

THE UNIFIER OF MODERN INDIA

Relevant for: History & Culture | Topic: Important Persons during freedom struggle & their Approaches to achievement of freedom goals

“By common endeavour we can raise the country to a new greatness, while a lack of unity will expose us to fresh calamities.” These pragmatic but profound remarks defined the vision and the sterling character of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the principal unifier of modern India.

Sardar Patel’s foresight and tactful navigation of the most turbulent period in post-Independence, and the resolve he demonstrated in integrating the more than 500 disparate princely States into the Dominion of India is an unparalleled accomplishment in modern history.

Hailing Patel’s feat, Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, had said: “By far the most important achievement of the present government is the unification of the States into the Dominion of India. Had you failed in this, the results would have been disastrous... Nothing has added to the prestige of the present government more than the brilliant policy you have followed with the States.”

Patel was a statesman with a strong sense of realpolitik, a realist to the core and an earthy politician whose sole aim was to build a strong and united India.

Great unifier and the maker of modern India: Narendra Modi’s tribute to Sardar Patel

What makes the merger of the princely States truly incredible is the fact that the princely rulers had the option at that time to either accede to India or Pakistan or remain independent. Yet, Patel’s sagacity, foresight, patriotism, tact, persuasive powers and abiding commitment to fair play enabled him to untangle a highly complex political and social problem of an unprecedented scale, without triggering any kind of revolt or civil unrest.

However, he was also compelled to use coercion by launching ‘Operation Polo’ to liberate and integrate Hyderabad after the Nizam of Hyderabad entertained false hopes of either joining Pakistan or remaining independent. In a swift operation lasting five days, Hyderabad State was liberated in September 1948.

Writing about Patel’s decisiveness in the *Christian Science Monitor*, W. Gordon Graham observed: “Hyderabad, a State covering 80,000 square miles in the heart of peninsular India, was at that time in the grip of an unscrupulous minority which aimed at secession from India. Had the bid succeeded, India might not have survived as a political unit. This situation needed a man of iron who would not balk at coercive action, and in the Sardar, India had at that vital moment just the man.”

Indeed at the most critical time when the country’s political unity was in jeopardy, India found the man of the moment in Sardar Patel, who displayed amazing patience, tact and a steely determination in dealing with an intransigent ruler, who refused to see the writing on the wall and even wanted to take the issue to the United Nations. Displaying statesmanship of the highest order, Sardar Patel prevented the attempts to not only Balkanise India but internationalise the issue as well. The complicated case of Junagarh, Gujarat, was also handled with dexterity by Patel. I feel that the problem of Jammu and Kashmir would have been resolved long back had Sardar Patel been given a free hand to handle it at that time.

Patel himself termed the entire exercise as a “bloodless revolution” when he wanted the

Constituent Assembly to consider privy purse settlements for the surrender by the rulers of all their ruling powers and the dissolution of the States as separate units.

Patel was an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi and never swerved in his loyalty to his mentor, although there were occasions when he differed with him. Similarly, he did not see eye-to-eye with Jawaharlal Nehru on certain issues, including the handling of Jammu and Kashmir. But he did not allow these differences or personal ego to come in the way of protecting the larger interests of the country — which were at the core of his heart. He worked shoulder-to-shoulder with Nehru in building a modern India.

Patel was a multifaceted personality. He was a dynamic political leader, an organiser par excellence, a competent administrator and a skilful negotiator.

After coming under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, he became his loyal follower and successfully organised peasants against the imposition of taxes by the British at Kheda and Bardoli, Gujarat, and in the process he earned the title of 'Sardar' for his leadership qualities. The manner in which he marshalled the peasants and the unflinching stand taken by him eventually forced the authorities to roll back the taxes.

The Iron Man of India was the chief architect of India's steel frame — the civil services. Thus, the All India Services were seen as an important cementing force in promoting the unity and integrity of the nation.

It will be relevant to recall his famous address to the civil service probationers in 1947 when Patel told them that the service will have to adopt its true role of national service without being trammelled upon by traditions and habits of the past. He said: "Officers must be guided by a real spirit of service in their day-to-day administration, for in no other manner can they fit in the scheme of things. Your predecessors were brought up in the traditions in which they felt out of touch and kept themselves aloof from the common run of the people. It will be your bounden duty to treat the common men in India as your own or to put it correctly, to feel yourself to be one of them." It is in the fitness of things that the National Police Academy located on the outskirts of Hyderabad, Telangana, is named after him, as a tribute to the statesman.

Another aspect of the Sardar that needs to be highlighted is his graciousness and magnanimity in readily abiding by Mahatma Gandhi's advice to withdraw his candidacy for the post of Congress President in favour of Pandit Nehru in 1946, although a majority of State Congress committees supported his candidature. It was apparent that the Congress President would become the first Prime Minister of India. It once again proved his noble intention of placing the country's interests above self.

His love for the motherland was best described by Maulana Azad when he said: "He made his choice out of two courses that come before a man, namely would he live for his country or for himself? Sardar chose his country."

I am glad that the 182-metre-tall 'Statue of Unity' is being unveiled today at the Narmada dam site in Gujarat, in a real tribute and recognition of Patel's stupendous role in integrating various princely States and ensuring India's unity.

As we pay our tributes to the great statesman on his birth anniversary today, on October 31, let us try to emulate his qualities and work towards realising his dream of providing 'Suraaj' in a new and prosperous India.

M. Venkaiah Naidu is the Vice-President of India

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