

# THE MAN WHO SAVED INDIA

*Sardar Patel and his Idea of India*

By INDOL SENGUPTA

---

*If only Patel had lived longer,  
India would have been spared  
the excesses of the License Raj  
and the Kashmir problem.  
This is one of the messages of  
this lively, highly readable book'  
Gurcharan Das, bestselling author*

PENGUIN BOOKS

## CONTENTS

### *Introduction: The Adjective Patelian*

1. 'We don't want to listen to your Gandhi!'
2. 'Gandhi is a Mahatma. I am not.'
3. 'Is there less risk in doing nothing?'
4. 'I am not a leader; I am a soldier.'
5. 'What is this feudal "Sardar"?!'
6. ' Could there be an equality between a giant and a pygmy? Or between an elephant and an ant?'
7. 'The so-called slogan of socialists to march forward is nothing but hollow talk.'
8. 'We felt that it would be unfair to Mahatma Gandhi to promise to do things which we cannot.'
9. 'One who had taken a pledge to protect the people cannot leave the city even when a single man is there.'
10. 'My life's work is about to be over . . . do not spoil it.'
11. 'This must, must and must be done.'

### *Illustrations*

### *Notes*

### *Bibliography*

### *Acknowledgements*

### *Follow Penguin*

## Advance Praise for the Book

‘Sardar Patel was the silent one of the trinity along with Gandhi and Nehru who dedicated his life to the struggle for an independent India. His lasting legacy is a United India rather than the land which throughout history was split in rival warring kingdoms. Hindol Sengupta has given us the story of Sardar’s life for the new generations of India so that they can understand and admire a unique personality. Read this book and discover India’s history in the first half of the last century. And reclaim your legacy’—Lord Meghnad Desai, bestselling author and economist

‘It is dangerous to put dreamers in power. Sardar Patel’s pragmatism was the perfect antidote to Nehru’s idealism in the early years of Independence. If only Patel had lived longer, India would have been spared the excesses of the License Raj and the Kashmir problem. This is one of the messages of this lively, highly readable book’—Gurcharan Das, bestselling author

‘*The Man Who Caved India* is the most authoritative and accessible biography of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, lovingly referred to as the “Iron Man of India”. In his impeccable narrative style, Hindol Sengupta rescues the memory of this beloved Indian leader from the vaults of obscurity. The book brings out the true story of independence as well as stability of India following it, which was achieved through the sweat and blood of its leaders like Patel.

*The Man Who Caved India* reverses one of the historical ironies of modern India by bringing into light many of the unknown facts of Patel’s life, based on the author’s field visits, interviews and extensive research, which is an onerous task in itself considering the fact that Patel neither maintained records of his work nor preserved his documents of communications.

Hindol begins the narration of the larger-than-life tale of Patel by describing his visit to the birth home of Patel in Nadiad, now in dilapidated condition, an image not unlike the less-than-optimal public memory of Patel in modern India.

Hindol discusses the numerous sacrifices Patel made in public life, bowing to the political ambitions of his peers, while never wavering from his duty to India. *The Man who Caved India* clearly charts Patel's leadership skills and statesmanship during the numerous non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements such as the Bardoli and Kheda satyagrahas, and the timely military action in independent India. It was Patel's sheer strength of resolve that helped forge the Bharat that would capture the imagination of the masses of independent India.

The hitherto unknown details of Patel's personal life and his complex relations with his peers and other contemporary national leaders including Gandhi, Nehru and Bose, help understand the grace with which he gave up key political positions more than once. In addition, Hindol also clearly describes the personal sacrifices Patel made at the altar of Mother India, not only of his personal life, but also the lives of his children, even to the chagrin of his family and friends.

The amazing result of Hindol's copious research is the emergence of an exceptionally clear picture of Patel's life and leadership in the three decades leading up to India's independence, in addition to establishing Patel's key role in the formative years of India following Independence, until his death. *The Man Who Caved India* is a timely and much needed historical account of modern India, a must-read for every Indian as well as every person interested in learning the true history of India'—Lavanya Vemsani, professor, Shawnee State University; vice president, Ohio Academy of History; president and cofounder, American Academy of Indic Studies

'Every nation has its own narrative that is built over time. For India, and as Indians, we claim ancient ancestry and are therefore, civilizational. Yet, we are a new democratic republic trying to find our place in the new tumultuous twenty-first century.

