

SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL



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Vallabhbhai Patel, the consolidator of independent India, was born on 31 October 1875 in a farmer's family at Nadiad, Gujarat. His father, Jhaverbhai, who hailed from Karamsad, was a godfearing and patriotic middle class farmer. He is believed to have participated in the 1857 struggle for independence. His mother Ladbai was a simple hard working lady with a religious bent of mind. She inculcated in little Vallabh, the qualities of self-help, hard work and a capacity for self-control.

Until he was 17, Vallabh remained with his father, went with him into the fields, fasted twice a month and had his initial education only in his mother tongue at the local village school. For further studies, Vallabhbhai went to Nadiad where he passed his Matriculation Examination in 1897 from the Nadiad High School.

As a student, Vallabhbhai had already set his mind on a legal career but since he could not afford a university education, he decided to become a District pleader to start with. He passed the local pleadership examination and started practising in the District Court as pleader. In between, his parents arranged his marriage to Zaverbai when Vallabh was barely in his teens. His abundant commonsense, courage, foresight, unruffled temperament and understanding of human psychology helped him considerably in his profession.

Towards the end of the year 1908, Vallabhbhai's wife fell ill and was taken to Bombay* where a surgical operation became inevitable. However, she died early in 1909 after an operation. At the time of his wife's death, Vallabhbhai was only 33 and had two children, a girl by name Maniben born in April 1904 and a boy named Dahyabhai, born in November 1905.

In 1910, Vallabhbhai arranged to proceed to England for further legal studies. He passed out from the Middle Temple standing first in the Roman Law Examination. Again, in his final examination in June 1912, he passed in the first division and got a prize of £50. Having completed his term in the Middle Temple, Vallabhbhai went through the Registration Ceremony of a new Barrister and was given a place of honour in view of having passed his examination with distinction.


*Now known as Mumbai.

On reaching India on 13 February 1913, Vallabhbhai wanted to lead an independent life, therefore, he chose to practise as Barrister in Ahmedabad. As a lawyer also, Vallabhbhai exhibited great fearlessness. Vallabhbhai continued to practise actively in the legal profession till the end of 1919 when he was drawn more and more to public life.

It was the Municipal Administration of Ahmedabad that engaged Vallabhbhai's attention first in public work. In Ahmedabad, the first Commissioner Mr. Shillidy was an arrogant and stubborn person. Popular discontent grew in Ahmedabad as a result of the maladministration of the Commissioner and a strong man who could rectify matters was very much needed. Finally, Vallabhbhai himself decided to stand for election to the Municipal Council to which he was returned unopposed. Vallabhbhai fought against the incompetence and indifference of the municipal officer and gradually made the local administration efficient and responsive to needs of the residents of the town.

In the year 1917, he gravitated towards Gandhiji when the Champaran challenge was accepted by Gandhiji and the grievances of farmers against indigo planters of Bihar were substantially redressed. He enthusiastically participated in the first Gujarat Political Conference, denounced forced labour and decided to eradicate that evil and accepted Secretaryship of the Gujarat Sabha. In 1918, he gave up comfort, riches and fame to follow Gandhiji's path of sacrifice, simplicity and service to the people.

Vallabhbhai was initiated to Satyagraha—a non-violent weapon of great potential—by none other than Bapu. When a severe famine broken out in the district Kheda in Gujarat where on account of excessive rains, the peasants could not realize anything from their lands for a whole year and their crops were washed away. The British Government as usual was strict and unsympathetic to the peasant's plight and wanted to collect the land revenue by all means regardless of their sufferings. Vallabhbhai offered his services and under the leadership of Gandhiji, organized a peasants' movement which took the form of Satyagraha, forbidding on one side, the payment of taxes and on the other, beseeching the authorities to go into the details of the plight of the peasants and to avoid harassing them by confiscating their properties. After a prolonged struggle against those in power, the campaign came to a successful conclusion, following the acceptance by the Collector of the district Kheda of Gandhiji's proposal to suspend all harassment and provide relief to the peasants. It was at this time that Vallabhbhai undertook to devote his total attention to public work and on Gandhiji's advice gave up even his western style of dress.



In 1919 when the Rowlatt Act was passed, the city of Ahmedabad rose in protest under his leadership. Huge processions were taken out, literature like the 'Hind', 'Swaraj' and 'Sarvodaya' were openly sold. Satyagraha Bulletin was published. In the chaos, many people were indiscriminately detained. Vallabhbhai defended them and had them released.


Repression of the people's demand for independence was being carried out by the Government in all possible ways. In response, non-cooperation on a non-violent basis was resolved upon by Gandhiji. On 11 July 1920, at the instance of Vallabhbhai, the Gujarat Political Conference passed a resolution supporting Non-Cooperation. In 1921, he was elected the President of the newly formed Provincial Congress Committee of Gujarat.

With the Chauri-Chaura incident and the suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement by Gandhiji and his subsequent arrest, the task of carrying on the work fell on Vallabhbhai so far as Gujarat was concerned. Vallabhbhai was quite determined that Gandhiji's programme must be strictly adhered to in Gujarat. He collected ten lakh of rupees and started the Gujarat Vidyapeeth.

