

## *My memories of Sardar Patel*



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**A**s a young man growing up in pre-Independence India, I do have personal memories of most public persona of that time.

I was born in a family that, like many others educated families, was heavily involved emotionally in India's freedom struggle, without actually participating in it.

My father had been a student at Allahabad University in 1919-23. The city of Allahabad, part of British-ruled India, was an epicentre of the freedom movement. My father had collected pictures of the great Indian leaders of that time, and they were prominently displayed in our Alwar home. Gandhi, of course, headed the list. Then came Jawaharlal Nehru, youthful, modern, and progressive, with a saga of sacrifices. Another name with similar qualities almost equally attractive to me was Subhas Chandra Bose, who gave up the "heaven-born" Indian Civil Service (ICS) to join the freedom struggle. As a high school student in the early 1940s, I felt very worried when he came into conflict with Gandhi.



Young Sardar Patel

Other leaders I admired were Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan (Frontier Gandhi), Rajendra Prasad (though he did not look as smart as Nehru), Dr M. A. Ansari who had a medical degree from London (at whose Daryaganj house most leaders stayed when visiting Delhi), Sarojini Naidu, and, to some extent, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

Another great object of my veneration was Rabindra Nath Tagore who, though not a politician, was an eminent national figure, referred to as Gurudev. I was inspired whenever I read in books or papers that he and Gandhi were two Indians known all over the world. Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya had departed from the political scene by the time I grew up, but he drew my admiration for his work in connection with the Banaras Hindu University.

### *Early impressions*

Sardar Patel, though known very well, did not inspire me. I was surprised when I learnt that he was a Barrister from England – I had not thought that he was highly educated and qualified. He was known as the organization man, but this did not enthuse the masses or endear him to me. And he had dreary cold looks. But there were two additional reasons which made my attitude towards him fluctuate between indifference and hostility.

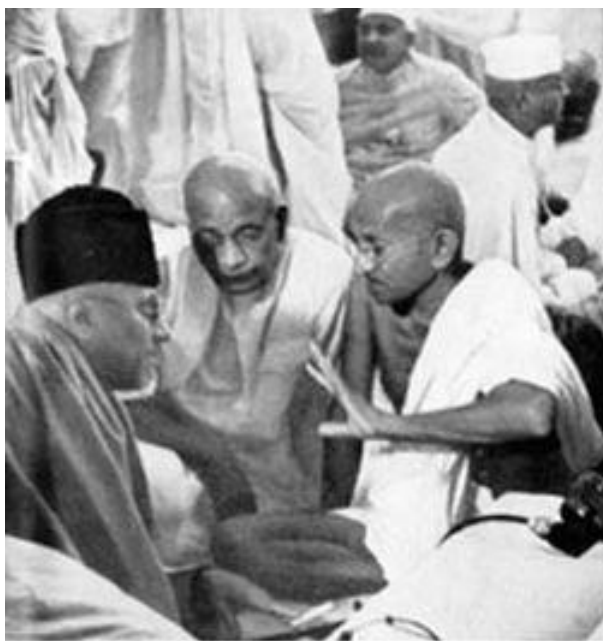


From L to R: Maulana Azad, Acharya Kriplani, Sardar Patel, Subhas Bose at Wardha Railway Station 1930s

He was known to be an arch rightist, pro-capitalist, anti-labour, and extremely close to the Birlas. Gandhi and most other leaders (other than the two Nehrus), were also close to Birlas, but all of them, unlike Sardar Patel, maintained their distance from the Birlas. Around 1945, there was a strike in Birla Cotton Mills in Okara, which is now in Pakistan. Sardar Patel travelled all the way to Okara to get the strike broken. I was in Lahore then, some 50 miles away, and I remember that my fellow students – Hindus and Muslims – were quite upset with what Patel had done.

Another factor which weighed against Patel in my eyes was his extremely hostile attitude towards Subhas. I had come to believe that it was Patel who was mainly responsible for inciting Gandhi against Subhas. Their enmity was not just ideological – it was personal too. It became public knowledge through newspaper reports that that Subhas and Patel's elder brother Vithalbhai (who served as a Speaker of the Central Assembly, predecessor of the present Lok Sabha) were together as patients in an Austrian hospital in the mid-1930s. Here they became very close to one another. Vithalbhai did not recover from the illness. Before passing away, he entrusted some of his assets to Subhas to be used for some good cause in India. When Subhas returned from Austria after his recovery, Sardar Patel asked him to surrender those assets. When Subhas declined to do so, Sardar Patel filed a civil suit against him in a law court. Subhas lost the case, and had to surrender the assets. When this news appeared in the press, Patel's image was in a shambles for a large section of Indians, including me.

Another factor which weighed against Patel



From L to R: Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel, Mahatma Gandhi, Sept 1940

However, the reports were not all against Sardar Patel. I came to know that once when he was pleading a court case as a Barrister a telegram intimating his wife's death was delivered to him. On reading it, he chose to fold it and keep it aside till he had finished arguing his client's case – a sure sign of a strong person.

