

Special Feature: Rashtriya Ekta Diwas (31st October)**Sardar Patel's Birth Anniversary*****Guru Prakash**

“Work is worship but laughter is life. Anyone who takes life too seriously must prepare himself for a miserable existence. Anyone who greets joys and sorrows with equal facility can really get the best of life.”

This statement can easily be mistaken as a thoughtful musing of a spiritual saint who has renounced the world, and has dedicated his life to a greater cause. It is difficult to believe that the aforementioned is one amongst many non-political quotes of the iron man of India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

EARLY LIFE & PEASANT STRUGGLE

Born as one amongst five brothers and sisters in a peasant family of Ladbai and Jhaveribhai Patel in village Nadiad in Kaira district of Gujarat, Vallabhbhai was set for a far greater cause of independence and integration of independent India. In his formative years, his mother has had a profound impact on his psychology. Like in a normal rural setting, the mother would gather all her children and narrate stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. While it impacted the spiritual quotient of young Patel, it was his father who introduced him to the world of peasantry. Young Vallabhbhai used to accompany his father to the fields and eventually became an expert in land tilling and cattle tending, two important aspects of cultivation. Such was his affection to his peasant ancestry that once an American journalist asked him about his cultural activities, to which he retorted, *“Ask me another. My culture is agriculture”*.

The first spate of struggle that brought Patel to public life was primarily his journey as a peasant

leader. His foray into public life and eventually into the freedom movement was possible through successful satyagrahas in Barod and Kheda, wherein he through his exceptional skills in leadership and consensus building brought the British government on knees to agree to the demand for the withdrawal of exorbitant increase in revenue.

Statesmanship and Political Acumen

Sardar Patel belongs to the legion of leadership who effectively contributed both to the freedom struggle, and guided the project of national reconstruction following independence.

“We worked hard to achieve our freedom; we shall have to strive harder to justify it”.

Patel was clearly conscious of the fact that independent India needed a steel frame to run its civil, military, and administrative bureaucracy. His faith in institutional mechanisms like having an organized command based army and a systemized bureaucracy proved to be a blessing. It was Patel who sent Indian navy to the port of Lakshadweep at an appropriate time, as Pakistan was equally keen to occupy the strategically important islands. One can only imagine what would have been the plight had our neighbours succeeded in her plans. He also pre-empted the relevance of Independent Tibet as a buffer state between India and China, as can be found in his correspondence with Pt. Nehru.

RSS and Sardar Patel

In a letter dated July 16th, 1949 to TR Venkatarama Sastri, Sardar Patel says, *“I was myself keen to remove the ban at the earliest possible opportunity.... I have advised the RSS in the past that the only way for them is to reform the congress from within, if they think the congress is going on the wrong path”.*

In another correspondence the second sarsanghachalak of RSS MS Golwalkar writes to Sardar Patel, *“I have decided to meet friends like Venkatarama ji etc. After meeting him and after attending to preliminary details with regard to our work, I shall do my best to call on you. I have learnt with sorrow that there has been some deterioration in your health. This indeed has given me much anxiety. The country is in so much need of your able guidance and service. I pray god to grant you long and healthy life. I hope till the time I shall be able to meet you; you would have much improved in your health. Some innermost feelings of heart are inexpressible through the medium of language. I am having such experience while I am writing this letter to you.*

The communication establishes the fact that Sardar was open to the idea of ‘conversation without confrontations’. There is a pertinent need to move beyond rhetoric; which can only be made

possible through independent research on the subject.

“Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is perhaps the only pragmatist in the Gandhi, Nehru, Patel trio who were the most important people especially in the run-up to independence and immediately afterwards. Most Indians do not realize that the map of India would not look anything like it does today had Patel not contributed to it. Without him, large chunks of India would have broken away through malicious intent. He almost single-handedly prevented this balkanization from happening. The one place where Patel could not entirely implement his wise policies is Kashmir, and we are paying the price for that even today. Next to Gandhi, and sometimes even better than the Mahatma, Patel understood the grassroots ethos and culture of India. If he would have lived even for a decade after independence, possibly many of India's persistent issues would have been resolved”, observes Hindol Sengupta, author of the upcoming Patel biography *The Man Who Saved India*.

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Views expressed in the article are author's personal.

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