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REVIEW ARTICLE

SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL AND HIS LEADING ROLE IN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

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Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and His Leading Role in Civil Disobedience Movement

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Sardar Patel was a great leader of the Indian Sub-continent. His personality was constituted with the qualities of self-confidence, truthfulness and non-violence. He subsequently organized peasants from Kheda, Borsad and Bardoli in Gujrat in non-violent civil Disobedience against oppressive policies imposed by the British Raj.

The Bardoli peasant campaign proved to be the classic of Gandhian Satyagraha and unique example of amalgamation of urban, rural mass. It again reinforces people's faith and Satyagraha became the potent force after Bardoli "Let us Bardolize our agitation" was the most popular slogan throughout the country under the presidency of Vallabhbhai the whole nation honoured him as "Sardar."¹

The civil Disobedience movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in March 1930, was his first direct attempt to secure 'Purna Swaraj' i.e. complete Independence in the sense of serving relations with imperialist Britain, in Pursuance of the. "Complete independence Resolution passed by the congress in its Lahore Session held in December, 1929. The 26th January, 1930 was fixed as the first Independence Day and subsequently the working committee on 15th February, 1930 decided to launch civil disobedience.

It was started on 12 March, 1930 from Sabarmati Ashram and reached at Dandi on 6 April, 1930 and broke the salt law. The programme of civil disobedience movement included the violation of Salt law, boycott of the educational institutions by the students. Picketing of shops dealing with liquor, and bonafide of foreign cloth and non-payment of taxes.²

Sardar Patel earned the application of "John the Baptist" during Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha of 1930. He was to the latter what saint John was to the Christ. The former was the forerunner and Baptist of Jesus. Patel seems to have played precisely the same role in this movement. He baptised the people on the route on which Gandhi was to go to Dandi on 6 April, 1930 and break the law prohibiting manufacture of salt from the sea water. According to B. Krishna, "Dandi was Sardar Patel's choice, so were the Participants of the March

being led by Gandhi. Most of them were his trusted lieutenants since his earlier Satyagraha movements; Gandhi appreciated Patel's efforts in preparing the people for the fourth coming struggle. The former in a speech at Napa, acknowledged that "Vallabhbhai had come ahead of him to smoothen his own path."³

People from different parts of the country strongly protested against the arrest of Sardar Patel and simultaneously participated in large numbers in the meetings being organized and presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, while on his way to Dandi.⁴

"A war based on Satyagraha is always of two kinds. One is the war we wage against injustice, and the other we fight against our own weakness."

This period may be said to have initiated the beginning of close relationship between the Mahatma and the Sardar. After the arrest of the latter, the former seems to have found himself incomplete and his arrest became the main burden of Gandhi's speeches. He said at Wasna: "....I may die at any moment, but the future generations will see that my prophecy was correct. Vallabhbhai was not a fit person for arrest. He should have been rewarded by the government. What wrong did he do.....He befriended the people which was the duty of the government...He managed the administration of Ahmedabad....I could succeed in Kheda district on account of him (Patel) and it was on account of him that I am here today....."⁵

The popular response to the March was beyond all expectations. On the very first day the route from the Ashram through the outskirts of the city (Ahmedabad) and beyond, was lined by the vast crowds and Gandhi felt that God's blessing have descended on him. The most remarkable aspect of this national awakening was the eagerness of women to join the struggle alongwith men.⁶

The government displayed admirable forbearance during the Dandi March for which Gandhi publically complimented it. But from the very first day of the commencement of the Civil Disobedience Movement,

the police resorted to force to suppress the spirit of the satyagrahis, the midnight of May 5, 1930, the Mahatma was arrested and moved to the Yeravda jail. Consequently, the All India Congress Committee extended the scope of the Civil Disobedience Movement to include the breach of forest laws, the non-payment of taxes in ryotwari areas and the boycott of foreign goods.⁷

"As Satyagrahis we should always claim and we did that we are always ready to make place with our adversaries. As a matter of fact we are always eager for peace and we found that the door to peace was opened we decided to enter it."

