs. 20/-. It was further decided to set aside a sum of ten lakhs out of which deserving poorer members of the backward classes were to be given non-repayable grants”.²⁴

At the same time, Vallabhbhai Patel continued to appeal to people to generously donate for flood relief. Gandhiji supported Vallabhbhai Patel’s call for donations. In an appeal issued on August 10, 1927, Gandhiji said:

“This appeal is in connection with the heavy floods of Gujarat the like of which have not occurred within living memory. I hope therefore that all Gujaratis, men and women, will contribute to this fund as much as they can. Vallabhbhai Patel, the President of the Ahmedabad Municipality and of the Gujarat Provincial Congress Committee”.²⁵

In the absence of any official administrative framework to coordinate flood relief work, a new make-shift architecture of doling out relief was created. This new pipeline required better coordination to avoid any overlaps. Gandhiji

called for greater coordination among relief agencies. He wrote in *Young India* on August 11, 1927:

“Not one agency can hope to overtake the whole work of relief over such a vast area. However, it will be the duty of several agencies to co-operate with one another, so as to avoid overlapping and so as to make every rupee go to the longest length and every grain of wheat find its way to the neediest hands”.²⁶

‘The efforts by Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai helped in mobilising an enormous amount of relief work. Ahmedabad Millowners’ Association too came forward and supplied bales of clothes, funds, medical aid and even constructed temporary shelters for flood victims, even though disruption in rail services had crippled the supply of coal to the Mills’.²⁷

Viceroy surveys Flood-affected Areas

‘As flood relief and reconstruction work continued, Vallabhbhai invited the Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin to visit the flood-affected areas to personally assess the damage it had caused. After Lord Irwin arrived in Ahmedabad on December 9, 1927, Vallabhbhai briefed him about the unprecedented scale of death and destruction in Gujarat. He later accompanied Lord Irwin when he toured flood-affected areas of Ahmedabad and Kheda districts on 11th and 12th December, 1927 to take stock of the situation. Vallabhbhai shared data on crop loss and severe financial distress among peasants with the Viceroy. He petitioned him to grant funds which were needed to reconstruct thousands of destroyed homes and livelihood opportunities’.²⁸ After a first-hand assessment of the flood-affected areas, Lord Irwin approved a one-crore relief package towards flood relief and reconstruction work. In the presence of Congress workers and Members of Legislature from Gujarat, Lord Irwin said in a public function in Nadiad on December 12, 1927:

“From what I have seen and heard, I am satisfied that if the volunteers of the Gujarat Provincial Committees had not arrived in the flood-affected areas in time, the loss of life instead of being negligible would have been very heavy. The credit for preventing such a calamity goes to the volunteers of the provincial Congress Committee”.²⁹

Conclusion

Lord Irwin’s appreciation marked the culmination of Vallabhbhai Patel’s efforts to seek maximum relief for lakhs of flood-affected victims in Gujarat. His efficient stewardship of the administration during one of the worst climate-related disasters earned him the goodwill of people and established him as a successful political leader. It was perhaps the first structured and organised effort in Gujarat to create a financial architecture to provide loans to flood

victims, to help them reconstruct livelihood opportunities and rebuild lives from scratch. The arduous task of resettlement of peasants through the supply of seeds at subsidised rates and grant of loans on easy terms earned him tremendous goodwill, especially in the worst-affected rural areas. The speedy mobilisation of volunteers and funds to carry out relief and rehabilitation and a fair distribution of relief across the social spectrum, in both Ahmedabad and villages, also united people in this hour of crisis.

Gandhiji's trust in Sardar Patel's administrative and fund-raising abilities grew during this period. In a public message published in "Young India" on 11th August, 1927, Gandhiji commended Vallabhbhai Patel for his stellar leadership during the flood crisis. "Sjt. Patel is a seasoned soldier and has no other occupation than that of service. He has got an efficient agency of workers under him"³⁰. Gandhiji went on to sum up the success of Vallabhbhai Patel's efforts and listed gains from his successful management of the flood crisis:

"The havoc worked by the floods was of a most unprecedented character; before which even Dyerism pales into insignificance. Dyer killed or wounded a thousand or twelve hundred men. No one can tell the heavy toll of life exacted of the immense property destroyed by the floods... We did construction work. We achieved Hindu-Muslim unity. We removed untouchability. We became self-reliant"³¹.

'Vallabhbhai Patel's efforts established him as an able administrator and leader across the political and social spectrum in Gujarat, and cemented his association with Congress workers'.³² Vallabhbhai Patel's herculean efforts also brought him nationwide recognition. The Bombay government even offered to award him for his stellar role during the calamity but Patel politely declined it. At a large level, this crisis provided Vallabhbhai Patel with an important lesson in managing political administration during a calamity. In the absence of disaster management institutions, the risk of failure was huge. But with perseverance, courage and strong will, Vallabhbhai Patel faced all odds and succeeded in his endeavor. His persuasive skills in mobilising funds from both British Government and the common people were of enormous help in arranging much-needed funds to carry forward the flood relief work in an adverse and uncertain environment. This was an art he was to master later as he progressed in his political life.

ENDNOTES

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