

SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL: LIFE AND LEGACY

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The establishment of independent India derived legitimacy and power, broadly speaking, from the exertions of three great men, Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. But while its acknowledgments are fulsome in the case of Nehru and dutiful in the case of Gandhi, they are niggardly in the case of Patel. “*That there is today an India to think and talk about*”, President Rajendra Prasad wrote in his diary on May 13, 1959, “*is very largely due to Sardar Patel’s statesmanship and firm administration*”. “Yet” added Prasad, “*We are apt to ignore him*”.

Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel was born on October 31, 1875, in a peasant family at Nadiad, a town in Kheda district from which his mother Ladbai hailed. His father Jhaverbhai, a small farmer with 10 to 12 acres of land in Karamsad village was a sturdy, upright and straightforward man of independent nature to whom the village folk flocked for advice and succour in times of distress. It is said that Jhaverbhai took part in the Great revolt of 1857 under the Rani of Jhansi and was later taken prisoner by the Holkar of Indore. He was an expert in chess and at a game so impressed Holkar that he released him and he returned to Karamsad after an absence of about 3 years. Vallabhbhai inherited from his father the skill to organise and plan a campaign or a movement at the opportune movement.

Hard-working and conscientious from his very childhood, Vallabhbhai helped his father in the fields along with his studies in the local primary school at Karamsad. Jhaverbhai, Vallabhbhai’s father, was a deeply religious man and being a follower of Swaminarayan sect he would visit the temple at Vedtal twice a month. Vallabhbhai imbibed the teachings of this sect and following in the footsteps of his father, fasted twice a month till he was at Karamsad. It is interesting to note that Vallabhbhai also inherited from his father another trait which has been commented upon by all those who came into contact with him, viz. the habit of walking to and fro, while talking to someone or when he happened to be in a pensive mood. For his secondary education, he had to go to Patlad, at a distance of about 14 kms from his native village of Karamsad,

which he had to traverse on foot, every week carrying the food grains, which he cooked himself. But soon he was able to organise a group of schoolmates and they would by turn bring the necessary foodstuff from the village and thus devote more time to studies.

Reminiscing on his school days, Vallabhbhai once wrote: “As far as I remember, I yielded to none in the captaincy of mischief or of sly attempts to hoodwink one’s elders. As far as I can recall, however, it was almost always in a good cause – of course, a good cause from my own point of view. I took to studies as seriously as I took to play cheerfully. I had no patience with an indifferent teacher and never spared a lazy one. As children, we had our own methods of correcting our teachers and we fully exploited all the subtleties of the manoeuvres which only children can. I can vividly recall one particular incident. My teacher at school had got annoyed because I persuaded the class to make fun of him for being late. He prescribed a task for me as a punishment. I came to the school next day without any task done. The following day I was asked to do twice as much. Days went by without the task being done and the punishment increased double-fold for each day, that went by until it was my task to write out the sums 200 times, I wrote on the plate just the figure 200 and took it to my teacher with an innocent air. The teacher asked me where the padas (in Gujarati that means both sums and buffaloes) were, I told him, ‘I could write only 200 when the padas (buffaloes) ran away’. The teacher was all sound and fury. I was presented before the Headmaster who instead of punishing me, took the teacher to task for not knowing the correct method of prescribing tasks.”

A few other incidents bear it out that he was a born campaigner and a leader since his school days. When Vallabhbhai was only in 6th standard he came into clash with a teacher who was in the habit of using his rod too frequently and punishing the students rather harshly. Once he imposed a heavy fine on a young student which he could hardly afford to pay. Vallabhbhai could not stand this injustice and persuaded all the students of the school to abstain from attending their classes. The strike went on and the young Vallabhbhai even made arrangements for their stay in a local Dharamshala. On the third day, the Principal had to yield, sent for the student leader Vallabhbhai and assured him that the students would not be punished severely in the future. Though he could not stand inhuman treatment or injustice from any quarter, his love and respect for his teachers was proverbial. It is related that one of his teachers in the High School stood as a candidate in the Municipal elections. His opponent was a rich person with considerable resources and influence and was sure of victory against a humble teacher. He boasted that if he would lose the election he would get his moustache shaved. Vallabhbhai could not stand the humiliation of his teacher and the vanity of his opponent. He took up the challenge on behalf of his teacher and organised the campaign with such resoluteness and methodical

manner that his teacher came out victorious with a thumping majority. He was determined to take the matter to its logical end by organising a procession of about 50 students who accompanied by a barber went to the residence of the vanquished hero and asked him to abide by his promise.

The son of a sturdy Kisan, Vallabhbhai had inherited not only his father's strong physique but also his iron nerves for which he was known since his school days. He was reputed for his courage, endurance and unflinching determination. He had a boil during his school days, the remedy for which, in those days, was only a puncture by a barber with a red hot iron rod – a painful operation indeed. The barber could not muster the courage to do so. The young Vallabhbhai took the red hot iron rod from the barber's hand and applied it to the boil himself without a trace of uneasiness on his face. We see these traits of his character – of suffering physical and mental agony stoically never allowing anybody to know about it. While in London he had to undergo an operation for taking out of a guinea worm from one of his legs. While the doctor was taking it out, it broke midway and a portion remained inside which had to be taken out, causing unbearable physical pain to the patient. The doctor was naturally worried but the patient insisted that the doctor should take it out without worrying about the suffering he would have to undergo. The Sardar, as he came to be known later on after the historic Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928, went through the agonising and painful process without taking chloroform and did not show any signs of suffering which enabled the doctor to finish his job satisfactorily and expeditiously. To quote the former Prime Minister Morarji Desai, his contemporary, ardent follower and admirer, Sardar Patel "maintained his spirit until his life's end as I could see when I was with him in Yervada Jail in 1941. He was suffering from intestinal trouble and the intestines were having a reverse movement and the pain of it was visible even to others. And yet he not only took no service from any of us but got up early in the morning before others and served tea to his companions without any sign of inconvenience or pain."

Vallabhbhai was already 22 years old when he passed his matriculation examination. He had been a witness to the sufferings of his peasant folk and was determined to fight for justice and fairplay which was only possible if he was a master of himself. He, therefore, decided to be a lawyer and after passing the District Pleader examination, he started practice at Godhara where his elder brother Vithalbai had already made a name for himself. He was soon involved in the case of a teacher against an influential person who had engaged the services of a well-known pleader with whom the judge was also on friendly terms. While on an inspection of the site of the incident with the Judge and the lawyer, Vallabhbhai had to suffer the ignominy of being made fun of by both of them for having taken up this weak case, as he was a briefless lawyer. Vallabhbhai kept his cool (and did not lose his temper) but at the next appearance in the Court, he narrated the talk they had proving thereby that the

Judge and the opposing lawyer were friends and the former was prejudiced and therefore pleaded for the transfer of the case. It was not only agreed to but he also won it and henceforward his clientage increased manifold.

Vallabhbhai was a criminal lawyer par excellence. Quite studious and thorough in handling cases, he soon became a reputed lawyer at Borsad. To quote Babubhai J. Patel, "*His robust commonsense, courage, foresight, unruffled temperament and understanding of human psychology, helped him considerably in his profession.*" Vallabhbhai was not content with his lot as a local lawyer. He had set his eyes on acquiring a higher position for which he wanted to go to England to be a barrister.

But Vallabhbhai knew that he belonged to a middle-class family and his father could hardly afford to send him to London and therefore he worked hard as a pleader to save enough money to study for Bar-at-Law in England. It is a tribute to his capabilities and hard work that within 3 years of his setting up his practice at Borsad he could amass sufficient money to apply for admission in the Middle Temple in 1905. He wrote to the famous travel agency Thomas Cook and Sons for arranging his trip to London. As the fate would have it, when all the formalities were nearly complete, the Company's last letter addressed to him fell into the hands of his elder brother Vithalbhai who had the same initials 'V.J. Patel'. He was also anxious to go to London for the bar and pleaded with his younger brother Vallabhbhai to let him avail of this chance and he could go later. He considered it as a privilege to be of some service to him and without a moment's hesitation agreed to his request and let him proceed abroad.

