

Nehru and Patel

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Recently, a controversy has arisen about who owns Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, the Congress or B.J.P. The Sardar was not a commodity, nor an item, which can be owned. He was a the man of the ages, a leader of all Indians, a great Indian patriot, freedom fighter and politician, an administrator who brought order out of the chaos of partition, gave India an administrative structure that arose like the phoenix from the ashes of the abandoned British Indian empire and created a unified nation out of the scattered pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of the princely states after the British lapsed paramountcy. The ease with which he merged the Indian states and solved the issues of Hyderabad and Junagadh is in sharp contrast with the mess in Kashmir created because we never developed the will to treat Kashmir like any other princely states, never integrated it fully into India and, by dithering, stopped the army when it was about to complete its ouster of the Pakistanis. Had Sardar been allowed to handle Kashmir there would be no problem there, but in the one case where Nehru personally intruded into the Sardar's domain he came a cropper. Nehru needed Sardar at all times and that is why, differences notwithstanding, they worked as a team. "As a team" are the key words here because, as I shall attempt to show, Nehru and Patel were both the lead members of a team headed by Gandhi.

One cannot abruptly view the relationship between Panditji and Sardar from 15th August 1947 onwards. They go back a long way into the freedom movement, in which a triumvirate or Trimurti existed consisting of Gandhi as Brahma, Nehru as Vishnu and Patel as Shiva the analogy of the Christian trinity Gandhi was representative of God the Father, Nehru of God the Son and Patel of God the Holy Ghost. I do not mention the Trimurti or Trinity in a religious context and my alluding to them is by way of making a point. I beg my readers not to take this in any other spirit. The team which led India to freedom had Gandhi as the captain, coach and manager rolled into one, but the other members were all stalwarts on their own account. Gandhiji never raised his status by reducing that of others and they all stood equally tall, with the diminutive Gandhi standing tallest of them all. Gandhi in many ways was a dictator, but one whose power flowed from his moral force rather than from the fascist weapon of terror. At another level he was a total democrat, a team leader who knew that success lay not in his own contribution to the game, or that of other individual players. Success lay in how the whole team performed. It is such a team that Gandhi built. It had players such as Nehru, Patel, Maulana Azad, C. Rajgopalachari, G. B. Pant, Morarji Desai, B. C. Roy, Gopinath Bardoloi, to name a few.

In 1946 it became certain that the British would leave India. It also became clear that the pressure for a separate Islamic state of Pakistan was mounting and in the face of massive communal violence in Bengal and the tension building up in the Punjab, the partition of India could not be avoided for long. The Interim Government was not working and Nehru and Liaquat were pulling in diametrically opposite directions. Both Louis Fischer and Stanley Wolpert in their respective biographies of Gandhiji mention his growing agony, his disillusionment as he saw the shadow of partition looming large. For him his life's journey would come to naught if he could not ensure Hindu-Muslim harmony or keep India together as a single national entity. In

desperation he even advised that Jinnah be made Prime Minister if that could help in preventing partition. The suggestion outraged both Nehru and Patel, both of whom foresaw the inevitability of partition. However, Sardar was a person who had surrendered himself totally to Bapu, as Gandhi was affectionately called and on his order was even prepared to drink the chalice of hemlock. It is Nehru, however, for once putting pragmatism above emotion, who put his foot down and refused to yield place for Jinnah. He rightly knew that this would not prevent partition but rather increase bitterness between Hindus and Muslims to an extent that never even in the distant future would the two communities ever be able to live together. What is more, India would no longer be a secular state, which would be a disaster. In a land as diverse, as polyglot, as multi cultured as ours, a non-secular India would not hold together because the glue was unity in diversity, not bigotry based on the exclusivity of a particular religion in a theocratic state.

It is at such a delicate stage in the nation's existence that Gandhi had to choose a person to lead the nation. He selected Nehru, with Sardar as his deputy. Why? I think Louis Fischer put it beautifully and he is quoting. He wrote, " 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 Fischer-The Life Of Mahatama Gandhi-page 541).

What manner of men were Nehru and Patel? In many ways they were poles apart, one a Kashmiri Pandit from an affluent and plutocratic family, the other a farmer's son, but from a prosperous background not wanting in material comforts. At the Mahatama's call Nehru gave up Anand Bhawan and all that it stood for and Patel gave up the club life of Ahmedabad. To the very last Nehru was an aristocrat in his lifestyle, his attire, his love for the better things of life from the west, especially in the matter of food and drink. Anand Bhawan, Harrow and Oxford had moulded Nehru as an aristocrat perfectly at home in the drawing room of a baronial house in Britain. The Sardar, on the other hand, opted for a Spartan austerity and lived the life of a farmer from Karamsad. Nehru saw the image of a modern vibrant, modernised and prosperous India in which Gandhiji's Charkha was a symbol but not the centrepiece. Sardar saw the vision of a united India welded together from the fragmented past in which there was law and order, security, the strength to protect itself from external aggression and immense confidence in the belief that India is great, but nevertheless Gandhiji's India.