Another story I remember is about the time when Gandhi arrived at the Ahmedabad club, where Sardar Patel was playing bridge. All members rushed to meet Gandhi. Patel did not move, saying that he did not want lessons in how to clean toilets; bridge play needed intellect and it was a much better pursuit. And, yet, there came a day when Patel accepted Gandhi as his Master, though he was never blindly supportive of Gandhi.

When Sardar Patel's name was proposed for Home Membership in the Interim Government (the first national Government ever to govern India) in 1946, as part of the younger generation, I was not

happy. Why could not Congress chose a younger (Patel was 71 then), more progressive person? (*I was*

*reminded of this feeling about Patel that prevailed in the country in 1946 in later years when I heard people saying that he, and not Nehru, should have been the first Prime Minister of India.)*

### ***Change of view***

But once Patel entered the Interim Government as Home Member (with Information & Broadcasting as an additional charge) on September 2, 1946, there was a sudden change in the feelings of young Indians like me about him. Not that there was a change in his style or that his personality underwent a change; he remained the same. But some of his attributes, which scared us earlier, started looking like assets for the country. Earlier, he was often referred to as 'strong man of the Congress'. Now he looked like he was the 'strong man of India', who would suffer no nonsense from those who were trying to break it.

The first confrontation came from none other than M. A. Jinnah, his arch opponent. Jinnah said, "Patel is considered a strong man, but words do not break bones." Patel might not have broken any bones, but when Jinnah asked for the Home portfolio in the Interim Government for his Muslim League, and the Viceroy endorsed the demand, Patel firmly said "No." And the League had to settle for the Finance portfolio.

One of Patel's early acts around that time was to patch up with Subhas Bose's family. Subhas himself was dead, except to those who did not wish to acknowledge this sad truth. Patel publicly embraced Subhas's older brother Sarat, saying that animosity between their families was "now a matter of the past."

Next, his handling of the bureaucracy brought Patel's statesmanship and sophistication into focus. For years, it had been widely believed that all the ICS officers, who were regarded as protégés of the British, would be replaced after Independence by patriotic Indians. Patel adopted a more nuanced view. He differentiated between the British and Indian ICS officers. While the British officers would be sent home, Patel accepted the Indian officers, after obtaining from them a commitment that they would serve Free India with utmost faithfulness and loyalty. Overnight, this dhoti-clad man with rural looks became a hero of the sophisticated, westernized ICS class.

This pleased and impressed young Indians like me. I remember that once when Patel was indisposed and H.V.R. Iengar, a senior ICS officer, came to enquire about Patel's health, Patel was annoyed that that Iengar was made to wait so that a Maharaja who had come for the same purpose could meet Patel first. Patel contended: "Mistake not, a Secretary to the Government of India was not less important a person than the Maharaja of a princely state." With gestures like this, Patel earned the loyalty of the bureaucrats who had earlier served the British.

### ***Foresight in accepting Partition***

But the greatest of his foresights was shown by the way he dealt with the crisis created by Muslim League after it entered the Interim Government on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1946. He was the first to realize that the League had created a vertical divide in the entire governmental machinery on a communal basis, up from a Member (Minister) down to the lowest peon. There was a virtual inter-Departmental (the term Ministry was used only after Independence) war on the Raisina Hill. The League was making a determined attempt to demonstrate that Hindus and Muslims could not work together, to strengthen the notion that partition of the country was unavoidable. In fact, the League had already, in a way, created several Pakistans on Indian soil, if one looked at the working of the Departments of Finance, Industry, Health, Posts & Air, which were under League Members; Liaqat Ali, the Finance Member, presented the Finance Bill (Central Budget) of 1947 to the Central Assembly without showing it in advance to Nehru, who was the leader of the Interim Government.

“How can the country be governed in such a divided way, now and in future?” Patel is reported to have wondered. Nehru was angry with the League, but it was Patel whose prescience helped him and the country to realize the inevitability of the Partition. It was neither defeatism nor a hurry to capture power, as has been imputed to both of them in subsequent years. It was nothing short of foresight and wisdom which Poet Tulsi Das had advocated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in this famous verse: “*Budh ardh tajain, lukh sarvasa jata*” (the wise give up half when they see the whole is going).

This is exactly the way I felt in the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of my life. The sacrifice in this case, in the creation of Pakistan, was much less than half. Almost three-fourths of the undivided country was saved for India, taking into account the fact that substantial portions of Punjab and Bengal and the entire Assam (except for one district) remained with India.

