

The iron man of india: vallabhbhai patel



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As the first Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of India, Patel organised relief for refugees in Punjab and Delhi, and led efforts to restore peace across the nation. Patel took charge of the task to forge a united India from the British colonial provinces allocated to India and more than five hundred self-governing princely states, released from British suzerainty by the Indian Independence Act 1947. Using frank diplomacy, backed with the option and use of military force, Patel's leadership persuaded almost every princely state which did not have a Muslim majority to accede to India. Hailed as the Iron Man of India, he is also remembered as the "Patron Saint" of India's civil servants for establishing modern all-India services. Patel was also one of the earliest proponents of property rights and free enterprise in India.

Patel traveled to attend schools in Nadiad, Petlad and Borsad, living self-sufficiently with other boys. He reputedly cultivated a stoic character—a popular anecdote recounts how he lanced his own painful boil without hesitation, even as the barber supposed to do it trembled. Patel passed his matriculation at the late age of 22; at this point, he was generally regarded by his elders as an unambitious man destined for a commonplace job. Patel himself harboured a plan—he would study to become a lawyer, work and save funds, travel to England and study to become a barrister. Patel spent years away from his family, studying on his own with books borrowed from other lawyers and passed examinations within two years. Fetching Jhaverba from her parents' home, Patel set up his household in Godhra and was called to the bar. During the many years it took him to save money, Patel – now an advocate – earned a reputation as a fierce and skilled lawyer. His wife bore

him a daughter, Manibehn, in 1904, and a son, Dahyabhai, in 1906. Patel also cared for a friend suffering from Bubonic plague when it swept across Gujarat. When Patel himself came down with the disease, he immediately sent his family to safety, left his home and moved into an isolated house in Nadiad (by other accounts, Patel spent this time in a dilapidated temple); there, he recovered slowly.

In 1909, Patel's wife Jhaverba was hospitalised in Bombay to undergo a major surgical operation for cancer. Her health suddenly worsened and despite successful emergency surgery, she died in the hospital. Patel was given a note informing him of his wife's demise as he was cross-examining a witness in court. According to others who witnessed, Patel read the note, pocketed it and continued to intensely cross-examine the witness and won the case. He broke the news to others only after the proceedings had ended. Patel himself decided against marrying again. He raised his children with the help of his family and sent them to English-medium schools in Mumbai. At the age of 36, he journeyed to England and enrolled at the Middle Temple Inn in London. Finishing a 36-month course in 30 months, Patel topped his class despite having no previous college background. Returning to India, Patel settled in the city of Ahmedabad and became one of the city's most successful barristers. Wearing European-style clothes and urbane mannerisms, he also became a skilled bridge player. Patel nurtured ambitions to expand his practise and accumulate great wealth and to provide his children with modern education. He had also made a pact with his brother Vithalbhai to support his entry into politics in the Bombay

Presidency, while Patel himself would remain in Ahmedabad and provide for the family. He was a vegetarian.

Fighting for independence

At the urging of his friends, Patel won an election to become the sanitation commissioner of Ahmedabad in 1917. While often clashing with British officials on civic issues, he did not show any interest in politics. Upon hearing of Mohandas Gandhi, he joked to Mavlankar that Gandhi would “ask you if you know how to sift pebbles from wheat. And that is supposed to bring independence.” But Patel was deeply impressed when Gandhi defied the British in Champaran for the sake of the area’s oppressed farmers. Against the grain of Indian politicians of the time, Gandhi wore Indian-style clothes and emphasised the use of one’s mother tongue or any Indian language as opposed to English—the lingua franca of India’s intellectuals. Patel was particularly attracted to Gandhi’s inclination to action—apart from a resolution condemning the arrest of political leader Annie Besant, Gandhi proposed that volunteers march peacefully demanding to meet her.

Patel gave a speech in Borsad in September 1917, encouraging Indians nationwide to sign Gandhi’s petition demanding Swaraj-independence—from the British. Meeting Gandhi a month later at the Gujarat Political Conference in Godhra, Patel became the secretary of the Gujarat Sabha—a public body which would become the Gujarati arm of the Indian National Congress—at Gandhi’s encouragement. Patel now energetically fought against the forced servitude of Indians to Europeans—and organised relief efforts in wake of plague and famine in Kheda. The Kheda peasants’ plea for exemption from taxation had been turned down by British authorities. Gandhi endorsed

waging a struggle there, but could not lead it himself due to his activities in Champaran. When Gandhi asked for a Gujarati activist to devote himself completely to the assignment, Patel volunteered, much to Gandhi's personal delight. Though his decision was made on the spot, Patel later said that his desire and commitment came after intensive personal contemplation, as he realised he would have to abandon his career and material ambitions.