The fate now dealt a severe blow to Vallabhbhai. His wife Zaverbai whom he had married at the age of 18 and had a daughter Manibean (b.1903) and a son Dahyabhai (b. 1905), fell seriously ill due to severe intestinal trouble in 1908. Vallabhbhai took her to Bombay and got her admitted to the famous Cama Hospital. She improved a little and the doctors advised an operation. Meanwhile, he had to leave for Anand where he had to defend a client involved in a murder case. He left word with the doctors to inform him about the date of the operation so that he could rush back. However, the condition of his wife became serious and the operation had to be performed urgently in his absence. The doctors informed Vallabhbhai about the successful operation and the consequent improvement in the condition of his wife. But the next day her condition deteriorated and she breathed her last that very day. As the destiny would have it, Vallabhbhai received the tragic news while he was arguing the case in the Court. A man of iron will, Vallabhbhai read the telegram carrying the saddest news of his life and kept on cross-examining the witness and did not disclose the contents till the court adjourned. Needless to say, his client was acquitted. But at what a heavy price hardly anybody knew. He was left with a 6-year old daughter and a four year old son to look after. But he never

wavered from his unflinching resolve not to marry again, earlier for the sake of the children and later on for devoting his whole life to the liberation of the motherland.

On the return of his brother to India after completing his studies in London, Vallabhbhai left for the U.K. in 1910 and joined the Middle Temple Inn. With his meager resources, he had to work hard in London too and would walk about 14 km. Daily to go to and return from the Library in the Middle Temple when he was already 35. Thousands of miles away from his home, Vallabhbhai's concern for his family was uppermost in his mind. In one of his letters dated 16 December 1910 written to his brother Narsibhai from London, he explained his helplessness and added, "While I was there I did my best for our home and looked after everything. At present I am not in a position to do anything".

"The story of Vallabhbhai's career in the Inns of Court," to quote Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, "was remarkable. His practical knowledge of law gave him an easy victory over his fellow students. His studious habits and established position at the Bar in India helped to abridge his course by a year." He pursued his studies, got a first-class in the finals and a prize of 50 Ponds. Referring to this, he wrote in a letter to his brother on June 7, 1912 in his unassuming manner, "I have completed my examinations and have passed in the First Class. It means that I shall be coming six months earlier than usual..."

He returned to India with flying colours. Despite an attractive offer, made by the then Chief Justice of Bombay, of a Professorship at the Government Law School (the College was then known as 'School'), Vallabhbhai having no attractions and ambitions in the first place for the Bombay legal world, preferred to come over to Ahmedabad. He wanted to make Ahmedabad a centre for his future activities.

In those days Vallabhbhai presented a different picture altogether. He had imbibed western culture and could be spotted in the Club, "a smart, young man, dressed in a well-cut suit, with a felt hat worn slightly at an angle; with piercing and bright eyes, not given to many words, receiving visitors with a smile but not entering into any conversation, maintaining firm and pensive looks, appearing almost to look upon them with a sort of superiority complex whenever he opened his lips carrying an impression of sternness and reserve, such was the new barrister which had come to Ahmedabad for practice." At that time there were only 6 barristers in Ahmedabad, Vallabhbhai being one of them. His personality and behaviour were both a cause of attraction as well as resentment to his clients and the people of Ahmedabad at large.

It was during this period in 1915 that Gandhiji visited Ahmedabad, paid a visit to the Club to talk to the members. Vallabhbhai was busy playing cards when someone mentioned this to him, but he did not pay any heed to the newcomer but merely shrugged his shoulders cynically.

Meanwhile, his distinguished brother Vithalbai had initiated himself into the public life of the country as a Member of the Bombay Legislative Council. It was difficult to combine public life with legal practice and, therefore, the two brothers decided among themselves that while Vithalbai would wholeheartedly devote himself to public work, Vallabhbhai would continue the practice and earn enough to meet the expenses of the family. This compromise was faithfully followed by Vallabhbhai till 1917 when he too plunged into the service of the country. Recalling this episode the Sardar said in 1921, "If we want independence and if we wish to serve the country, we must be prepared to be poor. We, therefore, decided that one of us should serve the country and the other, the family. My brother gave up his flourishing practice and started on a career of public service while I bore the burden of maintaining the household. I reconciled myself by the thought that I could claim at least a share in his good things." Vallabhbhai was elected as a Municipal Councillor of Ahmedabad Municipality in 1917. Thus began an association which was to last for 11 long years, i.e. from 1917 to 1928 with a short break for 1922-24 when the Municipality was superseded by the Government.

Vallabhbhai's entry into Municipality was independent of Gandhiji. Vallabhbhai had remained aloof from Gandhiji during the period (1915-17) but "he was watching, studying and establishing contacts." Nobody could think that in no distant future Vallabhbhai was destined to be a comrade-in-arms and trusted lieutenant of Gandhiji.

Gandhiji, after his arrival in Ahmedabad in 1915, was a familiar figure at the Gujarat Club. But dressed as he used to be in his "Kathiawadi turban, kurta and dhoti, he could not impress the members of the Gujarat Club, especially Vallabhbhai who is reported to have curtly, unceremoniously and sarcastically brushed aside any idea of ever listening to Gandhiji at the Gujarat Club." But a historical event suddenly changed his entire outlook and subsequently proved to be a turning point in his life. G.V. Mavlankar relates how Vallabhbhai came to be attracted towards Gandhi. He writes: "It was at the (Gujarat) Club that we received one afternoon the news about the heroic stand of Gandhiji in the court of the Motihari (Bihar) Magistrate who banned Gandhiji's enquiry into the conditions of labour employed by the European planters in Bihar. This was the first act in India of Gandhiji's technique of non-violent resistance. Gandhiji refused to obey the order and preferred imprisonment to the abandonment of the inquiry. This act of Gandhiji electrified all of us at the Club. The late Diwan Bahadur Harilal jumped up and waving his hands exclaimed: "Mavalankar, here is a brave man and we must have him as our President." It was this occasion that attracted Vallabhbhai more to the Gujarat Sabha and his attention hitherto restricted to the Municipality, he gave more and more time to the affairs of the Gujarat Sabha. Gandhiji accepted our invitation to be the President of the Sabha and that was also the beginning of Vallabhbhai being drawn nearer

to and in Gandhiji's activities and methods. Brave as he was, the bravery in Gandhiji found in him a ready response. This was the small beginning of the close and great association in comradeship in the service of the motherland." It changed his entire outlook and subsequently proved to be a turning point in his life. J.B. Kripalani recalls his first meeting with Vallabhbhai in 1917 at Sabarmati Ashram set up by Gandhiji and adds, "He was then living in a modest house. Vallabhbhai invited Mahadevbhai and myself to dinner. It was a sumptuous meal. But it did not appear that it was specially prepared for us. In the afterlife, he had often to content himself with a plain diet, but I have an idea that he was always partial to good food. At this first meeting, we talked of current political affairs. The talk was racy, interspersed by his humorous remarks, about men and matters."

Though Vallabhbhai was greatly impressed by Gandhiji and accepted his leadership, he refused his invitation to stay at the Ashram frankly telling Gandhiji that he could not accede to his wishes as he was not in agreement with conditions prescribed by Gandhiji for living at the Ashram. Sardar now left his practice and dedicated himself to the national service under Gandhiji's leadership. He used to say in later life that as a disciplined follower, he would give his independent and frank opinion but ultimately go by the directive of the leader. Humorously, he would say that he had locked his brain and given the key to Gandhiji.

Vallabhbhai's greatest contribution to India's struggle for independence was in the successful application of non-violence in various struggles he waged. The Agrarian Movement in Kheda in 1918 for securing redress of the grievances of the Kheda District peasants regarding land revenue remission due to failure of crops, undoubtedly was his first experiment. About 22,000 peasants of Kaira sent a petition to the Revenue Collector to postpone the collection of revenue. But the government was adamant. Gandhiji asked Vallabhbhai to take up the cause of the farmers. Vallabhbhai now toured each and every village and exhorted the peasants not to pay any taxes. "The fight will act as a spark which will set the whole country afire", he said. The satyagraha continued for six months but ultimately the Government had to yield and a settlement was arrived at and only eight per cent of the land revenue was to be recovered.

