

Sardar and Jawahar, not Sardar versus Jawahar

■ **Dr. M. N. Buch**

A very unseemly controversy has emerged on what is, in the light of the true history of our freedom movement and early days of independence, not an issue at all. Narendra Modi has stated that Sardar Patel would have made a better Prime Minister than Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi made the wrong choice in selecting Nehru. The Prime Minister presided over the function where this was said and he strongly opposed it, saying that this was a BJP attempt to hijack Patel, who was as staunch a Congressman as ever existed. It is no doubt a fact that BJP has been trying to project the Sardar as its own icon and role model, a true leader of Hindu society and by speaking out against Nehru has tried to create an artificial divide in the leadership of our freedom movement. According to BJP it was a clear case of Nehru versus Patel.

The freedom movement had many stalwarts, all so tall as to be the equals of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. But there was a triumvirate Gandhi as Brahma, Nehru as Vishnu and Patel as Shiva or, if one prefers the Christian Trinity, then God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. No one dared question Gandhi, but Nehru and Patel were so different in temperament and background that these were bound to be differences between them. That they did not part was the greatest tribute to Gandhi's moral force and the innate decency and patriotism of Nehru and Patel. The clashes between Nehru and Patel soon after independence have been documented by Stanley Wolpert, Louis Fischer, Ramchandra Guha, Rajmohan Gandhi and others, but all have stated that Gandhi chose Nehru as the leader and Patel as his deputy and both accepted this and loyally worked for India. I offer a quotation to support my statement. "They (Nehru and Patel) did not always see eye to eye. They were temperamental opposites. There was friction between them. It worried Gandhi...He appreciated Patel as an old friend and skilled administrator, but loved Nehru and was sure of his equal friendship for Hindus and Muslims... In the end Gandhi decided that Nehru and Patel were indispensable to one another. Government would be seriously weakened if it lost either" (Louis Fisher-The life of Mahatma Gandhi-page 541). It is to the credit of all three that Nehru and Patel honoured Bapu's choice.

Equally important is the fact that at the time of independence the Sardar was ageing and ailing. His forte was organisation and firm government, both vital to our survival at independence. Sardar was the need of the hour and what a magnificent job he did. But for him the Balkanisation of India could not have been avoided, nor peace restored to a strife torn India. But India also needed to move on, to modernise, to become global and this only Nehru could do. Thus the Mahatma chose his dual leadership well and Nehru as Prime Minister did us proud. No one has the right to denigrate him, or to represent him and Patel as duelling rivals.

What did the Sardar give India? Starting with the Indian Naval mutiny, whose success would have destroyed cohesion and discipline in the Armed Forces, Sardar Patel restored peace in the country, merged the princely states, prevented the secession of Hyderabad, organised the Civil Services and, by keeping his promise to the Mahatma to the last to work with Panditji, he kept party and government unity intact. He built a nation from the ruins of a crumbled empire.

And what did Nehru give us? He gave us the blueprint of a modern nation. He built power stations capital goods industry, better health care, a strong education system, a viable consumer goods industry, a foreign policy which insulated us from the Cold War and the power blocs. He gave us a secular and democratic polity, a free judiciary, true freedom of the press and dignity

and self respect to our citizens. Both Sardar and Nehru were figures who transcended the confines of political ideology, they were true patriots whose sole aim was to serve India and make it strong and the two are the icons of all political parties, not the Congress or BJP alone. Neither the Congress nor BJP can claim them exclusively for themselves because they belong to all Indians.

But this is not the whole picture. Bapu was cut to the quick by Congress agreeing to partition. He even suggested that to keep India united Jinnah should be offered the Prime Ministership. With great reluctance, knowing it would not work, the Sardar surrendered before the Mahatma, but Nehru, in this case acting pragmatically, refused because he knew that partition would not be prevented from becoming a reality and Jinnah as PM may delay the process, but this would lead to even more bitterness between Hindus and Muslims. He and the Sardar were on the same grid, but Sardar's acceptance of Bapu as the sole arbiter was so total that he was prepared to surrender himself completely to him. I state this because whatever his differences with Nehru, Bapu's order to him not to leave Nehru was an absolute command and those who try and drive a wedge between the two, insult both the Sardar's loyalty and Nehru's great heartedness.

To truly understand the relationship between Nehru and Patel one has to see the reality of India on 15th August 1947. The country was partitioned in the midst of bloodshed which made the massacres perpetrated by Attila the Hun look like a Sunday school picnic. Not only did the British leave an administrative semi-vacuum by withdrawal of British officers, but the division of assets, including administrative, had not been completed, adding to the chaos Communal violence, an administration in shambles, millions of refugees, the war in Kashmir, Junagadh, Hyderabad, all had to be tackled.

Only Sardar's iron will and clear vision of administration could have handled all this and virtually build a government. Here Nehru's role had to be and was supportive, but the two worked in tandem.

Economically India was weak and backward, with almost no capital goods industry, poor physical infrastructure, rudimentary capital formation and an under developed consumer goods industrial sector. In foreign policy India had to create a footprint, while steering clear of power bloc politics. Nehru was undoubtedly the only Indian leader who could give a direction to both and this he did brilliantly. Here the Sardar was the supportive factor. The two worked in harmony, though there were differences on details. Had Sardar lived upto 1962 China could not have dared to attack us. His early death deprived Nehru of a strong ally whose place the Pannikars and Krisna Menons could never fill. Therefore, it is very much a case of Nehru and Patel never Nehru versus Patel.