There comes a time when we cannot look forward without revisiting our past to see if the narrative of the past was complete, accurate and fair. For decades, the narrative has been that there were essentially two leaders in India—Mahatma Gandhi and his protégé Jawaharlal Nehru—who together led the country to Independence. Their contribution to the cause of independence was monumental and this became the widely accepted truth. Yet there was another truth, long ignored in our national narrative.

Hindol Sengupta's book *The Man Who Caved India* provides the other truth. In a meticulously and extensively researched book, the young author brings to the reader the significant role that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel played not only in our struggle for independence but in the consolidation of the new country. Vallabhbhai Patel was truly a part of the Trinity, along with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal, that led India to freedom. He was the man who ensured that this newfound independence did not collapse in a heap of dust. It was the Sardar who dealt with the reluctant maharajas, nawabs and the obdurate nizam of Hyderabad, when they dreamt of returning to their feudal opulence outside modern India. Patel liquidated the princely states without liquidating the princes. It was his commitment, diplomatic and political skills along with the force of his personality that made unified India a reality.

The book begins with a description of what was once the ancestral home of this great man of India. The decrepit and rather lonely state of the house and its utter neglect is a clear indication that the prevalent narrative preferred to ignore Vallabhbhai Patel's contribution. Gandhi knew the value of God and religion in an India that was subjugated. Nehru knew that if India had to talk about its future then there had to be a grand past of aloofness and elitism. It was Patel who was the hard realist who knew that democracy was not about daily plebiscites but hard decisions cloaked in egalitarianism. Nehru looked at the heavens for inspiration Patel looked at the ground beneath his feet for solutions. While Nehru wrote elegant prose and Gandhi spoke to the masses, it was left to Patel to worry over mundane matters like funds and their distribution. Patel was a man of few words and there is every reason to give him credit today for many of his arguments and

ideas ranging from tackling Kashmir, the future of Pakistan and how socialism without industrialization could be dangerous for the country. His warnings about Kashmir, Tibet and China went unheeded.

The book is thus not only one of the finest biographies in recent times but is also a much-needed redefining of the role played by Sardar Patel during India's freedom movement and as the great unifier. Sengupta argues that Patel was not only a pillar of strength behind some of Gandhi's earlier successes to holding the country together.

Sengupta quotes Patel's speech on 5 July 1947 where he warned, 'Our mutual conflicts and internecine quarrels and jealousies have in the past been the cause of our downfall and our falling victim to foreign domination a number of times. We cannot afford to fall into these errors or traps again.' Sardar Patel was relevant then as he is today. And so is Hindol Sengupta's book—Vikram Sood, bestselling author and the former head of India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing

*'The Man Who Caved India* is an excellent deep dive into the life and struggles of one of the tallest leaders in Indian history. Hindol Sengupta has written a fascinating book full of insights on things that are rarely discussed, such as Patel's economic ideas or his key role as the man who raised critical funds for the Congress Party. This captivating book breaks many myths and throws new light on one of the most important figures in Indian history'—Vijay Govindarajan, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author and Coxe Distinguished Professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College

'A very engaging biography of Sardar Patel, the man and his times, by one of India's best young writers'—Sanjeev Sanyal, bestselling author and principal economic advisor, ministry of finance, Government of India

'The genre of popular history and biography has been experiencing a golden age and Hindol Sengupta's fluent biography of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel joins a list of distinguished titles alongside Michael Axworthy's

Sword of Persia, Nadir Shah and Roger Crowley's Constantinople, The Last Great Siege, 1453. Very welcome indeed that an eminently accessible account of the life and achievements of one of India's true great sons is now available to a new generation of readers'—Gautam Sen, lecturer (retd.), London School of Economics and co-author of *Analysing the Global Political Economy*

'Rich with detail and illuminating insight, Hindol Sengupta's *The Man Who Caved India* brings alive Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's indomitable spirit and tenacity in the face of constant challenges that would crush a weaker man.