Gandhiji paid a high tribute to Vallabhbhai and said: "A leader's skill is judged by the competence in selecting his assistants for the execution of his plans. Many people were prepared to follow my advice, but I could not make up my mind as to who should be my deputy commander. I then thought of Vallabhbhai. I must admit that when I met Vallabhbhai first, I could not help wondering who this stiff-looking person was and whether he would be able to do what I wanted. But the more I came to know him, the more I realised that I must secure his help." To quote D.P. Mishra- once Chief Minister of Madhya

Pradesh: “Sardar always recalls to my mind the Indian peasant. Sardar was not only born in a peasant home; the whole make-up of his personality was that of an Indian peasant. The peasant is completely engrossed in his land. To tend it and make it productive is almost all his concern. He is practical and knows not how to prance about on the wings of imagination. The simple wisdom of ages is all his knowledge. He is not averse to new ideas, but only when you convince him of their practical utility. He would call a friend -a friend, an enemy- an enemy. He has no talent for tinsel talk. If you win his trust, he will even lay down his life for you. He is peace-loving, but he will not hesitate to use force in the defence of his land.” The humility of Vallabhbhai in the hour of triumph is worth recording: “I have not done anything....I wish to say on behalf of my colleagues and myself that if the people of Kheda district had not given proof of their courage and tolerance, he would not have been able to achieve anything. I would, therefore, say that the honour which has been conferred on me rightfully belongs to the people.” Gandhiji in his tribute to Vallabhbhai said that he had tested Vallabhbhai with fire and he had proved to be 100 percent gold.

Vallabhbhai was engaged in a relentless battle against the British authorities the country was faced with a national crisis in the wake of the passing of the Rowlatt Bills, popularly known as Black Bills, which curbed the freedom of the people. Gandhiji decided to offer Satyagraha. To begin with, he announced the 30th of March 1919 and later on April 6 when hartal was to be observed all over India. Gandhiji left for Punjab but was detained near Mathura and sent back to Bombay. Vallabhbhai led a huge procession on April 6 and openly defied the law. Riots broke out in Gujarat and martial law was imposed in Ahmedabad. Vallabhbhai had already urged the traders on March 2, 1919 to prepare themselves for the struggle. On April 13, 1919, Vallabhbhai decided to bring out the Satyagraha Akhbar to keep the people informed about the happenings in various parts of the country, particularly Gujarat. Vallabhbhai gave up legal practice in pursuance of the five-point programme of Gandhiji and plunged himself into the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Vallabhbhai supported the Khilafat Movement and criticised the treatment meted out to Turkey and West Asian countries after World War I and said, “It has, as a matter of fact, been a heartbreaking episode for the Indian Muslims, and how can Hindus stand by unaffected when they see their fellow countrymen, thus, in distress.”

Vallabhbhai had been appointed Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Fourth Gujarat Political Conference. In his spirited address, he showered praises on Lokmanya Tilak and said, “*No greater fighter has arisen on political firmament than Tilak who could fight the British bureaucracy with its own weapon. His deep scholarship, his shining character, his ideal simplicity, his*

fearlessness, his unquestioned patriotism and most of all his call for complete swarajya, this is his legacy." Vallabhbhai collected a sum of Rs. 25 lakhs for the Tilak Swarajya Fund against a target of Rs. 10 lakhs.

The Congress at Calcutta started the Non-Cooperation Movement under the leadership of Gandhiji. "*Swaraj within a year*" became the battle cry. On August 1, it is said, in pursuance of Gandhiji's programme of Swadeshi, the people of Ahmedabad made a huge bonfire of their foreign clothes. Vallabhbhai's barrister's robes, about a dozen suits, 250 collars, neckties and pairs of shoes were consigned to the flames. Vallabhbhai exhorted students to boycott schools and colleges. "*Do not ask yourselves, 'What should I do', or 'What should happen to me, because these are the considerations of impotent men. Jump into the struggle and be prepared to do your best. That is your duty today.'*"

A grass-root politician, he was quite conscious of the grave economic implications of the British policy of exporting raw materials. In a statement on December 6, 1923, he declared that the "*Englishmen import cotton worth five crores of rupees from India and send us textiles made from that cotton which are worth sixty crores of rupees. The money which they got from you is utilised to appoint Commissioners and Collectors, to buy guns which are utilised to keep you under their heels.*"

Vallabhbhai advised people not to expect justice from the British rulers as "*the man who gives justice should be impartial and independent. Even gods also are unable to give justice when they have an interest. So if you want justice, we have not to demand but snatch it from them. Independence is not granted, it has to be achieved.*"

The Congress held its 36th session at Ahmedabad on December 28, 1921. As Chairman of the Reception Committee, Vallabhbhai made a stirring speech and said: "We have tried to overcome our weaknesses honestly and in a definite manner. The proof, if any proof is needed, is Hindu-Muslim unity....I can proudly claim that our relationship is not merely of friendship but of fruitful cooperation so that we can take the nation forward. Similarly, we have established cordial relations with Parsis, Christians and other citizens of the country."

Mahatma Gandhi paid a handsome tribute to Vallabhbhai later in the Navjivan of 12 March, 1930: "*He is the man whose tireless energy put heart into the flood-stricken people of Gujarat in 1927 and when the Government machinery had broken down, his workers were responsible for saving the lives of thousands of people*".

It is interesting to recall that while Vallabhbhai headed the Municipality at Ahmedabad, several eminent national leaders were presiding over various

Municipalities, viz., Nehru in Allahabad, C.R. Das in Calcutta, Vithalbai in Bombay, and Rajendra Prasad in Patna. However, many of these contemporaries did not complete their full term, nor they had to tackle problems of such a magnitude and that too with such a great success. Reviewing the work done by the Municipal Board during Vallabhbhai's tenure of three years as President, D.N. Pathak and P.N. Seth in their work *Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: From Civic to National Leadership* observe: *"Though the Board had to give a tough fight against the Government on several occasions like the cantonment episode, waterworks, primary school education, municipal stipendiary magistrate, to the construction of drainage, town planning schemes etc., much was achieved. Vallabhbhai always kept before himself one ideal to serve the people to the best of his ability."* His development policies made Ahmedabad one of the best cities in India. He proved his mettle as a great administrator. He would not like the politicians to interfere in the administration and put pressure on civil servants. As he stated, "unless we are quite clear as to where the politician begins and the administration ends and vice versa, we are not likely to achieve that administrative adjustment between the Government servants and politicians which is necessary for the smooth working of a democratic government." This attitude was fully discernible when as Home Minister in Independent India, he earned the gratitude and admiration of top civil servants by following the highest standards while dealing with the civil servants. He was full of praise for the services and stood solidly by them as Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Independent India. In his speech on the floor of the House on 10 October 1949 he said in his ringing voice that "if you want an efficient All India Service, I advise you to allow the Service to open their mouths freely. You will not have united India if you do not have a good All-India Service which has the independence to speak out its mind."

While newspaper headlines were full with the vocal onslaughts of the *Swarajists* in the assemblies which were futile in most cases, Vallabhbhai was working hard in the remote villages of Gujarat in preparing the peasants for a struggle to be launched soon under the leadership of Gandhiji. Vallabhbhai never reconciled to the role of No-changers who, according to him, had not changed their stand and he was confident that, "the silent and non-vocal elements spread all over the country will sooner or later, and perhaps much sooner than anticipated, will raise the banner of freedom." In 1928, he "electrified the whole country by leading the poor dumb peasants of Bardoli to an epic struggle which is popularly known as the "Bardoli Satyagraha" The story of Bardoli is the story of the mighty ploughman. Bardoli proved that the power of the State rests with the poor and dumb peasant and not the rich and talkative politician. And that noblest of experiments was performed by Vallabhbhai Patel."