Satyagraha in Gujarat

Supported by Congress volunteers Narhari Parikh, Mohanlal Pandya and Abbas Tyabji, Vallabhbhai Patel began a village-to-village tour in the Kheda district, documenting grievances and asking villagers for their support for a statewide revolt by refusing the payment of taxes. Patel emphasised potential hardships with the need for complete unity and non-violence despite any provocation. He received enthusiastic responses from virtually every village. When the revolt was launched and revenue refused, the government sent police and intimidation squads to seize property, including confiscating barn animals and whole farms. Patel organised a network of volunteers to work with individual villages-helping them hide valuables and protect themselves during raids. Thousands of activists and farmers were arrested, but Patel was not. The revolt began evoking sympathy and admiration across India, including with pro-British Indian politicians. The government agreed to negotiate with Patel and decided to suspend the payment of revenue for the year, even scaling back the rate. Patel emerged as a hero to Gujaratis and admired across India. In 1920, he was elected president of the newly formed Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee-he would serve as its president till 1945.

Patel supported Gandhi's Non-cooperation movement and toured the state to recruit more than 300, 000 members and raise over Rs. 1. 5 million in funds. Helping organise bonfires of British goods in Ahmedabad, Patel threw in all his English-style clothes. With his daughter Mani and son Dahya, he switched completely to wearing khadi. Patel also supported Gandhi's controversial suspension of resistance in wake of the Chauri Chaura incident. He worked extensively in the following years in Gujarat against alcoholism, untouchability and caste discrimination, as well as for the empowerment of women. In the Congress, he was a resolute supporter of Gandhi against his Swarajist critics. Patel was elected Ahmedabad's municipal president in 1922, 1924 and 1927-during his terms, Ahmedabad was extended a major supply of electricity and the school system underwent major reforms. Drainage and sanitation systems were extended over all the city. He fought for the recognition and payment of teachers employed in schools established by nationalists (out of British control) and even took on sensitive Hindu-Muslim Issues. Sardar Patel personally led relief efforts in the aftermath of the intense torrential rainfall in 1927, which had caused major floods in the city and in the Kheda district and great destruction of life and property. He established refuge centres across the district, raised volunteers, arranged for supply of food, medicines and clothing, as well as emergency funds from the government and public.

When Gandhi was in prison, Sardar Patel was asked by Members of Congress to lead the satyagraha in Nagpur in 1923 against a law banning the raising of the Indian flag. He organised thousands of volunteers from all over the country in processions hoisting the flag. Patel negotiated a settlement that

obtained the release of all prisoners and allowed nationalists to hoist the flag in public. Later that year, Patel and his allies uncovered evidence suggesting that the police were in league with local dacoits in the Borsad taluka even as the government prepared to levy a major tax for fighting dacoits in the area. More than 6, 000 villagers assembled to hear Patel speak and supported the proposed agitation against the tax, which was deemed immoral and unnecessary. He organised hundreds of Congressmen, sent instructions and received information from across the district. Every village in the taluka resisted payment of the tax, and through cohesion, also prevented the seizure of property and lands. After a protracted struggle, the government withdrew the tax. Historians believe that one of Patel's key achievements was the building of cohesion and trust amongst the different castes and communities, which were divided on socio-economic lines.

In April 1928, Sardar Patel returned to the freedom struggle from his municipal duties in Ahmedabad when Bardoli suffered from a serious predicament of a famine and steep tax hike. The revenue hike was steeper than it had been in Kheda even though the famine covered a large portion of Gujarat. After cross-examining and talking to village representatives, emphasising the potential hardship and need for non-violence and cohesion, Patel initiated the struggle-complete denial of taxes. Sardar Patel organised volunteers, camps and an information network across affected areas. The revenue refusal was stronger than in Kheda and many sympathy satyagrahas were undertaken across Gujarat. Despite arrests, seizures of property and lands, the struggle intensified. The situation reached a head in August, when through sympathetic intermediaries, he negotiated a

settlement repealing the tax hike, reinstating village officials who had resigned in protest and the return of seized property and lands. It was during the struggle and after the victory in Bardoli that Patel was increasingly addressed by his colleagues and followers as Sardar.

