

## Sardar Patel: A Liberal with A Twist

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### Abstract:

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is generally seen in popular parlance as a statesman who united Indian states and who was responsible for initiating the Indian civil services of independent India. However, his public disagreements on various issues like the Kashmir issue are pointed out to show him as a leader who was not as Liberal as Jawaharlal Nehru. He is also seen by some political scientists as someone who ought to be Indian Prime minister but could not be so, because of his 'impulsive decision making' and blunt talk. This article borrows his speeches which he gave in his post- independence days as the deputy prime minister; to delve into his psyche and it tends to read between the lines about the 'true liberal' that Patel was, in the true sense of that term.

**Keywords:** Sardar Patel, Liberalism, Indian Democracy, Kashmir Issue, RSS

### Introduction

#### Patel: An Angry and Plain man

Kautilya, the great realist of Indian state craft quotes Sage Bharadwaja in his *Arthashastra* while talking about the pros and cons of a 'forceful and angry speech'

*"Anger is the characteristic of a righteous man. It is the foundation of bravery; it puts an end to despicable persons and ...is the foundation of bravery" (3)*

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the pragmatist leader of Indian freedom struggle was known famously to be a blunt man in his speech, owing to his staunch and challenging lawyer career. He was a man of great intellect but lacked the eloquence of great orators, who used flowery vocabulary for getting their point slowly into the minds of their listeners. Experts of coaching in eloquence say that eloquence needs a clarity of thought and emotion. In other words, it is about getting things done by a gentle method of persuasion. Sardar Patel was anything but eloquent. But it would be wrong to think he lacked clarity of thought and organized

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speech. He is a rare combination of a forceful personality who might seem to be more concerned about the command of a military attendant.

Urvish Kothari in his preface to Sardar's book, sums up the personality of Patel which did not confirm to the western version of a liberal who used a polished language like that of Winston Churchill. As an ardent disciple of Gandhi, Patel was a simple man who like Gandhi believed in practical action and implementation and he despised any nationalists of various political distinctions as utility-less in the sense of the great liberal thinker J.S. Mill. (6) What is being a true liberal? Is it working for solving issues of governance through action or just relegating it to confirmed political ideologies? It is pertinent here to look into the aspect of liberalism in the modern era as being inclusive of all sections of society and working for equal status of all. Indian historians and political theorists took this sense and categorized Patel as an anti-left, right of the Centre and did not mince words when uttered with playing to the gallery.

The Oxford handbook of Political Ideologies, explains liberalism as "the belief that the aim of politics is to preserve individuals' rights and to maximize freedom of choice" (2). Hence the key phrase is to maximise freedom of choice as has been implemented by Patel in his life. This true meaning of liberalism has of late been changing owing to political pressures. There is a superfluous misreading of Patel as pro-Hindutva and pro- RSS. Even modern researchers like Vinay Sitapati read it the same and made a statement that "Patel was always sympathetic to the RSS". (7)

### **The Truth behind the Personality: Patel as a Pragmatist**

The reason for this was shown as Patel being a proud Hindu and an anti- Muslim. He was anything but that, it was because of his observation of ideological redundancy of communists and socialists and their lack of rhetoric that he didn't mince words while criticizing the political manipulations of fringe groups, one should remember he was heading the regeneration of Indian union, fresh from the independence, an aspect which came out of partition which he did not want to happen. Kautilya famously says "*He's the most learned one fit to be a minister, when he knows the impending effects of any phenomenon or a policy in advance*" (3) In the same sense, Patel knew very well that he was dealing with ideological differences with the emerging political class in India, who resort to create a public opinion, by misguiding the reach they have in public spaces and press.