The Bardoli Satyagraha, a landmark in India's struggle for freedom, was put into practice, a la Gandhian technique, under the dynamic leadership of

Vallabhbhai. It is during the Bardoli movement that Vallabhbhai made some of his finest speeches full of eloquence & rhetoric. These speeches are fine examples of the richness of Gujarati literature as well. In one of his speeches, Vallabhbhai said: “The Government is like a wild elephant run amuck. But the gnat need not fear the elephant. The elephant can never trample it to death, but the gnat can certainly prove formidable to the elephant.” As Gandhiji put it, “Vallabhbhai found his Vallabh (God) in Bardoli”. Bardoli had now become the cynosure of all eyes in India. Many leaders visited Bardoli including Jammalal Bajaj who gave vent to their feelings thus: “They came to purify themselves and warm themselves at the sacred flame that had been lit in the villages there.” Vallabhbhai’s name became a household word not only in Gujarat but also in the whole of India.

The next session of the Congress in December 1928 was approaching and Vallabhbhai appeared to be the natural choice for Presidentship. In fact, Motilal Nehru had written to Mahatma Gandhi on 11 July 1928, even before the Bardoli victory, “I am quite clear that the hero of the hour is Vallabhbhai and the least we can do is to offer him the crown. Failing him I think that under all the circumstances Jawahar would be the best choice.” Even some P.C.Cs. had suggested Patel’s name but in all humility, he withdrew his name and Gandhiji resolved the issue by suggesting that Motilal might preside which he eventually did.

Vallabhbhai had the vision of a social reformer. He condemned those who practiced untouchability. He said: “*Hindus, wake up. You are in the wrong. These untouchables embrace Islam or Christianity when they are maltreated by you and then when they become Christians you kowtow to them.*” Again he criticised the farmers for marrying off their daughters and sons at a very young age and he added: “If I were in power, I would have a law passed to provide that those who marry off their daughters when they are twelve or thirteen should be shot or hung.” It will be revealing for those who now are crusading for reservation of jobs for backward classes that as early as 1928 Vallabhbhai had stressed the need for proportionate representation of peasants in services. It may come as a surprise to those who are of the view that Vallabhbhai was against trade unions, that he was himself the president of the B.B. & C.I. Railway Employees’ Association and led their agitation.

In 1929, Patel again was the favourite of five Provincial Congress Committees next only to Gandhiji, while Jawaharlal’s name was suggested by only three PCCs. It was quite clear that Patel would have been victorious, had Gandhiji opted out which he eventually did but at the same time persuaded his beloved disciple Vallabhbhai also to withdraw thus paving the way for Jawaharlal. Various reasons have been cited for Gandhiji’s preference to Jawaharlal but the fact remains that Vallabhbhai was deprived of his legitimate

and even overdue right to the crown by his master Gandhiji in whom he had implicit faith.

The secret telegram from the Bombay Government of 17 January 1930 informed the Viceroy that *“a civil disobedience or no-tax campaign may at any time be launched in parts of Gujarat where Congress workers have been carefully preparing the ground for years and are ready to act.”* Sardar’s arrest electrified the atmosphere and the whole of Gujarat rose to a man against the Government. 75,000 people gathered on the banks of Sabarmati and passed the following resolution:

“We, the citizens of Ahmedabad, determine hereby that we shall go the same path where Vallabhbhai has gone, and we shall attain full Independence while attempting to do so. Without achieving freedom for our country, we shall not rest in peace nor will we give Government peace. We solemnly declare that India’s emancipation lies in truth and non-violence.”

Sardar Patel’s arrest and imprisonment led to an adjournment motion in the Central Assembly by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, supported by M.A. Jinnah. Jinnah found fault with the Government for arresting Vallabhbhai on the presumption that “he was going to make a speech which would transgress the limits of the law.” He criticised the Government for suppressing liberty of speech. He added: “Again and again those who have attempted to stop the progress of opinion by the gallows and prison have merely hastened their own destruction by violence.”

In October 1930, Jawaharlal nominated Sardar Patel to be the Acting President of the Congress in view of his impending arrest. Vallabhbhai was to take over as soon as he was released from prison. However, the British Government was determined to re-arrest Patel after his release as indicated in the Bombay Home Government Secret Memorandum of 29 October 1930.

Sardar in his whirlwind tour of the country preached the message of the Congress and laid stress on the boycott of foreign cloth and urged the use of Khaddar. He told his audience that the people did not want communal representation and seats in the Council, their problem was hunger and bread.

In view of the extreme cold, the Annual Session of the Congress due in December 1930 was held in March 1931 at Karachi. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel presided over this Session. In his historic Presidential Address Sardar Patel, while disagreeing with the methods adopted by three young patriots – Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru – praised their spirit of dedication to the cause of emancipation of the country from foreign rule and said: “I bow my head before the patriotism, bravery and the spirit of sacrifice which animated Bhagat Singh and his comrades.” Sardar Patel thanked the honour conferred on him by selecting him to preside over the session of the Congress but he attributed it to the sacrifices made by the people of Gujarat.

It was under the Presidentship of Sardar Patel that the National Tricolor Flag was adopted after consideration at various levels. The Working Committee of Indian National Congress held on 2 April 1931 at Karachi had appointed a Committee to examine the objections to the existing flag and to recommend a suitable flag for the acceptance of Congress. The members of the Committee were Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, Master Tara Singh, Pt. Nehru, D.B. Kalkar, N.S. Hardikar with Pattabhi Sitaramayya as the Convener.

Arrested with Mahatma Gandhi and other members of the Working Committee during the Civil Disobedience Movement on 4 January 1932, Sardar Patel spent two years and three months in jail. From 1932 to May 1933, he was in Yervada Central Prison with Gandhiji and later shifted to Central Jail, Nasik, till he was released on 1 April 1934.

The jail period, as the Documents reveal, was full of physical and mental sufferings as well as personal tragedies for Sardar Patel. He suffered extensively from his nose trouble but the Government did not permit his own doctors to examine him.

As it was not enough that Sardar received the tragic news of the passing away of his mother on 26 October 1932 from his younger brother Kashibhai who informed the Sardar, "Our respected mother breathed her last this morning at 9.00 A.M. She had a fever for last seven days and four or five days after that the temperature rose very high and since yesterday her condition was grave and she died this morning." Sardar took the news stoically. His only solace, as he wrote to his daughter Maniben in Central Prison, Belgaum, was that his mother did not suffer much "she had not to be in sick-bed for a long time, only for three or four days she had a slight fever and peacefully left without suffering any pain." He was acutely aware of financial constraints at home and therefore wrote to his son Dahyabhai to get Rs. One thousand from G.V. Mavlankar from his account for a donation in charity in the name of his departed mother as had been decided by his younger brother Kashibhai. But Sardar was at the same time very particular that the funds collected and converted into a Trust for medical and educational purposes in Gujarat were not misused whatsoever. "If there is personal loss one need not be miserable about it, but if in the Trust, if there is any irregularity, it is regrettable....", he wrote to Maniben Vaghjibhai Patel in his letter of 13 April, 1934.

Domestic worries continued to haunt Sardar Patel's life. His daughter-in-law Yasodabai's death at a young age leaving behind a small child, daughter Maniben's loneliness and poor health, besides financial problems at home only added to his discomfiture but the Sardar bore all these privations with his usual fortitude and iron-will.

The long illness from typhoid of Dahyabhai kept the Sardar constantly worried in jail. However, he kept on encouraging him to bear the illness with

patience and courage. “Illness will disappear when the time comes. Those typhoid patients who follow the advice of doctors and nurses are not harmed by illness,” he consoled his son. However, he refused to entertain the idea of his daughter Maniben’s release on parole to look after his ailing son.