Sardar Patel was again arrested on August 1, 1930, for participating in the procession to mark Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's death anniversary. He was released in November of the same year and served with a prohibitory order against making public speeches. In spite of delivering a harmless speech on the occasion of opening a Khadi Bhandar at Bombay, he was arrested for the third time and was sentenced to nine months imprisonment. But before he could complete his term in jail, he was released in March 1931, along with other members of the Congress Working Committee for being available for consultation with Gandhi, who was holding talks with the Indian Viceroy.⁸

The Gandhi—Irwin parleys had begun on February 17, and lasted until March 4, 1931, the day on which an agreement was signed between the two known as 'Gandhi—Irwin Pact.' It provided for discontinuation of the Civil Disobedience Movement and participation in the 2nd Round Table Conference, on the part of the Congress, and the revocation of ordinances and the release of all prisoners of the Civil Disobedience Movement on the part of the government.

"Satyagraha is not a creed for the weak or the cowardly."

The Viceroy, Lord Irwin, too was under no illusion as to the difficulties that still had to be surmounted. Sir Penderel Moon, paid a well-deserved tribute to the Indian Viceroy's statesmanship: "today, free from distorting emotion and prejudice, we can see that Irwin's policy was overwhelmingly right and that he did more than most other men of his time to keep alive the faith of the two peoples in each other....."⁹

Patel, however, was not fully satisfied with the Pact since no provision was made in it to return the confiscated property, especially land, to those people who legitimately owned it before the commencement of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Gandhi too felt that the unsold property must be returned to their erstwhile owners.

Sardar Patel was appointed President of the Congress in Karachi Session in March 1931. Both he and the Mahatma were greeted by a 'Black Flag'

demonstration because of the failure of the Congress leaders to save the lives of the national revolutionaries viz. Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Rajguru, from the gallows. Not only this, the demonstrators also criticized Gandhi's compromise formula and his decision to participate in the 2nd Round Table Conference as the sole Congress nominee, even against the advice of Patel and Nehru.¹⁰

In the Karachi session of the Congress, Sardar Patel acquired a new status, next only to Gandhi's in the hierarchy – of national leadership. William Shirer, an American journalist, who covered the proceedings of the Session, said that there was one figure in Karachi Congress Session, little known in the West, but a power in India, who deserved mention. Next to Gandhi it was Vallabhbhai Patel, who built up the Congress into a formidable national political party, the only one there was in India. He was the boss of the Congress Party machine.

"It is the prime responsibility of every citizen to feel that his country is free and to depend its freedom is his duty."

While commenting on the success of the Karachi Session, Jawahar Lal Nehru also admitted that this Session was an even greater success for Gandhi than any other previous Congress Session had been. He further observed that the Congress President, Sardar Patel, was one of the most popular men in India with the prestige of victorious leadership in Gujarat.¹¹

The time for the commencement of the 2nd Round Table

Conference (November 1931), was fast approaching. Gandhi was reluctant to go to England because of growing tension between Congress members and British authorities. Moreover, each party was blaming the other for violation of Gandhi—Irwin Pact. But he was finally persuaded by the Congress Working Committee members to go to London to attend the Conference.

"Faith is of no avail in absence of strength. Faith and strength both are essential to accomplish any great work."

At the discussions of the Round Table Conference, Mahatma Gandhi's stand was governed by the Congress Party's mandate which reiterated the national demand for complete independence. During his stay in England, he tried his best to arouse the British public opinion in favour of Indian freedom. Though his mission proved to be a total failure as far as the deliberations in the Round Table Conference were concerned, he utilised the visit to influence the people of England about the prevailing conditions in India. Even in Lancashire, hurt by the Indian boycott, there were cheers for him. Gandhi informed Patel about his activities inside and outside the Round Table Conference and wrote that most of his work there was

done outside the Conference. Although its value for the present was not much. He was inclined to think that it would turn out to be very useful on.¹²

Gandhi asked for Patel's opinion about his visiting the European countries which was likely to take one month more as his work of the Conference was going to be over by mid November 1931.

After completing his foreign tour, Gandhi returned to India December 28, 1931. Soon thereafter, he found that the spirit of the Gandhi—Irwin Pact was almost dead and the government was determined to destroy the influence of the Congress. The British authorities at that time refused to enter into negotiation with him except on humiliating terms. Consequently, the Mahatma directed his countrymen to resume the Civil Disobedience Movement. Taking a serious note of his decision, the government arrested him and Patel on January 4, 1932, and lodged them in the Yeravda Jail.