Patel became a steadfast nationalist and Gandhian whose lawyer career had done him a lot of good, establishing him as an upright leader who spoke his mind. His study of law and quick decision-making in

future, was seen as early as 1913, after completing which he had two options of either choosing a government job in Bombay or to practice law in private, he wanted the latter as his demeanour did not allow him to work under anyone. He was also content with what responsibility he was entrusted by the government of the day. It was generally believed that Jawaharlal Nehru was more a 'liberal' than 'conservative' Patel who, did not suffer fools. Perhaps the under-pinning's of steering a nation in its nascent stage of self-rule made Nehru to do this political socialization to appease demands of minorities, especially the Muslim community. Patel had always been a staunch believer in non-partition of India, in fact in a letter to VVGiri, who was a fellow lawyer and future president of India, Patel makes it clear. Talking on an applicant, he says in a letter dated 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1946.

*"Dear Giri...I cannot support N. M. Joshi who done service to the labour in India...he always accepted all the claims of Muslim league without any question.... he is accommodative of communists and he himself might be one. But there are men ...but a golden knife cannot be used for committing suicide" (6)*

The matter in question was VV Giri's plea to Patel to support one N. M. Joshi as a member of constituent assembly in 1946. It might be remembered that the constituent assembly was formed to draft the Indian constitution on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1946 and finalised the draft on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1949. This shows how alert and diligent Patel was in having members who sit to decide the codified law of the land, he had a keen observation regarding every man of public life and knew who really were serving for the country. Patel just because of this very plain and blunt talk of not accommodating someone on face-value gave him a unpopular image as opposed to Nehru whose decisions especially on the Kashmir issue still haunt Indian internal security. Patel again was not ready to take up this internal issue to the United Nations Organization as Nehru, which further escalated the issue.

### **The Man with Liberal Thought: In its broader sense**

It is pertinent to observe some public speeches he delivered to party workers, young students and civil servants just pre- independence and post -independence which more or less put an end to the popular adage that Patel was not secular as Nehru and was pro-Hindutva. (Read pro-RSS: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the primary Hindu organisation fighting for Indian culture).

In the week running to India's independence, on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1947 Patel makes a public speech in New Delhi, where he unmasks the dichotomous nature of the socialists in using different means and ends for the purpose of freedom. A socialist government in Britain is calling upon the workers to sweat an hour more a

day and here in India socialists and others preach strikes and encourage wage boosts” (Patel: 2023,11) This shows beyond doubt that Patel was not against socialists or communists but their different versions which actually cause halt of work than promote social welfare.

In the same speech, Patel who was staunch believer in India’s unity says that the partition of India, will soon make people who are Muslims and who go to Pakistan, to come back to India. He says “India is indivisible. One cannot divide or split the running waters of the river. The Muslims have their root in India. I don’t know what they can do in Pakistan and it will not be long before they begin to return.” (6) This again proves he was not a pro-RSS or anti- Muslim, but a great unifier of this country and a true liberal who believed in India being the country for Muslims from ages. Jawaharlal Nehru and Patel had difference of opinions on the post Gandhi assassination events which banned the RSS. He was aware of RSS activities and also warns them of stringent action if they cause any harm to a community. He says I have received complaints against the RSS...the Sangh should realize that there must be something wrong. I appreciate the enthusiasm of young men, but that should be diverted into constructive channels (5)

Similarly, Patel and Nehru had differences on another issue, the much-publicized Kashmir issue. Nehru decided to have a ceasefire and ask the UNO to mediate between India and Pakistan. Recent research clearly pointed out that the King of Kashmir when signing the instrument of accession, was aware that each clause was a part of Indian independence act,1947 (4). But Nehru wanted to play to the gallery for Muslim minority under the thought that Kashmir needed extra constitutional protection in order to protect itself. (7) Hence the article 370 was carved out which gave a tool to Pakistan to feel that Kashmir was a part of their own territory. Naturally, Patel who singlehandedly integrated Indian princely states was offended by this decision of the prime minister. Patel openly hinted in a speech he was not happy with the government’s handling of Kashmir issue. (7) This again reflects that Patel was a true liberal with a twist, who called a spade a spade and was concerned only with firm decision making on careful observation in ground zero, without thinking about speculative conclusions as Nehru.