As Gandhi embarked on the Dandi Salt March, Patel was arrested in the village of Ras and tried without witnesses, with no lawyer or pressman allowed to attend. Patel's arrest and Gandhi's subsequent arrest caused the Salt Satyagraha to greatly intensify in Gujarat-districts across Gujarat launched an anti-tax rebellion until and unless Patel and Gandhi were released. Once released, Patel served as interim Congress president, but was re-arrested while leading a procession in Mumbai. After the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Patel was elected Congress president for its 1931 session in Karachi-here the Congress ratified the pact, committed itself to the defence of fundamental rights and human freedoms, and a vision of a secular nation, minimum wage and the abolition of untouchability and serfdom. Patel used his position as Congress president in organising the return of confiscated lands to farmers in Gujarat. Upon the failure of the Round Table Conference in London, Gandhi and Patel were arrested in January 1932 when the struggle re-opened, and imprisoned in the Yeravda Central Jail. During this term of imprisonment, Patel and Gandhi grew close to each other, and the two developed a close bond of affection, trust, and frankness. Their mutual relationship could be described as that of an elder brother (Gandhi) and his younger brother (Patel). Despite having arguments with Gandhi, Patel respected his instincts and leadership. During imprisonment, the two would discuss national and social issues, read Hindu

epics and crack jokes. Gandhi also taught Patel Sanskrit language. Gandhi's secretary Mahadev Desai kept detailed records of conversations between Gandhi and Patel. When Gandhi embarked on a fast-unto-death protesting the separate electorates allocated for untouchables, Patel looked after Gandhi closely and himself refrained from partaking of food. Patel was later moved to a jail in Nasik, and refused a British offer for a brief release to attend the cremation of his brother Vithalbai, who had died in 1934. He was finally released in July of the same year.

Patel's position at the highest level in the Congress was largely connected with his role from 1934 onwards (when the Congress abandoned its boycott of elections) in the party organisation. Based at an apartment in Mumbai, he became the Congress's main fund-raiser and chairman of its Central Parliamentary Board, playing the leading role in selecting and financing candidates for the 1934 elections to the Central Legislative Assembly in New Delhi and also for the Provincial elections of 1936. As well as collecting funds and selecting candidates, he would also determine the Congress stance on issues and opponents. Not contesting a seat for himself, Patel nevertheless guided Congressmen elected in the provinces and at the national level. In 1935, Patel underwent surgery for haemorrhoids, yet guided efforts against plague in Bardoli and again when a drought struck Gujarat in 1939. Patel would guide the Congress ministries that had won power across India with the aim of preserving party discipline-Patel feared that the British would use opportunities to create conflicts among elected Congressmen, and he did not want the party to be distracted from the goal of complete independence. But Patel would clash with Nehru, opposing declarations of the adoption of

socialism at the 1936 Congress session, which he believed was a diversion from the main goal of achieving independence. In 1938, Patel organised rank and file opposition to the attempts of then-Congress president Subhas Chandra Bose to move away from Gandhi's principles of non-violent resistance. Patel considered Bose to want more power over the party. He led senior Congress leaders in a protest, which resulted in Bose's resignation. But criticism arose from Bose's supporters, socialists and other Congressmen that Patel himself was acting in an authoritarian manner in his defence of Gandhi's authority.

Quit India

On the outbreak of World War II Patel supported Nehru's decision to withdraw the Congress from central and provincial legislatures, contrary to Gandhi's advice, as well as an initiative by senior leader Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari to offer Congress's full support to Britain if it promised Indian independence at the end of the war and install a democratic government right away. Gandhi had refused to support Britain on the grounds of his moral opposition to war, while Subhas Chandra Bose was in militant opposition to the British. The British rejected Rajagopalachari's initiative, and Patel embraced Gandhi's leadership again. He participated in Gandhi's call for individual disobedience, and was arrested in 1940 and imprisoned for nine months. He also opposed the proposals of the Cripps' mission in 1942. Patel lost more than twenty pounds during his period in jail.