The Muslim League members got what they themselves called as a ‘Moth-eaten Pakistan’. To me, this looked then, and looks now, a great decision in India’s favour, for which Patel was primarily responsible. (*Jaswant Singh, a former Foreign Minister, alluded to this in his 2009 book Jinnah – India, Partition, Independence. The Bhartiya Janata Party expelled Jaswant Singh for expressing such a view. I think the decision against him was taken by his party colleagues, who were born much after the event, and, who I feel, had not studied their history properly.*)

In his speech recommending the Partition plan of 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1947, Patel said, “Let us develop this part of the country and let them develop the other one.” To my mind, Patel showed statesmanship of an unprecedented order. If only the League leaders had lived up to this healthy approach to Partition!

### ***Merging Princely India***

And then came Independence. Only a few weeks before it dawned, the Indian leadership realized that Pakistan apart, power was being transferred to the people of India in respect of only two-thirds of the residual India. In respect to Princely India, the remaining one-third, the British threw their hands up, saying that legally Princely India did not belong to them and they had no right to transfer it to either India or Pakistan. They said that it belonged to 500 and odd Princes with whom the British had treaty rights under which they (British) exercised Paramountcy over them. This Paramountcy over Princely India would lapse the moment the British left India. After this, the Princes were free to choose their own course. It was for them and their successors in British India to carve out a fresh relationship on mutually agreed terms.

Indian leaders were aghast. Nehru was furious, called it Balkanization and started abusing the outgoing British officers supporting such a view. Jinnah mischievously supported them and the right of Princes to be independent and clashed with Nehru at a meeting in Delhi when Mountbatten had to intervene to quieten them. The fact was that for India it would lead to a situation far worse than the approaching Partition, with pieces of Princely India scattered over the entire face of the country as in a labyrinth. Living in the Princely State of Alwar, I felt that I would not belong to India that was going to be free. At that point of time, Patel took charge of the situation, and handled it calmly, moving step by step.

Under Patel’s strategy, Nehru and he met the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, and impressed upon him that all the goodwill created by transfer of power would be totally eroded if Princely India was allowed to go astray in this manner. Patel correctly perceived that the Princes would heed Mountbatten more than any Indian leader. The reason was that the Princes had traditionally regarded the British as their protectors. On top of it, Mountbatten was a member of the British Royal family, towards which the Princes still had feelings of loyalty, verging on devotion – one of them actually wailed in a letter to Mountbatten about the approaching break of link between his house and the House of Windsor.



Mountbatten responded positively, despite a very different attitude of the outgoing British bureaucrats and the mischief that Jinnah was trying to play, with probably Hyderabad in mind. Mountbatten's appeal to the Princes worked. Almost all of them, except Hyderabad and Kashmir, agreed to become part of the emerging India. But they agreed to do so, without accepting the Paramountcy of the new Indian State over them. The Princely States agreed to yield only Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications to the successor India Government, keeping the rest of the powers for themselves.

Patel felt that this was good enough for the time being. He was quick to issue a statement towards the end of July 1947 (a few days before transfer of power) in which he assured the Princes "we want nothing more", and wanted the Princes and their subjects under their aegis to prosper. And all of them, except Hyderabad and Kashmir, signed an instrument (devised by Mountbatten with the help of his aide V.P. Menon) called the "Instrument of Accession", ceding Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications to the forthcoming Indian Union. And this enabled Independent India to come into existence on August 15, 1947 with its territory well-defined, except for Hyderabad and Kashmir (there was a minor abrasion in case of Junagarh, a small state in western India, which was rectified after a short time, as described below).

But was it enough? Not to my mind, except as a stop-gap arrangement. And to my satisfaction, Patel also expressed a similar feeling, within a few weeks. How will India be governable when the writ of Delhi does not run forcefully through the length and breadth of the country? In my own State of Alwar, the Indian flag was not allowed to be hoisted on public buildings on August 15, 1947. According to my Maharaja, it was the flag of an ally. Every other day his Dewan (Prime Minister) would assert that they had nothing to do with Delhi except in respect of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications, for which they had a treaty with India. Most other Princes exhibited the same attitude though not so blatantly. I was still longing to be a full-fledged citizen of free India.

But, Patel marked time.

The wait was painful but turned out to be short. It was around middle of December 1947 (just 4 months after August 1947) that a ray of light at the end of the tunnel became visible. Patel had gone to Cuttack with V. P. Menon, now Patel's close confidant and aide, on receiving reports of law and order problems in the province of Orissa. After committing crimes in the province, certain groups were seeking shelter in the territory of one or another of the surrounding tiny Princely States. Patel, as Deputy Prime Minister of India, chaired a conference of representatives of the provincial government, led by Chief Minister Hare Krushna Mehtab, and the Princes of the region. The Princes made various suggestions for overcoming the problem. Some suggested measures in the nature of extradition arrangements between independent countries.

Patel did not find any of these suggestions to be practical. Instead, he told the Princes that the only way was to have a unified authority for the region. He suggested to the Princes that they hand over the administrations of their states to the Orissa Government.