Partition and independence were not gradual processes in which measured step succeeded measured step, the boundaries of the two new countries clearly defined, assets and administrative structures divided on deliberately demarcated lines and administrative responsibilities transferred and unit by unit to the successors to British administrative officers. The boundaries were determined by Lord Radcliffe in an armchair exercise in which the Commission never even attempted to see realities on the ground. The British ICS and IP officers withdrew as independence approached, the Indian (and Pakistani) elements of the two imperial services were too thinly spread on the ground to fully pick up the reins of office and in any case the division of administrative assets was by no means complete. The district administration and the police were, at best, in a state of flux and, at worst, almost non-existent. I make this point because as partition approached a massive transfer of Hindus and Sikhs from all over what became Pakistan and of

Muslims from North India had started, soon to become a deluge. Violence escalated to the point of genocide on both sides of a border yet to be defined and the administration was too much of a shambles to handle the situation. This is what India inherited at birth and it was for the Sardar, as Home Minister, to remedy it.

Did the Sardar falter? The police was virtually recreated, the district administration revived, the IAS and IPS, successors to the ICS and IP, born and within a matter of months one could see things falling into place. The Sardar was iron-willed, seemingly dour, but at all times calm, collected and at the helm of affairs. The respect he commanded, the loyalty he earned enabled the Sardar to bring order out of chaos, peace out of violence, unity out of disorder, a sense of purpose out of an environment bereft of hope. No one else could have done this, not even the Mahatma and both Gandhi and Nehru appreciated this. To resurrect the “Steel Frame” which constituted the structure of British administration and to make it the servant of democratic India is an achievement so vast in dimension that even today one cannot fully comprehend the miracle wrought by Sardar Patel.

One major mischief done by the British when they left India was to lapse the doctrine of paramountcy which governed the relationship between the Crown and the princely states. The British made it clear that sovereignty vested in the Crown, the states had to recognise its paramountcy and the Crown reserved the right to recognise or derecognise a Ruler and that Dalhousie’s Doctrine of Lapse was suspended, but could be revived. Lapsing paramountcy meant the granting of sovereignty to the princes, which was totally foreign to the concept of Federation enshrined in the Government of India Act, 1935. This essay is not the place for discussing the fine points of the 1935 Act’s view of federation, but Sardar Patel immediately saw the danger of lapse of paramountcy and quickly moved to secure Standstill Agreements from the princely states, followed by Instruments of Accession. Early resistance from Travancore, Bhopal and states similar oddities was quickly snuffed out, Hyderabad tamed by Police Action, Junagadh taken over at the request of Nawab after a brief flirtation with Pakistan and Kashmir acceded after Pakistan invaded it and almost conquered it. This was swiftly followed by unions of states being formed, the states merging into them and ultimately the present constitutional form of constituent States of the Union being adopted. By the time the Sardar died he merged a fragmented India into the union which now forms the Republic of India under Article One of the Constitution.

If the Sardar was dour Panditji can only be described as dapper, a man with a puckish sense of humor, an emotional man with a infectious laugh, quick to both laughter and tears.

The Sardar commanded total loyalty, Nehru inspired love. These two, who together built India, could and did have differences, but they never lost their complementarity, their mutual need of each other, their combined contribution to the nation. One was incomplete without the other. Patel handled the administratively complex domestic front, but Nehru carried forward the core vision of India in economics, on social issues and India’s relations with the rest of the world. Patel created the administrative frame, Nehru gave it a secular orientating and an economic momentum. Patel gave India strength and security, Nehru built on it a foreign policy superstructure which has given India a place of eminence in the councils of the world. Metaphorically Patel was the warrior Arjun and Nehru was Krishna, the Sarathi; except that

unlike Arjun Patel never faltered. One without the other would have led to a Kaurava victory because it is only because they combined that victory became possible on the field of Kurukshetra.

In a recent article in the Hindustan Times Gopalkrishna Gandhi wrote, “Patel’s death stunned the nation, Nehru more than anyone else. He was now all in all, but all alone.” The man of steel on whom Nehru and the nation could depend was gone and in his place were pygmies like K. M. Pannikar, Krishna Menon and Gopaldaswami Ayengar. As Gopu (as Gopal is affectionately called) writes.”...a slow but steady mono-culturism took hold over the party...” The Trimurti was gone and as death broke the partnership it became all too clear how much Patel and Nehru meant to each other. The 1962 debacle of the Sino-India war conclusively proved that Nehru and Sardar needed each other and, despite differences, they were really one and the same.

Shortly before he died the Sardar wrote to Nehru that K. M. Pannikar, our Ambassador in China, was misleading him, that China would soon take over Tibet by force and terminate our neutral buffer and that China’s expansionist policy would soon bring it into clash with India. We could handle Pakistan, but it is China which was our real enemy. Therefore, we needed to strength our defences against China. Because Nehru, who relied on Sardar to the extent of writing to him in early 1948, “I have been greatly distressed by the persistence of whispers and rumors about you and me... we must put an end of this mischief”, with the Sardar going out of his way to address Nehru as “my leader” chose to ignore Sardar’s warning, the dire consequences which followed are there for all to see.

Nehru and Patel are of the nation, not of a particular interest group or political party. They both transcend politics and are iconic figures. To trivialise their work, their persona, their personal relationship is a great national disservice and those who indulge in it are at best anti national, at worst they are traitors. My respectful submission is that it is very much a case of Nehru and Patel, not Nehru vs Patel.