### **The man who integrated India: The making of the Iron Man**

Another instance which showed how different Nehru and Patel were regarding the secular and liberal fabric of India, is the rebuilding of the famous Somnath temple in the princely state o Junagadh, which Patel made a part of India through his efforts. Patel simply went in person to Junagadh, which was conspired to accede to Pakistan in Mountbatten’s plan, by addressing a public gathering as whom the people there wanted to join, India or Pakistan? Pat came the reply as India and soon he conducted a plebiscite in Junagadh on

February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1948 which totally sealed Junagadh to India. As a sentiment of Hindu population Patel took up the project of reconstruction of the famous pilgrim centre, the Somnath temple with help of private money which included the RSS funds. Patel did not see this as a pro-RSS move but a move respecting the religious faith and the famed jyotirlinga shrine of Lord Siva, in Hindu faith. This again shows that Patel was a true secularist and did not stick to pseudo liberal ideas of excluding a population just because it was in minority.

In case of the language issue too, Patel was a disciple of Gandhi who said that Hindi was the national language which united India. Significantly, the view was taken by Gandhi to see to it that Linguistic barriers do not hamper country's progress and he wanted to achieve what is known as integration of this country in whichever way possible. Patel addressed Tamil population in erstwhile Madras (now Chennai) in 1949 February, where he echoes Gandhi's statement of building a strong united India. He assures the population there that two main forces should be dealt with to ensure unity of Indian polity. One the communists and the other the RSS. Time and again the argument that Patel was pro-RSS can be easily repudiated just by reading his public speeches. Here was a man who was a true liberal and not a sham, who wanted easy applaud from people. He always foresaw the damage of encouraging fringe groups which did not directly participate in Indian political process like communists and the RSS which encouraged militant version of Hindutva. Patel hints at the communists' role in the death of 200 innocent lives in Hyderabad in 1948 during the Razakar movement, entirely instigated by the Nizam of Hyderabad. Patel says "how did the communists grow in Hyderabad....it was because the Hyderabad government foolishly allowed the communists to grow and cause violence there.... (sic)" (6).

In same Madras speech Patel talks about the insistence of him talking in English, but says that all people in India should return to Hindi which is a "national language" (6). But he should not be understood as a language bigot, as his early work as member of Gujarat Sabha which was established to follow the moderate's way to fight for Indian independence. In fact, Patel says in one of his speeches in the Sabha that "Gujarat should lead the Indian freedom struggle" (1). Gandhi was so happy that he remarked "Gujarathis are the trustees of Mother India's hour" (1). Way back in 1919 when he was appointed as chairman for the fourth Gujarat conference, he praised Balgangadhar Tilak's role in not using violence like the British, but using the chief tool of informed argument by Tilak in fighting the moderate phase of Indian freedom struggle. Patel says "no greater fighter has arisen on political firmament than Tilak who fought British bureaucracy with its own weapon. His brilliant scholarship, his patriotism, his commitment to Swaraj" (5).

## Conclusion

All these issues point out that Sardar Patel was a man with a firm resolve to unite India in any which way and he should be seen as a visionary who foresaw the discrepancies one could face with, if the country is strewn apart on the basis of sham secularism or appeasement politics which was not his cup of tea any day.

In a telling letter to Nehru in 1948 Patel places his stance in unequivocal terms. *"We both have been lifelong comrades in a common cause. The paramount interests of our country and our mutual love and regards, transcending such differences of outlook and temperament as existed, have held us together."* (6). If anyone had a doubt about Patel being a rival to Nehru, it can be proved beyond doubt by this letter that he is actually a statesman who valued his role as a servant of Indian state. In all his life, Patel has remained a blunt man with a clean tongue and at that was a liberal with a twist, a man who represented what is true liberalism without playing to any petty appeasements.

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