The Princes found the idea atrocious. The arguments went on till midnight, when Patel left the meeting indignantly, and went to sleep in the waiting room of the Cuttack railway station. Menon stayed behind, ostensibly without Patel's consent. And in the early hours of the following morning, Menon came to him with the signatures of all but one of the Princes, merging their states with Orissa. The one who did not sign said that he would do so only if told in writing that his State would be forcibly merged if he did not sign voluntarily. Patel ordered Menon to comply with his condition, and he too affixed his signature. The merger of about 12 Princely States with Orissa, and thus with India, was complete. A new chapter opened in India's long history. (*Two decades later, the recalcitrant Prince, who was resisting the merger of his state with Orissa till the last, himself became a democratically elected Chief Minister of Orissa.*)

From Cuttack, Patel and party did not return to Delhi. Instead, they flew to Nagpur. There were small Princely states around Nagpur, creating similar problems for the Central Province (C P) and Berar (later Madhya Pradesh and now Chattisgarh). These Princes were shown the Cuttack agreement, but they revolted at the implied suggestion. One of them suggested that they would give the new Indian Government the same Paramountcy rights which the British had over the Princes.

Patel felt that this would be too little, too late. He said 'No' firmly but pleasantly. Within the next few hours, all the Princes present there came around and signed agreements merging their states with CP & Berar, following the example of their brethren at Cuttack. Triumphant, Patel and his team returned to Delhi the next day. Some of us who had believed that Patel was capable only of settling intra-party problems in the Congress now found in him a man capable of much greater things.

But then there were concerns too. What would Gandhi say? Suppose he called it coercion, a breach of his principle of non-violence? Patel did not like to face Gandhi, and left the job of convincing Gandhi to Menon. Menon met Gandhi in Birla House and told him that it was all done in the interest of the concerned Princes themselves. Gandhi agreed and accepted that it was like administering 'castor oil to resisting children'.

This success notwithstanding, the light at the end of the tunnel was still dim. Only about two dozens Princely States had merged with India, and most of them were tiny. The large states had yet to be tackled.

On January 7, 1948, a delegation of some of the major Princes landed in Delhi, some with their formidable Dewans – a few of whom later became pillars of the new Government of India. The Princes were inconsolable at what happened at Cuttack and Nagpur. Where was the assurance of July 1947 – that the new Government of India wanted "nothing more" than Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications? Mountbatten, now Governor-General, chaired the meeting. (*Although he had played a major role at the 'Accession' stage, in the matter of 'Integration' he was lukewarm.*) Various explanations for the new approach were put forward. None of these satisfied the Princes till they were told that the states which were merged were tiny ones, and that such steps would not be taken in the case of 'viable' states.

The concept of viability in respect of Princely states was introduced for the first time around 1937 (although the term was probably not used at that time), in the context of their becoming a part of Indian Federation under the Government of India Act, 1935. This was meant to separate out about 20-21 of the largest Princely States, including Bahawalpur, which went to Pakistan in 1947). These States were entitled to send, mainly on the basis of their population, at least one representative each on their own, i.e., without combining with another sister Princely State, to the Federal Legislature envisaged under the 1935 Act.

But, as is well known, the Federation scheme was never implemented due to opposition from most of the influential Princes. Soon after the commencement of World War II, in September 1939, it was declared that it would be considered *de-novo* after the War was over. After the War of course, it was time for the British to pack up and quit India. and the Federation scheme was never implemented.

Yet, the formula devised in 1937 was used now to determine representation of Princely States to the post-Independence Dominion Parliament.. The concept of viability, however, was certainly not a part of Patel's promise of July 1947; the understanding 'nothing more than Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications' was applicable to all Princely States, irrespective of their viability.

The Princely States participating in the January 7, 1948 meeting (including Kashmir, which had by now acceded to India under circumstances which are too well-known) fell into the 'viable' category, which was mentioned for the first time in the context of the survival of Princely States. With this assurance that the viable States would not be pressured to merge with India, the Princes and their Dewans returned home, with their fingers crossed.

Yet, from now on, Patel felt that he had much greater freedom to go ahead with his plans.

A few weeks later a massive merger operation was accomplished in Kathiawar in western India. Many States – big and small, but none of which fell in the 'viable' category – were merged into a new State named Saurashtra. This merger operation was given the appearance of a voluntary move on the part of these Princes to join together to create a larger state, which the Princes would jointly administer. This merger was smoothly accomplished and there were no protests. Gandhi, who happened to hail from one of the affected states, okayed the scheme.

Meanwhile, the Nawab (Muslim ruler) of Junagarh (one of the Princely States in Kathiawar), had acceded to Pakistan, though the vast majority of his subjects were Gujarati Hindus. Technically, he had the right to do so. Nevertheless, his action went against the understanding that geographical location of the State and the wishes of the State subjects, had to be kept in mind in choosing between India and Pakistan. Patel, himself a Gujarati, regarded it an act of defiance. Without waiting to go into the fine points of the issue, he ordered Indian troops to march into Junagarh. The Nawab, along with his precious pet dogs, ran away to Pakistan. The episode was soon forgotten. Junagarh became a part of Saurashtra and, later of India.