While Nehru, Rajagopalachari and Maulana Azad initially criticised Gandhi's proposal for an all-out campaign of civil disobedience to force the British to Quit India, Patel was its most fervent supporter. Arguing that the British

would retreat from India as they had from Singapore and Burma, Patel stressed that the campaign start without any delay. Though feeling that the British would not quit immediately, Patel favoured an all-out rebellion which would galvanise Indian people, who had been divided in their response to the war, In Patel's view, an all-out rebellion would force the British to concede that continuation of colonial rule had no support in India, and thus speed power transfer to Indians. Believing strongly in the need for revolt, Patel stated his intention to resign from the Congress if the revolt was not approved. Gandhi strongly pressured the All India Congress Committee to approve of an all-out campaign of civil disobedience, and the AICC approved the campaign on 7 August 1942. Though Patel's health had suffered during his stint in jail, Patel gave emotional speeches to large crowds across India, asking people to refuse paying taxes and participate in civil disobedience, mass protests and a shutdown of all civil services. He raised funds and prepared a second-tier of command as a precaution against the arrest of national leaders.

Historians believe that Patel's speech was instrumental in electrifying nationalists, who had been sceptical of the proposed rebellion. Patel's organising work in this period is credited by historians for ensuring the success of the rebellion across India. Patel was arrested on 9 August and was imprisoned with the entire Congress Working Committee from 1942 to 1945 at the fort in Ahmednagar. Here he spun cloth, played bridge, read a large number of books, took long walks, practised gardening. He also provided emotional support to his colleagues while awaiting news and developments of the outside. Patel was deeply pained at the news of the deaths of

Mahadev Desai and Kasturba Gandhi later in the year. But Patel wrote in a letter to his daughter that he and his colleagues were experiencing “ fullest peace” for having done “ their duty.” Even though other political parties had opposed the struggle and the British had employed ruthless means of suppression, the Quit India movement was “ by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857,” as the viceroy cabled to Winston Churchill. More than one hundred thousand people were arrested and thousands killed in police firings. Strikes, protests and other revolutionary activities had broken out across India. When Patel was released on 15 June 1945 he realised that the British were preparing proposals to transfer power to Indian hands.

Death

On 29 March 1949, authorities lost radio contact with a plane carrying Patel, his daughter Maniben and the Maharaja of Patiala. Engine failure caused the pilot to make an emergency landing in a desert area in Rajasthan. With all passengers safe, Patel and others tracked down a nearby village and local officials. When Patel returned to Delhi, thousands of Congressmen gave him a resounding welcome. In Parliament, MPs gave a long, standing ovation to Patel, stopping proceedings for half an hour. In his twilight years, Patel was honoured by members of Parliament and awarded honorary doctorates of law by the Punjab University and Osmania University.

Patel’s health declined rapidly through the summer of 1950. He later began coughing blood, whereupon Maniben began limiting his meetings and working hours and arranged for a personalised medical staff to begin attending to Patel. The Chief Minister of West Bengal and doctor Bidhan Roy heard Patel make jokes about his impending end, and in a private meeting

Patel frankly admitted to his ministerial colleague N. V. Gadgil that he was not going to live much longer. Patel's health worsened after 2 November, when he began losing consciousness frequently and was confined to his bed. He was flown to Mumbai on 12 December on advice from Dr Roy, to recuperate as his condition deemed critical. Nehru, Rajagopalchari, Rajendra Prasad and Menon all came to see him off at the airport in Delhi. Patel was extremely weak and had to be carried onto the aircraft in a chair. In Bombay, large crowds gathered at Santacruz Airport to greet him, to spare him from this stress, the aircraft landed at Juhu Aerodrome, where Chief Minister B. G. Kher and Morarji Desai were present to receive him with a car belonging to the Governor of Bombay, that took Vallabhbhai to Birla House. After suffering a massive heart attack (his second), he died on 15 December 1950 at Birla House in Bombay. In an unprecedented and unrepeated gesture, on the day after his death more than 1, 500 officers of India's civil and police services congregated to mourn at Patel's residence in Delhi and pledged "complete loyalty and unremitting zeal" in India's service. His cremation was planned at Girgaum Chowpatty, however this was changed to Sonapur when his daughter conveyed that it was his wish to be cremated like a common man in the same place as his wife and brother were earlier cremated. His cremation in Sonapur in Bombay, was attended by a one million strong crowd including Prime Minister Nehru, Rajagopalachari, President Prasad.