Despite his own ill-health and acute family sufferings, Sardar’s concern for Gandhiji’s health was uppermost. While they were together in Yervada Jail, Sardar served Gandhiji with motherly care. Gandhiji referred to it in a statement he released on 8 May 1933. “One of the greatest joys of my life was that I had an opportunity of staying in prison with the Sardar. I knew of his invincible courage and of his burning love for country, but never before had I had the good fortune of spending so much time with him as I was able to do during these sixteen months. His affection and love overwhelmed me and reminded me of my dear mother. I would never have imagined that he possessed such qualities of maternal affection. If I was in the slightest degree indisposed, he would immediately be by my side, and would pay personal attention to the smallest of my needs...”

While in jail another great personal tragedy struck Sardar Patel is the death of his elder brother Vithalbhai Patel. Vithalbhai died on 23 October 1933 in Geneva. Sardar Patel was anguished that his brother died in a foreign land with no family member by his side in his last moments. Vithalbhai Patel’s last patriotic words were “*Tell my and whole world’s pranams to all my countrymen. I pray while going that mother India may be liberated soon.*”

Sardar’s innermost recess has again been bared open in his letter of 21 November 1933 to Bhai Mathuradas. He grieved his brother’s death but philosophically consoled himself again and again. “After deep thinking,” he wrote, “I feel that in such hard times if one leaves this transitory world with honour then there is nothing to worry about. We have to submit to the wishes of God. While going, he has enhanced the prestige of the family, the caste and the land. So I do not worry at all. At first, I was terribly shocked. I was highly disturbed because he left this world in a foreign land with nobody to whom he could open his heart...”

Gratefully, he wrote to Subhas Chandra Bose who was with Vithalbhai Patel in his last moments and had also arranged to send the body of the departed leader to India for last rites. “My heart is too full and I cannot thank you adequately. I know that you have worked very hard against the odds, but it was destined that you should be his real brother in his last days and I should be here helpless to render any assistance or be of any use at such a time.”

However, anticipating the public reaction, the Home Secretary, R.M. Maxwell had written to the Inspector-General of Prison, Bombay Presidency, to authorise Superintendent, Nasik Road Central Prison in advance to arrange for the release of Sardar Patel at short notice “*for such time as is necessary*

to enable him to attend the cremation on condition that he gives a promise that while at liberty he will not make any political speech nor take part in any political activities and that he will surrender himself at an appointed time and place in order that he may be rearrested....” However, Sardar Patel refused to attend his brother’s funeral at the cost of his honour and self-respect, as he wrote back to Major Bhandari, Superintendent, Nasik Road Central Prison, on 8 November 1933 that “...*I cannot purchase my liberty at the sacrifice of my honour and self-respect even on an occasion when my presence outside is very highly necessary.*” Ultimately the last rites of Vithalbai were performed by Sardar’s son Dahyabhai in Bombay. The Gujarat Punch was bitterly critical of Government’s attitude in this regard.

Even Sardar Patel was very pained at Government’s attitude, as he wrote to Shapurji on 15 November 1933, “*Fate was much cruel with me this time. I have lost some very near and dear relations during this period of my detention, but I feel more for my brother’s death as there was none from amongst us near him in his last days to whom he could open his heart I know he was anxious to come back. It was destined that his dead body and not he could return and even then I could not go out without accepting conditions so humiliating that it would be more an insult to go near it than paying respect*”.

Sardar stood for equal rights for women. He attributed the backwardness of the nation to men who had not given equal rights and responsibilities to women. He said “*Women in one way are extremely courageous. Men do not endure the miseries to the extent the women do. In India misery is destined in women’s fate and she smilingly endures them....She is not aware of her rights. The society fears that if she is educated she would have knowledge of her rights and will shake off the privations.*” He described this fear as baseless and called for giving equal rights to women which would only help in the emancipation and social uplift of the country.

Sardar Patel, again and again, advised his audience that the Congress goal to win Swaraj had not changed and they had only changed their programme for the time being and their policy was to gain Swaraj by sending our representatives to the Assemblies. He advised them not to indulge in unlawful activities to provoke the Government for some time. Sardar Patel advised the people not to take part in the celebrations of the King’s birth anniversary. He argued that no doubt they had postponed the Civil Disobedience but the “*fight between the people and the Government has not yet ceased.*”

Even minor matters did not escape the notice of the Sardar who was bent upon cleansing the society from evildoers. As soon as he heard that some innocent girls were being lured by some miscreants under the garb of religion and celibacy, he got them removed from the institutions where they were serving despite their violent threats.

Sardar held high caste Hindus responsible for the plight of untouchables and exhorted them to treat Harijans as equals so as to avoid their conversion to other religions. *“If you had not treated the untouchables inferior even to the dogs, would there have been so many Christians?”*, he asked. He advised Hindus to eradicate untouchability from their minds. Again and again, he reverted to this theme and said: *“I advise you to abolish untouchability which is a curse to the Hindu community of India. You cannot discard your own brother. According to Hindu philosophy, it is sin to discard anyone who is living. The soul is God and even an untouchable has a soul in him. You, therefore, cannot discard God-Soul”*.

Sardar Patel was a social reformer in the true sense of the word and opposed child marriage and favoured the education of the girls. Advising the villagers of Gujarat against child marriage, he told them, *“if you do not stop child marriage, you will degenerate and the progeny will be very weak which will be of no use to the country.”* He also advised the villagers to give up the social evils of drinking and opium eating. Sardar Patel was also very much against the social custom of giving Preeti Bhojans (dinner after death), which he considered ridiculous and a waste of money, which could be spent for some better purpose. *“Do you feel glad in giving dinner after the death of your relative? You can spend that sum in a better way. Why should you not spend that sum in building a school or a dispensary”*, he asked them. Similarly, he wanted curtailment of expenditure on marriages and said: *“Spend only that which we comfortably can. If a man crosses the limits and takes a loan which he cannot repay, he has no right to do such thing”*.

Sardar Patel wanted the Hindu religion to be reformed and was critical of ritualism and observed: *“True Hindu religion consists in practicing control of the senses, abstaining from sensual pleasures and in the realisation of Supreme being i.e. God. You now cease building temples and small shrines, enough of it. You may renovate the old and dilapidated shrines If you want to protect your religion, first protect your children. They are our future treasures. So kindly divert your resources for the building of schools etc.”*

Sardar Patel exhorted farmers to be bold *“We can get Swaraj only when the public will become bold. We are governed by only two lakhs of persons who have come from 5000 miles. What does this show? It is timidity. If you remove this you can get Swaraj. By Swaraj, we don't want to remove white Sahebs and place black Sahebs in their places. That would be the worst. We want Ram Raj, Majdoor Raj or the Raj of the farmers in which every man must be happy”*.

While addressing the Hindustan Sahitya Sangh Association at Ahmedabad, Sardar Patel emphasised the necessity of using Hindi in every walk of life. *“There was no country in the world so unfortunate as India, which used a*

foreign tongue among its people. If they wanted to penetrate the heart of the masses and understand them and redress their grievances they could do so only by use of Hindi. If they had an infatuation for foreign tongue how could they achieve their goal to learn to die for their country", he observed.

Sardar Patel was against one man holding two posts which unfortunately became the rule since Jawaharlal's time when he held the post of the Prime Minister as well as the President of the Congress Party and since then it had been followed by his daughter Indira Gandhi and her successor Rajiv Gandhi.

Sardar Patel was critical of the Government policy of providing separate electorates for Harijans and Muslims. In this way, he said, "*the Government wants to divide India into separate parts. The Government is trying to defeat the Congress by the policy of divide and rule.*" "*The Government first divided us and then tried to see that three crores of people get the right of voting.*" He, therefore, exhorted people to use their franchise rightly and vote for Congress.

