

## The great unifier

No country can ignore its heroes, the ones who shaped its destiny. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was one such iconic personality who shaped India's destiny in a far-reaching manner. After India attained Independence, Patel fashioned the country's political integration with the swiftness of a military commander and the deftness of a visionary leader.

Present-day India owes immeasurable debt to the vision, tact, diplomacy and pragmatic approach of the Sardar in preventing the Balkanisation of the country. He was instrumental in the merger of more than 560 princely states with the Union of India after the country's partition. What makes this achievement very remarkable is that it was achieved without any bloodshed.

Adopting different approaches, as warranted by the situation, Patel gave friendly advice in some cases, persuaded the rulers to see reason in others and even used force as in the case of Hyderabad. It is remarkable that he fashioned a unified country at a time when the rulers of the princely states were given the option of joining either India or Pakistan or remaining independent.

The Nizam of Hyderabad nurtured ambitions of remaining independent of India and issued a firman to that effect. At the same time, he let loose razzakars and even toyed with the idea of merging Hyderabad with Pakistan, although there was no geographical continuity between the two. Travancore also declared that it would remain independent and the Nawab of Junagarh announced accession to Pakistan.

Sardar Patel secured the accession of Junagarh in a swift action code-named "Operation Polo". Hyderabad was integrated with the rest of India in just four days. What is popularly described as a "police action" to liberate and integrate Hyderabad commenced on September 13, 1948, and ended on September 17. September 17 is celebrated every year as "Hyderabad Liberation Day" in the city and in some areas of Maharashtra and Karnataka, which were parts of the erstwhile Hyderabad State.

In a masterful display of statesmanship, Patel ensured the smooth integration of the troubled domains by not allowing the situation to deteriorate into civil unrest. There was neither bloodshed nor rebellion as he went about the task of building a strong India with a missionary zeal. He said, "the safety and preservation of these states as well as of India demand unity and mutual cooperation between its different parts. By common endeavour we can raise the country to a new greatness while lack of unity will expose us to fresh calamities".

Patel was the greatest unifier of India. There is, perhaps, no parallel in modern history to this achievement. Acknowledging the monumental contribution of Patel in nation building, [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) said, "History will call him the builder and consolidator of new India."

His biggest asset was his down-to-earth disposition. He exemplified what the Father of the Nation had said about leadership: "I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles. But today it means getting along with people".

When he returned to India on completing of his law studies in England, Sardar Patel gravitated towards [Mahatma Gandhi](#)'s non-violent campaign against British rule. He was chosen by Gandhiji to lead the Kheda campaign. "Many were prepared to follow me, but I could not make up my mind as to who should be my deputy commander. Then I thought of Vallabhbhai," Gandhiji said.

The trust that Gandhiji reposed in Patel was not misplaced. Gandhiji's trusted lieutenant not only became an organiser par excellence but also a people's leader. He earned the title of "Sardar"

after spearheading a no-tax campaign by peasants at Bardoli in Gujarat. He also led the relief and rehabilitation operations when Gujarat was ravaged by floods and worked tirelessly during a plague outbreak in Ahmedabad.

Patel was also instrumental in the creation of the All India Administrative Services which he described as the country's "Steel Frame". In his address to the probationers of these services, he asked them to be guided by the spirit of service in day-to-day administration. He reminded them that the ICS was neither Indian, nor civil, nor imbued with any spirit of service.

His exhortation to the probationers to maintain utmost impartiality and incorruptibility of administration is as relevant today as it was then. "A civil servant cannot afford to, and must not, take part in politics. Nor must he involve himself in communal wrangles. To depart from the path of rectitude in either of these respects is to debase public service and to lower its dignity," he had cautioned them on April 21, 1947.

The remarks he made during the Quit India Movement are also relevant today. He said: "We have to shed mutual bickering, shed the difference of being high or low and develop the sense of equality and banish untouchability. We have to live like the children of the same father".

After he passed away, The Manchester Guardian commented on the role Patel played during the freedom struggle and after Independence: "Patel was not only the organiser of the fight for freedom but also the architect of the new state when the fight was over. The same man is seldom successful as a rebel and a statesman. Sardar Patel was the exception".

It is unfortunate that there has been no proper recognition of Patel's monumental contribution in unifying the country at its most critical juncture in history.

The invaluable contribution of Sardar Patel in building a modern and unified India needs to be remembered by every Indian as the country marches ahead as one of the largest economies in the world.

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