During the years 1922-23 and thereafter, the question of flying the National Flag at public places in preference to Union Jack assumed importance as it was not permitted by the then Government. Against this order of the Government an agitation started. Meetings were held at public places. The Government started confiscation of the flags and many leaders were sent to jail. Nagpur was the centre of the struggle for securing a place of honour for the National Flag in the country. Vallabhbhai was sending batches of volunteers from Gujarat to join the National Flag procession and get imprisoned. Finally, he himself went to Nagpur to conduct the struggle in person.

The movement, nevertheless, continued with momentum. Finally, the Government sought a settlement and Vallabhbhai took this opportunity to secure from the Home Member of the local Government unfettered freedom for flag processions to proceed through the civil lines. Those arrested and imprisoned in connection with flag struggle were also to be set free. Thus, the struggle ended favourably for the nation and Vallabhbhai was deemed to have won the battle.

In 1927, trouble started in Bardoli with the periodical reassessment of land revenue which had resulted in an arbitrary raise of 30 per cent over the existing rates. This sudden increase in the land revenue hit the peasants hard and not knowing what to do, they approached Vallabhbhai. He arrived




in Bardoli and methodically prepared the ground for passive resistance against the unjust demand of the Government for increased land revenue.

The Government used all sorts of methods to collect the enhanced tax but to no avail. The people in Bardoli were well disciplined and united and it became an uphill task for the Government to execute their orders of confiscation of properties and such other acts of inquisition.

This matchless victory of farmers against a mighty empire inspired confidence in the whole country in the efficiency of non-violent Satyagraha. It was at this time that Vallabhbhai came to be spoken of and referred to as the Sardar of the peasants. And this title given to him by the people got permanently associated with him.

Sardar's achievement at Bardoli made him a leader of All India stature, his position being next only to Gandhiji. He now turned his attention to wider issues outside Gujarat. In March 1929, Sardar presided over the Kathiawad political conference. In December 1929, the Presidentship of Lahore Congress was pressed on him, but Sardar with his usual modesty, declined with a view to working for the attainment of *Purna Swaraj*. In 1930, Sardar Patel was arrested even before Gandhiji's Dandi March commenced. Again in August 1930, he received a sentence of 3 months after completion of which he was arrested for the third time in December and awarded 9 months' imprisonment. The 1931 Congress Session was convened at Karachi and Sardar Patel was elected its President.

During his incarceration from January 1932 to May 1933 in the Yervada jail he spent his time with Gandhiji. During this time, the Sardar gave up smoking and drinking tea and studied the Gita. At this juncture, he lost his mother Ladbai and his elder brother Vithalbai. He was released in 1934 unconditionally on medical grounds. In 1937, the Sardar steered the elections to the Provincial Legislative Assemblies resulting in the Congress coming to power in 7 out of 11 Provinces. The Ministers had to resign in October 1939 when India was dragged into the Second World War without her consent. In 1940, individual Satyagraha was launched landing the Sardar again in prison from where his failing health brought him out again on 20 August 1941. In 1942, he participated in the discussions with Sir Stafford Cripps, which failed. The All India Congress Committee passed the famous "Quit India" Resolution on 8 August 1942 at Bombay. Sardar Patel was again arrested as he was one of the most prominent leaders and then released only in June 1945.



The Congress entered office at the Centre in 1946. Sardar Patel was made the Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the Interim Government. On 2 June 1947, the British Government declared 15 August 1947 as the date for transfer of power.

The crowning glory of Sardar Patel's eventful life was his superb and matchless handling of the Home Ministry and the Ministry of States between the period 1946 and 1950, which was full of challenges. Of the many services rendered by Sardar Patel to the country, the greatest perhaps is the integration of all the Princely States with the Indian Union which he effected. He achieved the integration of six hundred odd States in India in a masterly style and within a short period. It was Sardar Patel who established a Sovereign Democratic State out of near anarchy and chaos. Truly, he was the consolidator of India.

A colossus and one of the most precious jewels of Mother India's crown, Sardar Patel was snatched away by the cruel hands of destiny on 15 December 1950. India lost her great leader—one of the three great architects of independent India. The whole country went into mourning.

In Parliament, Prime Minister Nehru paid a moving tribute to his colleague when he observed:

"It is a great story, as all of us know, as the whole country knows, and history will record it in many pages and call him the builder and consolidator of the new India and say many things about him. But perhaps to many of us here he will be remembered as a great captain of our forces in the struggle for freedom and as one who gave us sound advice in times of trouble as well as in moments of victory, as a friend and colleague on whom one could invariably rely as a tower of strength which revived wavering hearts when we were in trouble. We shall remember him as a friend and a colleague and comrade above all, and I, who have sat here on this bench side by side with him for these several years will feel rather forlorn and a certain emptiness will steal upon me when I look to his empty bench."

Expressing his grief, Lord Mountbatten observed:

"His spirit will forever live in India. His work as incharge of the Ministry of States in 1947 and 1948 will go down in history, for he handled one of the most difficult problems which ever confronted any statesman, with a high degree of understanding and regard for the Indian Princes."

The United Nations Secretary-General commented:

"In Mr. Patel's death, India has lost a great leader and the United Nations a powerful friend."