Sardar Patel warned those Congressmen who considered it their hereditary right to be elected to represent the Congress in the assemblies or those who were prepared to raise the banner of revolt against the party if they were not given Congress ticket. He observed: "*Those who do not have any sense of discipline have no right to go to the assemblies as the representatives of the Congress. Those who lack the spirit of sacrifice and those who do not prefer the collective interest of the people of India to their own personal interest have no right to adorn the assemblies either. If we cannot show a high order of sense of sacrifice we cannot do justice either to India or to its people who vote for us.*"

Sardar Patel could not tolerate indiscipline and insubordination. Entrusted with the task of making the final selection of Congress candidates for different legislatures, Sardar Patel was strict in taking disciplinary action against those Congressmen who opposed official candidates. As Chairman, Central Parliamentary Board, he issued a circular letter to all Provincial Congress Committees to this effect. "*Whatever the merits of various candidates might be, once the final decision has been made by the Central Parliamentary Board, there is no room for further discussion. All Congressmen must stand by the decision and if any, who deliberately go contrary to it, invite disciplinary action on behalf of the Congress. The mere fact that an individual is personally so anxious to go to the legislature that he or she is prepared to flout the Congress decision, is the final argument against his candidature.*" He advocated strict disciplinary action against such Congressmen.

Sardar Patel was afraid that Jawaharlal's appointment as Congress President would usher in socialism. But later on, Sardar Patel withdrew in favour of Jawaharlal Nehru but observed, "*My withdrawal should not be taken to mean that I endorse all the views Pt. Jawaharlal stands for*".

Sardar Patel with a prophetic foresight had envisaged criminalisation of politics and in his letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad dated 25 November 1938 purports: “*discloses the extent to which communally minded mischief-mongers are prepared to go.....*” Sardar Patel was firm of the view that “*The moment you (the electorate) feel the Ministries are acting against your interest and are no more useful recall them from office.*”

Sardar Patel strongly condemned the influence of bureaucracy by elected representatives. In his letter to Dr. Khare, Prime Minister of Bombay, he strongly condemned the action of R.S. Dubey who was abusing his position as Congress MLA and was interfering with the course of investigations against an officer of the Government who had committed some offence and asked Dr. Khare to take disciplinary action against the MLA.

Repeatedly, Sardar Patel advised the Indian Princes to come to terms with their subjects and introduce responsible government in their states. He declared “*I appeal to the rulers and request them to stop harassing the people and stop doing things which might inspire the people to cut jokes on us*”.

In the historic session of the All India Congress Committee which met on 8th August 1942, at Bombay, Gandhi gave the clarion call of Quit India to the British Government and his countrymen to ‘*Do or die*’ – either free India or die in the attempt. Sardar Patel exhorted his countrymen – students, women, Government servants, everyone, to join the movement with full dedication to drive the British out of the country.

Commenting on Sardar Patel’s role in 1942 movement, The London Times observed “*Some leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and other left-wing members of the Working Committee put the impending mass movement upon the plane of revolt. They warned their audience that it will be necessary for them to face bullets and bombs which was as much to say that they were to create a situation that could be dealt with only by bullets and bombs.*”

January 1943 to December 1946 Sardar Patel was under detention in Ahmednagar Fort upto April 1945 and subsequently in Yervada Prison till June 1945.

In 1942 when Sardar was interned in Ahmednagar Fort, he was suffering from an acute intestine ailment. While parting from Maniben at Poona station both had similar feelings: “*We will meet if God wills.*” His failing health in jail was causing concern to his near and dear ones. However he always asked them not to worry. To Maniben, he assured in 1943: “*My health is as it was, change neither for better nor for worse. So there is no cause to worry.*”

Despite his acute colon pain, he assured her, “*there is bound to be some physical ailment in advanced age but there is no cause to worry.*” He also stressed “*Mental agony is much more disastrous than a physical ailment. For*

physical pain there is medicine but there is no remedy for the mental ailment.” To his daughter-in-law Bhanumati also he wrote, *“Do not worry about my health. Happiness or misery depends on mental condition, those whose mind is strong are not affected by physical maladies. But if the mind is weak even tiny physical ailments also make us more uneasy.”* He was unwilling to be released from jail on health grounds. *“I take as much care as possible to see that I might not get released because of physical ailment. I pray God for it”*, he wrote to Maniben.

Sardar Patel wrote to Maniben who was also under detention in Yervada Prison about various social and political problems. He deplored the condition of widows in Hindu society. *“In this world”*, he wrote to Maniben, *“the condition of Hindu widows is most tragic, the social taboos and social behaviour is so cruel that she finds life unbearable. In Europe lacs of women learn nursing and serve sick persons throughout their lives. Yet the girls of higher class do not join the nursing class. What other noble profession can there be for widows? And we do not get women to do the work of nursing”* he further observed.

On his release from detention of nearly three years, he returned to active political life *“My path is clear before me”*, he declared *“I want freedom. I am going to get it. Ten Englands cannot prevent me from getting it.”*

Despite thousands of Congress members still in prison which was to affect its campaigning strength, Sardar Patel took up the challenge of contesting elections ordained by the new British Labour Government in September 1945 to test the strength of Indian Political Parties. Sardar stressed on the need for National Unity for which he said he would fight *“till the end of my life.”*

For the first time, we get glimpses of Sardar Patel’s personal life in his letter to D.N. Banerjee dated 3 May 1946 who had lost his daughter at a tender age. While consoling him, Sardar Patel narrated his own experience of life, *“when I was in the full vigour of youth, at the age of 32, my partner-in-life disappeared suddenly, leaving two young children – a son of 2 and a daughter of the age of four. Both these children took a vow when they were studying for Senior Cambridge to serve their country and joined the National College at Ahmedabad when the call came in 1919. The girl took a vow to have nothing to do with but hand-spun and hand-woven garments, and since that day she has never worn cloth except that made of her own yarn. She has never touched any ornaments or jewellery and she voluntarily discarded whatever she had at that time. She has remained unmarried all throughout and she is now forty-two. She has suffered imprisonment, more or less rigorous, for about 8 or 9 years. Every time I had been in Jail, she went on the same day and she never remained out when I was arrested. Our life-work is about to bear its fruit and we are longing for the day when India will be free.”*

Sir Stafford Cripps paid a handsome tribute to Sardar Patel in his letter of 21 December 1946 observing “*I know that you have done very much to help and I am conscious of how much we are indebted to you for your wisdom and guidance.*”

What emerged finally from the Constituent Assembly could be declared the Patel Constitution. Its basic tenets, particularly the balancing of the fundamental rights of the citizens with the State’s need to maintain law and order as well as the reservation of a whole set of citizen rights as non-justiciable directives to the State, bear the stamp of Patel who evolved them in the committees he chaired. His predilection for a strong centre and his anxiety to guarantee the purses and privileges with which the loyalty of the princes and the civil servants had been secured are reflected in the Constitution. Patel also ended separate electorates and seat reservations for the minorities.

If the Constitution has become the lawyers’ instrument, it is largely due to Patel supporting the entry of several jurists into the Assembly to help word the Articles. The language of the Constitution is that of a host of brilliant lawyers of the day notably B.N. Rau, Alladi Krishnaswami Aiyar, Gopalaswami Ayyangar and K.M. Munshi. Like Manu who gave Hindus their first code, these constitution-framers were largely the elite Brahmins. But it was given to Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, to pilot the Basic Law of the new India through the Constituent Assembly. Not only did Patel see to it that Ambedkar was appointed Law Minister but ensured his completing the tenure despite Jawaharlal Nehru’s wish to drop him at one point.

The British Government’s decision to promote early self-government in India and to convene a constitution-making body was announced on September 19, 1945, in a broadcast by Viceroy Wavell on return from London where he had been summoned for consultations.

A British Cabinet Mission arrived on March 24, 1946, to set up an interim government. It could not get Congress and the Muslim League to agree on the framework of a constitution. A month later, on June 16, the Viceroy set in motion the election process to the Constituent Assembly and invited 14 personalities (six of the Congress, five of the League, a Sikh, A Parsi and a Christian) to join him in an interim government. The Congress first declined but was persuaded to join. The Muslim League then withdrew its acceptance, objecting to the Congress interpretation of the powers of the Union, and called for Direct Action to achieve Pakistan.