*(Years later it became clear that the difference between the operation which created Saurashtra and the earlier ones at Cuttack and Nagpur was only cosmetic. In practice, no Prince was ever associated with the administration of Saurashtra. The ruler of Bhavnagar, the largest of the merged States was sent as Governor to far away Madras. The Jam Sahib of Nawanagar remained Raj Pramukh, titular head, of Saurashtra until its merger in 1956 into the state of Bombay, when the official name Saurashtra became a part of history. Later in 1960 when the state of Gujarat was created, the region became a part of Gujarat. This was typical of the ways in which Patel attained his objectives. Although the dissolution of Saurashtra happened many years after Patel's death, I am sure he knew that it would one day get absorbed in the state of Gujarat.)*

Patel's journey towards creation of a new India continued.

Alwar and Bharatpur, two Princely States now part of Rajasthan, remained on a confrontationist path vis-à-vis the new Indian Government, Alwar particularly so. As said earlier, Alwar did not allow Indian flag to fly over its territory. Alwar's Dewan was lodging protests every now and then during meetings in Delhi that the Indian Government was overstepping the terms of the Instrument of Accession under which his State had acceded to the Indian Union and interfering in its internal affairs. He was also delivering provocative speeches, mostly inspired by communal considerations, against Nehru Government's policies in the Parliament, of which he was a member as nominee of his Maharaja.

Inside its territory, the Alwar Government had unleashed a reign of terror over the Muslim minority, in total defiance of the national policy of religious tolerance. There were conversions (euphemistically called *Shuddhi*, i.e., purification), exterminations, demolition of mosques and graveyards on an extensive scale. The State machinery was openly participating in and supporting these activities.

Patel was watching the situation patiently from Delhi, just 100 miles away. He felt that interference might be considered a breach of understanding with the Princes, who would object vehemently if the Indian Government took any actions within a Princely State. After the commitment made at the aforesaid 7<sup>th</sup>

January 1948 meeting, the situation had become all the more tricky as Alwar made it – though barely – into the category of ‘viable’ states.

But the situation took a sudden and unexpected turn when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948. Alwar decided not to join in the national mourning and did not lower the State flag. The local population protested, “*UNO ke sare jhande jhuk gaye hain, par ye pachranga besharmi se phaira raha hai*” (flags of all the countries at the UN have been lowered but the five coloured flag of Alwar is flying high shamelessly).

When the agitation reached a high pitch, a condolence meeting was hurriedly organized in the city’s Company Garden. The Maharaja came to address it, but he was nervous and could hardly speak. The meeting ended in a fiasco. Next morning the headline in a local Congress daily was “*Paap sar par jadhkar kaise bolta hai, kal company bagh mien dekhana tha*” (how one’s sin speaks from the top of his head, this could be seen in Company Garden yesterday).

The same morning (it was probably 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1948) Patel asked the Alwar Maharaja to come to Delhi. He complied. The same evening, the 9 pm news broadcast on All-India Radio opened with the news that the Maharaja of Alwar was suspected of having a hand in Gandhi’s assassination and had been asked not to leave Delhi. It was further reported that the Government of India had instituted an enquiry against the Maharaja and his Dewan, and meanwhile, the Indian Government had deputed one of its officers to take over administration of the State. Next day, the newspapers reported that Patel had taken these steps after obtaining the consent of ‘Negotiating committee of Princes’.

The sensation which this news created in Alwar city can well be imagined. Some ten days later, the Administrator deputed by Delhi hoisted the nation’s flag on the Alwar Secretariat, saying that it should have been there six months earlier.

After another five days later, Patel himself landed in Alwar. I remember that the State Government, now led by the Administrator, received him in the same way it had (led by the Maharaja) received the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, eight years earlier in March 1940. I saw Patel for the first (and probably the last) time when he came to address a public meeting in the afternoon, on the Raj Rishi College grounds – the same grounds where we once used to play games. His speech was disarming, full of humour. He asked the citizens of Alwar to forget the past as a bad dream and be good citizens of India: “Do not talk of swords which some of you here were reported to have been brandishing; they are not even as good as broom sticks with which you clean your floors.”

I recollect it as one of the most thrilling days of my life. The apprehensions looming large for six months, that Alwar was not a part of Independent India disappeared once for all.

Subsequently, we learnt that one of the first things that Patel did after landing at the Alwar airstrip was to send for the brother of the Maharani, to tell him, “Please tell your sister not to worry about her husband; he is safe with us in Delhi and will join her soon.”

The enquiry soon concluded that the Maharaja did not have a hand in Gandhi’s murder. But before his innocence was officially acknowledged, it was agreed that Alwar would cease to exist as an independent State. The Maharaja, while still under enquiry, signed the instrument of Alwar’s merger into Matsya, a hurriedly improvised union of Alwar and three other Princely States: Bharatpur, Dholpur, and Karauli. Patel had replicated the Saurashtra model on a smaller scale.

