

Sardar Patel – An Embodiment of National Unity

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In its January 27, 1947 issue, *Time* Magazine featured 72-year old veteran Congress leader Vallabhbhai Patel on its cover page.

The comprehensive story on the socio-political dimensions of Patel's life led to speculation that perhaps the person taking over as the first prime minister of independent India would be the "Sardar of Bardoli", a title given to him by Mahatma Gandhi for successfully championing the cause of the peasants in Gujarat against anti-farmers policies of the British Raj. But, as aptly put by some commentators, Sardar Patel was destined to be the finest prime minister of his time that India never had.

Apparently, Mahatma Gandhi had made up his mind to anoint Jawaharlal Nehru for the coveted role; otherwise, he would not have asked Patel to withdraw in favour of Nehru for the post of Congress President at a time when the British were preparing to leave India.

Many historians believe that the *Iron Man of India*, whose "steely determination and pragmatism" in taking decisive action to consolidate the Indian Union and ordering direct police action against the Nizam of Hyderabad forcing him to merge his state into India, deserved a better treatment from the successive Congress governments in commemorating his birth anniversary since his death in 1950.

Even India's first President Dr. Rajendra Prasad at one stage said - "*No attempt has been made in Delhi to erect a memorial. Even the portrait in the Parliament House is the gift from the Prince of Gwalior. Let us not, therefore, run away with the thought that his (Sardar Patel's) services are any the less valuable because we choose not to recognize them.*"

Patel was awarded *Bharat Ratna* (highest civil decoration) in 1991, forty one years after his death, by the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao.

Today a grateful nation is commemorating Sardar Patel's 140th birth anniversary as the Rashtriya Ekta Divas (National Unity Day), introduced for the first time in the calendar of national events by the Narendra Modi's BJP-led NDA government in 2014, to be officially held annually on his birth anniversary, 31 October.

Prime Minister Modi has always believed that "India will forever be indebted to Sardar Patel for his tireless efforts to unite the Nation," In a befitting tribute to Sardar Patel, 182 metres (597 feet) high **Statue of Unity** monument dedicated to Sardar Patel is being constructed facing the Narmada Dam near Vadodara in Gujarat.

The world's tallest iron statue is being built by the Gujarat Government with people's participation. The Statue of Unity Movement organized a marathon entitled *Run for Unity* in which millions of people participated at several places throughout India.

Sardar Patel, according to his contemporary historians, was a man of strong convictions with high moral character.

His wife Jhaverba died of cancer in 1909 when he was just 34. Leaving his daughter Maniben Patel and son Dahyabhai Patel to his family members for their upbringing, Patel, instead of marrying again, went to England to study Law and returned as a Barrister finishing a three-year degree course in 30 months as a topper in his class. He used to study 16 hours a day at the age of 36-37.

Sardar Patel returned to India as a highly westernised barrister and a keen bridge player. He soon set up a flourishing law practice in Ahmedabad and aimed to be a rich man. But his first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, a chance encounter at the Gujarat Club in Ahmedabad in 1915,

changed the entire course of Patel's life and within a year the three-piece suit loving stylish barrister turned into a Khadi Dhoti-Kurta clad freedom fighter.

Patel became the mayor of Ahmedabad in 1927 where his extraordinary skill as an administrator was on display during the Gujarat floods. He initiated an unprecedented fund-raising drive for the relief of the flood victims. Patel soon established himself as Congress Party's chief organiser. He handled party funds but never used them for personal purposes.

Sardar Patel demonstrated his organizing skills in making a success of Mahatma Gandhi's Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928 and the Dandi March in 1930. Patel was at his persuasive best when he spoke at the Gwalia Tank ground (now called August Kranti Maidan) in Mumbai to launch the nation-wide civil disobedience movement in 1942 at the behest of Mahatma Gandhi.

Patel guided the cooperative movements in Gujarat and helped in setting up of the Kaira District Cooperative Milk Producers' Union which proved to be a game changer for the dairy farming throughout the country. Patel came to be known as the "muscle man" of Mahatma Gandhi and a genuine grass root level party leader with mass appeal and as a true son of the soil.

The Sardar was also an exceptional scholar and a prominent member of the Constituent Assembly and several provisions of the constitution, especially relating to the Fundamental Rights, carried his stamp of approval. It was at Sardar Patel's insistence that Mahatma Gandhi persuaded a reluctant Nehru to induct stalwarts like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee into the Union Cabinet.

Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, who later formed Bharatiya Jana Sangh, described Sardar Patel as "*the most valiant champion of India's freedom and the strongest unifying force in our national life.*" According to Dr. Mookerjee, Sardar Patel was "*a rare combination of idealism and realism, of strength and generosity which made him a leader and a statesman who had no equal.*"

As the Union Home Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, Patel emerged as a statesman of integrity with practical acumen and resolve to accomplish the monumental task of integrating 565 princely states to merge into the independent Indian Republic. Patel is also affectionately remembered as the "*Patron saint of India's civil servants*" for having established the modern unified Indian Administrative Service and other all India services.

On the issue of Jammu & Kashmir, Sardar Patel was unequivocal in declaring: "*I should like to make one thing clear, that we shall not surrender an inch of Kashmir territory to anybody.*" Sardar Patel was perceived as the real boss of the Congress and a disciplinarian. When dissidence erupted against the then Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Pt. Govind Vallabh Pant, It was Sardar Patel who took upon himself the arduous task of handling this unfortunate development.

Patel convened a meeting of the Congress Legislature Party in the Vidhan Sabha hall in Lucknow and asked for all the exit points to be thrown wide open and said in a commanding tone "those who want to leave are free to go". He again said "I say those who want to leave are free to go" and repeated the same for the third time. There was a pin drop silence and no one moved from his/her seat. Patel then asked all the doors to be shut and gave the Congress legislators a dressing down for plotting dissidence against a great freedom fighter and a dedicated congressman like Pt. Pant. That was Sardar Patel's style of tackling internal party dissidence.

Historians believe that one of Patel's key achievements was the building of cohesion and trust amongst the different castes and communities which were divided on socio-economic lines. Sardar Patel played a pivotal role in the reconstruction of the ancient Somnath Temple in Saurashtra through a public trust.

But on the Ram Mandir-Babri Masjid issue, Patel wrote to UP Chief Minister Govind Vallabh Pant in 1949, "I feel that the issue is one which should be resolved amicably in a spirit of mutual toleration and goodwill between the two communities. . . . such matters can only be resolved peacefully if we take the willing consent of the Muslim community with us. There can be no question of resolving such disputes by force."

Very little is known about Sardar Patel's role in the growth and consolidation of the Press after independence. As the first Information & Broadcasting Minister in the Nehru cabinet, Sardar Patel played a key role in bringing round the British transnational News Agency Reuters to enter into a reasonable partnership agreement with the Indian premier news agency the Press Trust of India for supply of international news to the newspapers in free India.

Eventually, when the terms were accepted by Reuters and an agreement was announced on 21 September 1948, PTI had to raise funds quickly for buying the shares of Reuters. PTI issued 10,000 debentures of Rs. 100 each and Sardar Patel helped by persuading the ruler of Baroda to buy a large portion of the debentures. That was how PTI remitted the money and became a partner of Reuters.

Sardar Patel did not live long after independence to further shape India's destiny. One unique feature of the condolences which poured from all over the world on his demise was that even the erstwhile rulers of the princely state which Patel merged into the Indian Union paid their respectful homage to the great son of India. In a departure from the British service rules, member of the I.C.S and the I.A.S assembled in the capital and passed a condolence resolution paying glowing and affectionate tributes to the man who launched the unified All India Services.

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