The Viceroy reserved five cabinet posts for the League and, on September 2, 1946, formed the interim government with Jawaharlal Nehru as vice-president and Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Asaf Ali, C. Rajagopalachari, Sarat Chandra Bose, John Mathai, Baldev Singh, Shaffat Ahmed Khan, Jagjivan Ram, Syed Ali Zahir, C.H. Bhabha as members. Five days later Nehru announced the

Congress decision to enter the Constituent Assembly to seek a common basis for solving all controversial issues. The British parliament passed an Indian Independence Act for transferring power to India and Pakistan as of August 15, 1947, and the Royal assent was given to it on July 18.

The Assembly assumed power in India at the Midnight Session. Patel went to it after attending prayers at the residence of Rajendra Prasad. Sucheta Kriplani sang the first verse of Vande Matram. President Prasad, Muslim League's Khaliqzaman and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan spoke. Nehru made his Tryst with Destiny address. At the stroke of midnight, as India awoke to freedom, Patel with other members took a pledge to serve India and to promote world peace and human welfare. Prasad and Nehru went to Mountbatten to convey that the Constituent Assembly had assumed the governance of the country.

Patel the "*old warrior had trouble locating his car and driver after the ceremony*", reports his biographer, "*and it was 1 A.M. when for the first time in his life he reached home in independent India... Vallabhbhai reached his bed, stretched his weary limbs and eased his head onto a pillow wrapped in khadi. Sleep may soon have come, but in the minutes or seconds until it did the agony and ecstasy of the past must have broken loose from his depths and, colliding with the miracle of the hour, flooded his tired eyes.*"

Patel presented on August 27 the Advisory Committee's recommendation of 'political safeguards' for minorities sans separate electorates. The Assembly accepted the next day recommendation, specifically seats reservations in legislatures.

The following day, it appointed a constitution drafting committee composed of Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar, N. Gopalaswami Ayyangar, Bhim Rao Ambedkar, K.M. Munishi, Saiyid Mohd. Saadulla, B.L. Mitter and D.P. Khaitan to work on what had been put together by B.N. Rau. More importantly, the Drafting Committee of which Dr. Ambedkar was Chairman was guided by policy decisions and even wording of the key Articles handed down from time to time by the plenary of the Assembly.

Thus on August 30, the Assembly decided the wording of certain Fundamental Rights articles held over from April and in effect transmitted the Directive Principles of State Policy to the draftsmen as decided by the Patel Committee.

During the consideration of the Constitution Bill itself, Patel intervened on a few occasions. He defended the inclusion of Article 283-A (incorporated in the Constitution as Article 314) giving constitutional guarantee to the terms and privileges assured to the I.C.S. officers opting for service in independent India.

He outlined the concept of people's polity replacing Rulers' Polity in states acceding to the Union and defended privy purses in the October 12, 1949

debate on Article 211A (to be renumbered 238 only to be repealed in 1956 on the linguistic reorganisation of states).

All in all, living up to his reputation as a man of action and a man of few words, Patel spoke only on 25 days out of 171 the Constituent Assembly sat over the 37 months of its term. And his name figures in various connections on five days more in Constituent Assembly Debates, the official record of the proceedings.

But his impact on the Constitution was wider than his interventions in the debates. By committee work, by his role in the selection of draftsmen, by the stand he took for or against Nehru on such issues fundamental rights (particularly compensation for dispossessing landholders), the position of the prime minister, the election procedure for the President and the status of Kashmir, Sardar Patel so dominated the Assembly that the Constitution which emerged from it was truly the one bearing his stamp.

Sardar Patel was approaching 71 years when he joined the Interim Government on 2 September 1946. In accordance with the wishes of Gandhiji, he had withdrawn from contesting the Presidentship of the Indian National Congress in 1946, though 12 out of the 15 Provincial Congress Committees had recommended his name. It virtually meant that he would have taken over as the Vice-President of the Interim Government and later on as the Prime Minister of Independent India. In this connection, Acharya Kripalani wrote: *“All the PCCs sent in the name of Patel by a majority and want to propose the name of Rajan Babu in addition, but none that of Jawaharlal Nehru. I knew Gandhi wanted Jawaharlal Nehru to be President for a year and I made a proposal myself saying some Delhi fellows want Jawaharlal’s name. I circulated it to the members of the Working Committee to get their endorsement. I played this mischief. I am to blame.”* Gandhiji’s action was resented by several leading Congressmen including D.P. Mishra, the then Home Minister of the Central Provinces. Why a person like Gandhiji did so? Any answer has not satisfied me till today. To me, it is a great injustice done by Gandhiji against Patel.

However, Sardar Patel as a true follower of Gandhi abided by his mentor’s wishes and withdrew his name. He became Home Minister in the Interim Government till August 15, 1947, Sardar Patel naturally became the Deputy Prime Minister when India became independent on August 15, 1947, and was allotted the most important portfolios of Home and Information & Broadcasting. To this was added the equally important portfolio of the States Departments from 5 July 1947. Thus, the Sardar was for all practical purposes supreme in the Departments he handled and it was understood that the Prime Minister as such would act as a constitutional head so for the ministries under the charge of the Sardar were concerned. It is in these two important roles that Patel was

the true founder of an orderly and viable state through the welter of uncertainty, disorder, and confusion that followed partition.

In his rejoinder to Jinnah, Sardar Patel stressed that the Muslim League should not play with the services for political purposes and warned *“The Services which were popularly known as the ‘steel frame’ were about to crash. Men were also required to take up diplomatic jobs in foreign countries. These jobs required special training. This could not be done by those whose only qualification was going to jail for winning the freedom of the country.”* He further clarified in his speech on 7 April 1947: *“Formerly we were abusing police, we used to hate them. In those times they were officers now they are servants. But you will say that policemen are the same. Then I would say you get recruited in police and change them. Nobody will prevent you. There is no hindrance.”*

Sardar was very particular that Indian Administrative Services Officers should set a high example and while addressing the probationers at the All-India Administrative Services Training School at Metcalfe House, Delhi on 21 April 1947, he said *“You are the pioneers in the Indian Service, and the future of this Service will depend much upon the foundation and traditions that will be laid down by you, by your character and abilities and by your spirit of service.”* *“Perhaps you are aware of a saying which is current in India regarding the past civil service, which is known as the Indian Civil Service, that it is neither Indian, nor civil, nor imbued with any spirit of service. In a true sense, it is not Indian because the Indian Civil Servants are mostly anglicised, their training was in foreign lands and they had to serve foreign masters. Therefore, in effect the whole service was known not to be Indian, nor to be civil, nor imbued with any spirit of service, and yet it was known as Indian Civil Service. The thing is now going to change.”* Concluding, Sardar Patel said: *“Above all, I would advise you to maintain to the utmost the impartiality and incorruptibility of administration. A Civil Servant cannot afford to and must not, take part in politics. Nor must he involve himself in communal wrangles. To depart from the path of rectitude in either of these respects is to debase public service and to lower its dignity. Similarly, no service worth the name can claim to exist if it does not have in view the achievement of the highest standard of integrity.”*

Against the popular belief propagated by vested interests, Sardar Patel was a staunch believer in Hindu-Muslim unity. In one of his speeches on 5 January 1947 he stressed *“I believe that if we want real Swaraj, Hindu and Muslim have to be united.”*

Sardar Patel stood for a strong Centre and time and again repeated that *“It is the lesson of history that it was owing to the country’s politically fragmented condition and our inability to take a united stand that India succumbed to successive waves of invaders. Our mutual conflicts and internecine quarrels*

and jealousies have in the past been the cause of our downfall and our falling victims to foreign domination a number of times. We cannot afford to fall into those errors or traps again.” He further added *“History has taught us a lesson that our country was divided into small States and we could not unite and repulse foreign attack and foreigners consolidated their rule here. Our internal quarrels, envy and enmity have contributed to our defeats at the time of the foreign invasion. Let us not repeat the mistake and get caught in the net of slavery. We are standing on the doorsteps of independence. Indeed, we have not been able to maintain complete unity.”* He further refuted the assertion of those who felt that he and his colleagues agreed to the partition of the country *“either because of fear or out of a sense of defeat. Under the prevailing conditions in the country, partition on the pattern was the best thing possible and he had no qualms about it. In a matter of weeks, they had divided the country, the Army, the Services, etc. and this indeed was a colossal task performed. He, however, strongly believed that those who had seceded today would be disillusioned soon and their union with the rest of India was assured.”*