To my mind, this merger brings out several facets of Patel’s multi-faceted personality. The move was initiated at a time when he was under immense grief because of Gandhi’s death – which is said to be one



of the causes of the massive heart attack he suffered two months later. Yet he did not miss the opportunity afforded by the tragedy of Gandhi's assassination to take an unprecedented step to attain his objective of consolidating India. He managed to overcome the restriction that commitment of 7<sup>th</sup> January 1948 ('viable' states would not be subjected to merger) placed on him, as the merger was billed as a voluntary act on the part of the concerned Princes. And yet, in the midst of all this, he did not forget the anxiety of a young wife (the Maharani) about the welfare of her husband.

While the merger of Orissa and CP mergers brought several protesting princes to Delhi on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1948, none came to protest against the merger agreement less than two months later on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1948, which created the Matsya Union. Far from protesting, the remaining Princes, from viable and non-viable States, from then onwards started queuing up for merger of their States, vying with one another *Rajpramukhship* and other honours from the new regime, the way they did while under British paramountcy for 150 years.

What brought about this sudden change? Patel's 'wizardry'. Less than a year ago, till July 1947, most of the Princes were not willing cede even Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications. Now they were handing over their entire States!

One after the other, the citadels started crumbling. Patiala, Udaipur, Gwalior, Indore, Travancore, Cochin, and a little later Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Bikaner, all became part of India. The States, except Hyderabad, which were not affected immediately, had agreed in one way or another to get integrated. Patel's deftness often came into play during the period the integration process was on. While inaugurating Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) with the Patiala ruler as the *Rajpramukh*, Patel said, "If I were to be born again I shall like to take be born as a loyal subject of the Maharajadhiraj of Patiala." He said it on the day on which the Maharaja of Patiala ceased to have subjects any more!

A few months later while inaugurating Greater Rajasthan at Jaipur, Patel said, "Today Maharana Pratap's dream has come true." One wondered how much the obliteration of Mewar as a kingdom, and Udaipur becoming part of a state of which Jaipur (territory of Raja Man Singh, whom Maharana Pratap considered as a traitor) was the capital, conformed to Pratap's dream! But then, that was Sardar Patel's style.

And, as always, his personality did not lose its multi-faceted character. When one of the engines of the aircraft carrying him to Jaipur for the inauguration of Greater Rajasthan failed, the pilot managed to soft-land it in a jungle between Alwar and Jaipur. It took a few hours for one of the members of the party to walk up to the highway to stop a passing car by which Patel and his party managed to reach Jaipur for the historic function. During those hours the country was wondering where its Deputy Prime Minister was. After he reached Jaipur, Patel was asked as to what the experience was like. "It was a good change," he said, adding, "Got away from the *asaar sansar* (transient world) for some time, for a pleasant communion with the Almighty."

### ***Hyderabad***

But even after most of the Princely States had been integrated with India, or were about be integrated, Hyderabad remained an ulcer in India's body politic, needing serious attention. The Nizam of Hyderabad had refused to sign any agreement with India. Here Patel's skills, patience and firmness were put to the severest of tests.

Practically every other week, a delegation from Hyderabad, headed by a leading constitutional expert from Britain (hired by the Nizam) would land in Delhi, emphasizing that the Nizam was a sovereign ruler who could not be a vassal of the government in Delhi. The talks would fail, and the Nizam's team would return to Hyderabad. The process went on for almost a year. Mountbatten, till the end of his Governor-

Generalship of India in June 1948, kept on trying to persuade the Nizam to accept India's nominal suzerainty, but the Nizam would not agree.

Meanwhile, there were regular reports that Qasim Rizvi and his band of Razakars had unleashed a reign of terror on the Hindu population of Hyderabad. There were rumours that the Nizam's air force would bombard Bombay any day. Even when he accepted stationing of a representative of Indian Government (K. M. Munshi) in Hyderabad, the Nizam would not permit him to occupy the house owned by the Indian Government in that city. This house was earlier the Residency, the home of the British Resident, and if India's representative lived in it, people might think that he was the successor of the erstwhile Resident, who was virtually the Nizam's boss.

This state of affairs continued until early September 1948, when India's Cabinet, briefed by Patel, secretly decided to send the Indian Army to march into Hyderabad. However, when the scheduled date came, news was received that Jinnah had died in Karachi. Nehru felt that action against Hyderabad should be postponed, lest the world get an impression that India was taking advantage of Jinnah's death. Nehru sent a request to Patel through the new Governor-General, C. Rajgopalachari (Rajaji), to consider postponing the proposed action. Patel, in his characteristic way, told Rajaji, "Tell Nehru that the troops are already on the move; they cannot be stopped on the way or recalled."