The second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement started with the arrest of Gandhi, along with certain other Congress leaders on January 4, 1932.¹³

The Mahatma and the Sardar were lodged in the Yeravda Jail for more than sixteen months from January 4, 1932 to May 8, 1933. During their long incarceration, the former had discovered that behind the hard and stern exterior of the latter was a warm heart with devotion and sincerity towards Gandhi. He also found hidden in the Sardar, motherly qualities of service and sacrifice. The Mahatma's discovery was the outcome of their living together in an atmosphere free from the din and dust of political arena.

"Today we must remove distinctions of high and low, rich and caste or creed."

At the age of nearly 57, he started learning that language, of which Gandhi wrote to Pyarelal "Vallabhbhai is running with the speed of an Arab horse (learning Sanskrit language very rapidly). Sanskrit book seldom leaves his hands....."¹⁴

He was surprised to see the job done to his entire satisfaction. He asked Patel thereafter, 'Vallabhbhai do you have the inclination for doing odd jobs since childhood, or have you acquired it in prison? Were you a craftsman already or have become one now? The Sardar said, There is nothing like that.. I have had no previous experience. When I see anyone doing something, I try to pick it up'. How independent, practical and determined Sardar Patel was is revealed by the frank talks these two leaders had over various issues facing the country. However, he did not share Gandhi's faith in the British politicians.

Sardar Patel, however, was at times critical of Gandhi in regard to some of his fundamental principles: non-

violence, fasting saintliness, attitude towards Indian Muslims etc. On one occasion, when the latter started covering the steaming hot tumbler of his morning drink with a piece of cloth, in order to save tiny insects from falling into it, the former could not help poking fun at him that he could not practice his non-violence to that extent.

"Manpower without unity is not a strength unless it is harmonized and... united properly then it becomes a spiritual power."

Vallabhbhai Patel didn't go the whole hog with Gandhi in regard to fasting.

Gandhi's policy of appeasement towards the Indian Muslims and this claim to represent the Muslim community. Patel opined that by fasting, the Mahatma had pricked the conscience of the Hindus only. He asked the latter one day that was there any Muslims who would listen to him? Yet, on another occasion, the Sardar ruefully remarked that the Muslims were keeping mum on various national issues facing the country and were offering no opinion. But they were co-operating with the government and would continue to do so in the days that followed.¹⁵

Prior to his release on May 8, 1933, Gandhi told Mahadev Desai that he was in the company of Sardar Patel with God's grace.

On the following day of his release, Gandhi in a letter to Patel, acquainted him regarding his own health; and while appreciating the Sardar's exceptional care for him during the long term of incarceration, said : "... you gave me a mother's love..."¹⁶

The third phase pertains to the resumption of the Civil disobedience Movement on August 1, 1933, with the launching of a new programme of Individual Satyagraha Campaign that kept the movement going nominally and symbolically.

In fact the period of 1930—34, presents a clear picture of the closer relationship between the two, which is clearly depicted in their correspondence. If two or three days passed without any message from the Sardar, the Mahatma felt uncomfortable and wrote to the former not to keep anything secret.

"Caste community will rapidly disappear. We have to speedily forget all these things. Such boundaries hamper our growth."

After spending more than two years in jail, the Sardar was released on January 14, 1934, unconditionally on account of a nose ailment. On January 15, 1934, an earthquake of devastating intensity struck the

province of Bihar. Thousands of people were dead and millions rendered homeless.¹⁷

From now onwards, Gandhi spent most of his time in non-political activities like fight against untouchability, temple entry, communal harmony and contribution in relief and rescue operations in the earthquake hit areas; Patel dedicated himself to the political activities. He assumed a new role as the Chairman of the Congress Parliamentary Board which had been constituted to fight the provincial elections during 1936—37.¹⁸

CONCLUSION:

Sardar Patel played an outstanding role in the civil Disobedience movement. He devoted his time and energy to educate the people for Civil Disobedience Movement being launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Life of Sardar Patel is continuous flow of inspirations and his never ending spirit, dedication to work, loyalty to country. It won't be exaggeration to say that after Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel is the most saluted leader in India.

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