Sardar Patel, a foresighted statesman, advised the people to choose their representatives with care *“you have to know and understand what a person whom you send as your representative does there and what he expects from you”*. Mountbatten paid a handsome tribute to Sardar Patel *“No one could pretend that the coalition Ministry was an easy partnership, particularly with the partitions looming so large in the background; but you and your colleagues made my task easy and thus proved yourselves true statesmen of whom your country can well be proud. It was indeed fortunate that a statesman of your vision and realism should have been associated with all the discussions on the 3 June Plan and with all the subsequent vital and delicate negotiations with the States. After our first ‘tussle’ I always felt that we should become friends, and I believe history will prove that the friendship played a very vital part in obtaining a peaceful solution and a speedy transfer of power to a Dominion of India which, with the States, will be greater than “British India” was by itself.”*

Sardar Patel was of the firm view that there would be no distinction based on caste or communities. He said, *“We have to speedily forget all these things. Such boundaries hamper our growth. You have to know that these are revolutionary times.”* It is to be regretted that about half a century of his passing away these became major factors in our politics due to the vested interest of our politicians.

Sardar Patel in his letter to the British Officer Bozman dated 11 July 1947 agreed with him that the division of India was unfortunate but somehow or the other they had no other alternative. He nursed the hope that one day Pakistan would come back and join India. On an occasion, he said *“India is one and indivisible. One cannot divide a sea or split the running waters of a river. The Muslims have their roots in India. Their sacred places and their cultural*

centres are located in India. I do not know what would they do in Pakistan and it would not be long when they would like to return.” Again Sardar Patel observed: *“Though the country is partitioned people are not partitioned. Who can partition? Can mountains and rivers be partitioned? The roots of Muslims are also here. Here there is Jammu mosque, Taj Mahal, Aligarh University, etc. So they have no other go except being one with us.”*

The prestigious ‘New York Times’ carried on the front cover picture of India’s Home and Information Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel and contained a four-page article on the Indian situation including a map of India entitled *“Pieces of Hate”*. Time says, *“Patel represents what cohesive power free India has. This cinder-eyed schemer is not the best, worst, wisest, or most typical of India’s leaders but he is the easiest to understand and on him more than any man except Gandhi, depends India’s chance of surviving the gathering storms.”*

The very existence of the free States was in danger. As a result, Sardar Patel realised that the nascent democracy would not survive without discipline and patriotism and took strong measures towards these ends. Speaking at Calcutta on 3rd Jan. 1948, the Sardar in one of his most enthralling speeches before a veritable sea of humanity projected a full picture of India’s variegated ills amidst stupendous problems of reconstruction and evoked people to united action face to face with realities of the struggling nation on her way to peace and prosperity. There were the communal riots, the problem of princely states particularly Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh, the task of economic reconstruction, rehabilitation of refugees, etc. *“Our life’s mission has been fulfilled”* he observed, *“We have won independence...but how to prepare ourselves for reaping its fruits,”* he added.

For the reconstruction of India, he felt, two things were the need of the hour. A strong Central government and a formidable army – in all its three branches – Naval, Air and Land Forces, but ultimately governed by the will of the people. For a strong army, industries for the production of necessary material and equipment were necessary. Hence India was to be industrialised first. Sardar was therefore very much against labour unrest, strikes, etc. *“We must realise that no country can prosper without industry, nor can labour in the modern sense survive without industry,”* he observed. *“We have a vast country with enormous potentialities.”* He was critical of organisers of strikes particularly Communists who were engineering labour as well Socialists. He wanted to reorient labour on truly nationalistic lines to contribute to the nation’s welfare and progress.

“The future of India depends on whether we step up production of food, cloth, iron and steel, cement and other essential articles both for the civil population and defence needs. Today, labour is at the crossroads. If they take the right road and contribute their energies for strengthening the

country, India will have a glorious future...upon their efficiency and hard work depends the greatness of the country.”

Sardar Patel justified the partition of India in his speech on 30th October, 1948 at Bombay. *“If we had not partitioned India, the consequences of what would have followed would have been much worse than actually taken place as a result of partition. At that time, we were quarrelling and fighting bitterly amongst ourselves. The third-party was reaping the full benefits out of the dilemma in which we were placed and out of the situation in which we had landed ourselves. We had to pay the price for our liberty. It was then we decided that, if the foreign government undertook to leave as soon as possible, the price of partition was worth paying for. We suffered grievously as a result of partition. A limb was torn asunder and we bled profusely. But it was nothing as compared to the troubles that would have been in store for us and with which we would have had to put up. I have, therefore, no regrets for accepting partition. My experience of Government had convinced me that if we went on like the way we were carrying on, we would lose everything that we held precious.”*

Nothing was dearer to Sardar Patel than the fullest protection of his motherland. And when Pakistan was at the height of its bellicose attitude towards the minorities in East Bengal and the beautiful valley of Kashmir already locked in war, Sardar, in his historic speech at Nagpur on 4 November, 1948, while calling upon people to realise their true duty to nation amidst dangers to her security spoke like a thunder: *“We are India’s guardians and as long as we live, we are not going to tolerate all these dangers to our national existence.”* Here again, among the top leaders of the day, Sardar was the first to issue a resounding threat to Pakistan that if Pakistan was bent on a precipitous course to drive out Hindus from their homes in East Bengal it would have to compensate by parcelling out a portion of its territory to resettle lakhs of those unsettled.

The partition had disrupted the ‘Steel Frame’— the Indian civil service, comprising 1500 officers who virtually held the administration together. Of these, all the British and Muslim officers had left. Those who remained were sent abroad to man newly opened diplomatic posts. Even thousands of *chaprasis* and clerks had left for Pakistan. In a note dated 27th April, 1948, Sardar Patel informed Nehru that *“in consultation with and with the unanimous support of provincial Governments, we have evolved two new services to take the place of the ICS and the IP viz., the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service”* for which recruitment, discipline and control rules have been framed. Common talk among the members of the Indian Civil Service post-Independence used to be: ‘If the dead body of the Sardar were stuffed and placed on a chair, he could still rule.’

On the eve of his departure from India, Mountbatten paid rich tributes to Sardar Patel. *“There is no doubt that by far the most important achievement*

of the present Government is the unification of the State into the Domain of India. Had you failed in this, the results would have been disastrous. But since you succeeded, no one can see the disastrous results that have been avoided.”

Sardar Patel stoutly opposed the creation of linguistic provinces, as he considered it to be dangerous to Indian unity. He asked the people not to forget the lessons of history. He observed: “*To talk in terms of separation from each other on grounds of language was to ignore at our peril hard lessons of history and this was the surest way to lose their freedom.*” He, therefore, strongly deprecated the talk for the re-grouping of provinces on a linguistic basis as opposed to national unity and solidarity. It was a dangerous game to allow such fissiparous tendency to rear its hand at present. Unfortunately, Sardar’s advice was not followed in later years and many provinces were created on linguistic grounds which only weakened the unity of this country.

Patel judged people instantly. He had the courage to reprimand the erring. He did so judiciously, though treating everyone with the same yardstick. There were two exceptions: Gandhi and Nehru. He spared them with a difference. To Gandhi, he was respectful as his guru; to Nehru, considerate as his Prime Minister. In national matters, he was ‘harder than steel’, but ‘softer than a flower in personal and private relations’. Sardar Patel embodied Abraham Lincoln’s famous lines: “*With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in ...*” In that spirit, Patel devoted himself to his various tasks right till the end of his life.

Patel a man of action, caring as much for the common folk as for others, died on 15 December 1950, leaving behind a son, Dahyabhai Patel, and a daughter, Maniben Patel.

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