A few months later, I joined the Reserve Bank of India at Bombay. One of my batch mates told me the story about the 'march' into Hyderabad. He and his family were living in Sholapur (on the road from Poona to Hyderabad) on the crucial night when they were awakened by the continuous roar of passing heavy vehicles. When they looked out, they 'jumped with joy', realizing that the large convoy was heading to Hyderabad. Such was the mood of the entire nation.

The Nizam's forces crumbled within two days and surrendered. Shortly later, when Patel visited Hyderabad, the Nizam was there to welcome him at the airport. I was reminded of Patel's visit to Alwar a few months earlier – except that it was a much bigger story this time, of how "He came, he saw, he conquered." Today, when Indians take pride in Hyderabad as one of their foremost cities – a centre of education, science and IT – they should do well to remember who got it for them and how.

### ***Ill-will towards Patel***

The differences between Nehru and Patel were in evidence right from the time they entered the Interim Government, but they were always ideological rather than personal. These two great men had their own way of resolving them in order to work together in the larger interests of the country.

The differences had reached a breaking point during the last days of Gandhi's life but he is known to have patched them up only a few minutes before his assassination. But they erupted again a few months later and from then onwards most of what Patel did had the effect of widening them. At the Centre as well as in the States, the principal functionaries were seen as either Nehru's men or Patel's men. It was a reminder of the 1946 divide between the Congress and Muslim League, although mercifully it did not have the same dangerous implications.

The climax was reached when with Patel's support, and in the face of stiff opposition from Nehru, P. D. Tandon was elected as the President of the Congress. At the State level, Patel nominated Hira Lal Shastri as the first Chief Minister of newly created Rajasthan, instead of Jai Narayan Vyas, who had Nehru's support. (*Incidentally, within weeks of Patel's death, Vyas replaced Shastri.*)

The leftist elements in and outside Congress started taking advantage of the growing differences between Nehru and Patel, and started mounting a propaganda campaign against Patel. In mid 1949, when I was

living in the YMCA in the Fort area of Bombay, I recollect that anti-Patel gossip was common among the left oriented youth. They would refer to his son Dayabhai as ‘President of Bombay Black Marketing Association’ whom nobody could touch because of his father. It was surmised that India’s march towards a secular and an egalitarian society was being held back because of Patel. “We are waiting for him to die,” some would say, so that progressive forces could take charge of the country. Many hoped that the Nehru-Patel leadership would soon be replaced by a Nehru-J.P. Narain leadership.

Although I also had leftist leanings then, and had not liked Patel initially, by this time I was overwhelmed by thought of his yeomen services to the country in the interregnum. Such petty gossip and ill-wish against Patel pained me, smacking as they did of ungratefulness. *(My feelings were vindicated decades later when J.P. Narain himself said that ‘my inability to recognize Vallabh Bhai’s greatness in time is one of the sorrows of my life.’)*

In any case, I had started realizing that Patel never sought personal power. Whenever a suggestion was made that he should replace Nehru, he scoffed at the idea. “What do you mean?” he would say, adding “I will die, and do you want the country to remain without a leader?”

To some one who talked to him once about his “indispensability” he is reported to have said, “The entire surface of the earth is covered with the remains of those who were once considered indispensable.” These are some of his observations indicative of the type of man he was.

### ***The end***

During all these months of controversy, Patel was in fact dying with an ailing heart. Much of his work relating to integration of Princely States was accomplished by him in the aftermath of his first ‘massive’ heart attack, in March 1948, shortly after Gandhi’s assassination. And the disease got worse as days passed. On or around 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1950, he was moved to Bombay for treatment. The gathering at the Delhi airport to bid him farewell was unusually large; it included Nehru. They all knew that they were seeing him for the last time. And just about two days later on 15<sup>th</sup> December, shortly after I entered my office in RBI, Madras, an announcement came declaring the day as a holiday: Sardar Patel was dead.

I remember having broken down, but quickly regained composure, lest I looked silly to those around, who did not appear to be afflicted in this manner

The funeral in Bombay was a tame affair at a public crematorium. Many of the Princes whose states Patel had taken away took special planes to reach Bombay for the event. V. P. Menon was there, isolated and forlorn. Nehru was among the mourners but left the funeral oration to Rajaji, as Nehru said that he was emotionally disturbed. Rajendra Prasad, now President of India, broke protocol (to Nehru’s annoyance) and attended the funeral.

Thus came the end of a great life. It took many years after that for the country to realize that it would not see a like of him again, at least for many decades to come.

*(Long after Patel passed away, it became known that a few days before his death, he had written a long letter to Nehru warning him against the impending danger from China. Nehru totally ignored the warning and tragically for the country as well for Nehru personally, all that Patel feared came true, 12 years later.)*

## *Epilogue*

There were several charges levied against Patel during his lifetime. Many years after his death, they are still fresh in my mind. Some of them are mentioned below, with my comments on them

### *Patel, as Home Minister, should bear the responsibility for the Government's inability to prevent Gandhi's assassination.*

There was talk about his inability, as Home Minister of the country, to save Gandhi's life despite many warnings. Jai Prakash Narain, a prominent leader, then lent support to this charge.

Let me first recall Patel's broadcast after the Gandhi murder. This speech, which is not as ornate as Nehru's "Light has gone out of our lives" speech, is remembered by few. Patel spoke immediately after Nehru, in Hindi. His language was down to earth, his tone halting. I recollect some portions of Patel's speech. He said: "Along with Jawaharlal, I had just taken leave of him (Gandhi) and was proceeding towards *Makan* (my residence) when somebody stopped my car on the way and gave me the news that by now, you are all aware of. Such a terrible thing could happen, we could never imagine. We have yet to reconcile with it. However, I can only tell you that because of all that was happening in the country, for past some time, *unka mun khatta par gaya tha* (Gandhi's feelings had turned sour) ..."

One has to consider how much it was within Patel's capacity to impose security checks at Gandhi's prayer meetings, when these checks were not acceptable to him. Those who knew Gandhi were aware how stubborn he was on matters like these. It was in fact Patel who had lodged Gandhi in Birla House, keeping his security in view, instead of the *Bhangi* colony, where Gandhi wanted to stay and where his security would be difficult to ensure.

### *Patel was biased during the integration process – and integration itself was not a major achievement.*

In the matter of integration, he was blamed for favouring some Princes. One charge was that some of the Princes got unduly large privy-purses – the annual payments they received from the Government of India. Another charge related to the formation of Greater Rajasthan. This new state was supposed to be amalgam of the territories of all the 22 Princely States of Rajputana, plus Ajmer a British Indian territory surrounded by Princely states. However, Mt. Abu, the only hill station in the region was quietly taken out and merged with Bombay state. This was regarded as a move to give the state of Gujarat, as and when it would be created, a hill station. Further, Baroda, a Gujarati speaking Princely State with a Maratha ruler, was the only one among the big five Princely States, whose identity was not preserved. Nor was it made the epicentre of a Union of States with its ruler as a *Rajpramukh*. Instead, it was merged outright with Bombay state. This was considered to be a move prompted by Patel's desire to favour Gujarati, as against Maharashtra, sentiments.

And above all some people tried to play down Patel's entire work of integrating the Princely States, saying, "What is so great about it? In any case the Princes would have been eliminated one day under the sway of democratic forces."

In my opinion, some of the allegations could be correct, others not so. The fact that Mt Abu came back to Rajasthan in 1956 under recommendation of States Reorganisation Commission, suggests that its earlier merger with Bombay (though liked by its inhabitants) was not a correct step. Baroda could perhaps be treated like other states of its size and standing. But when such a gigantic process like the integration of India is on, minor injustices, here and there are inescapable. If we look back at history and the doings of great leaders, we would come across many instances when they did not act rightly.

The claim that states would have disappeared on their own under public pressure, is based on a false supposition. One should see the sentiments which Gayatri Devi of Jaipur and the ruling houses of Gwalior and Udaipur evoke till this day.

In any case, one has to recognise that, what Patel achieved was not merely integration of Princely States into India's body politic. More importantly, as far back as 60 years ago, he erased the institution of hereditary monarchy from the face of India. Keep in mind that the institution of monarchy thrives even now, with different degrees of influence, in many western democracies, in the Middle East and in the Far East, including a modern great power like Japan. In India this institution was as old as the country itself. Even the heroes of our great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata hailed from this order; and then came venerable personalities like Ashok, Akbar, Maharana Pratap, and Shivaji.

But of late, the institution of monarchy had gone into decay and had remained a relic of medievalism. Westerners had started calling India, disdainfully, as 'the land of Maharajas and snake charmers'. We may still have snake charmers, but certainly we have no Maharajas any more. The elimination of this relic of medievalism from our soil significantly was achieved not by a Marxist but by one who was considered a rightist, by some even as a reactionary.

*Patel was a rightist, too close to the Birlas.*

Patel was undoubtedly very close to G. D. Birla, the head of the Birla family. To his credit, Patel was never shy of admitting it. In fact the relationship grew closer during the last years of Patel's life when his official residence as Deputy Prime Minister was within a stone's throw of Birla House, and the two were often seen together during morning walks. But a closer look would reveal that Patel did not seek any personal gain from the relationship. The fact is that Patel died without leaving any assets behind. He supported Birla apparently for no reason other than his conviction, right or wrong, that Birla's approach to India's economic development, as enshrined in the Bombay Plan of 1945 (of which he along with J.R.D. Tata and others including John Mathai, a minister in Nehru government, were joint authors), was in the country's best interest. As time would show, Birla's stand against the License-Permit Raj was vindicated when this system was dismantled in the 1990s. Patel, it can be surmised, wished that to happen much earlier, in the 1950s. Ironically, personally Birla was the largest beneficiary of the License-Permit Raj, and he was too shrewd not to have visualized it; obviously, he was opposed to it on national grounds rather than in terms of his personal interest.❖