Few people immediately think of Patel when they think of men responsible for the shape and form of modern India. This is a great injustice, for, as Hindol explains with a wealth of anecdote and context, it was Patel who defined the very contours of the India we know today. This book is a must-read'—Saradindu Mukherji, member, Indian Council of Historical Research

'Hindol writes popular, unpopular history. Another brilliant book, this time presenting the untold story of one of India's greatest political leaders in front of today's readers in a way which makes it accessible and unputdownable. His work of putting together Sardar Patel's life story is strikingly accurate yet stunningly engrossing'—Vikramjit Bannerjee, senior advocate, Supreme Court of India, and advocate general of Nagaland

'This is one of those rare, great books which every Indian should read. After all, it is also about Vallabhbhai Patel, the man who created the modern state of India out of myriad fragments. Drawing upon a well-researched base of facts and writings, Sengupta emerges as a masterful storyteller who has weaved together a very coherent and absorbing story. The complex relationships among the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle are captured in all their subtle shades and colorful complexity. The end result is, for the reader, a more holistic understanding of Indian history, a much-needed filling up of certain gaps in our knowledge of the past, and a refreshingly enriched perspective on the architects of modern India'—N.C. Suresh, UB



Distinguished Professor, School of Management, State University of New York, Buffalo

*To my parents and Ishira*

## INTRODUCTION

### THE ADJECTIVE PATELIAN

Outside the entrance to the house I was greeted by a raggedy clothes line with holey clothes swaying listlessly on it and a duster, clenched between the teeth of a half-broken clip, which seemed to have given up the struggle for freedom.

The house looked relatively young, or had been whitewashed to at least appear so. A filigreed veranda gave it an antique touch. Its modernity seemed unsure but determined.

‘Is this Sardar Patel’s house?’ I confirmed with the woman hunched over a mound of soaked clothes in the neighbouring house. I had seen the sign and the photo on the other side of the house next to the barred windows facing the main road. The road was not very broad. It could just about fit a car and maybe a rickshaw, side by side.

The entrance to the house where ‘Sardar’ Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel was born, I was told by a passer-by, was from the ‘backside’.

In the front of the house, where the sign in Gujarati marked it as Patel’s birthplace, there was a photo of his naturally serious, even dour, face. It is a cheery photo, though, in sky blue and white, a bit like an enlarged passport image.

There is a small concrete enclosure right in front of the sign. This houses a cement prop-up statuette of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Mahatma, Patel’s guru and political mentor. The narrow road separates Patel’s house and the Gandhi statuette. When you approach the street where the unremarkable house stands, your eyes fall mainly on the Gandhi effigy. Even today, at his birthplace, Patel seems a bit of an afterthought.

It was about ten-thirty in the morning and there was hardly anyone around, except the usual friendly vagabond—every Indian street has one man ever willing to walk with you to your destination. The one I met was helpful: ‘No one comes here much,’ he said. ‘That’s why it is kept locked.’

To reach Patel’s birthplace, I had left Ahmedabad shortly before breakfast and driven for little more than an hour on the sort of smooth roads that feature in Gujarat Tourism advertisements starring Amitabh Bachchan.

Nadiad is just under 60 kilometres south-east of Ahmedabad. They say at one point it used to be the home of rope dancers,<sup>1</sup> en route from the bustling port of Cambay to Ahmedabad, which sent its textiles all the way to Europe in the Mughal age. There are nine routes to Nadiad, and nine out of it; the city has nine stepwells, nine lakes and nine villages (now towns) located in and around it. It might be a wee bit superstitious about the number nine. It is here that Patel was born, the fourth child, and fourth son,<sup>2</sup> of the farmer Jhaverbhai and his wife Ladba. They were five brothers and one sister— Vithalbhai, Somabhai, Narsibhai, Vallabhbhai, Kashibhai and Dahiba. They were Patidars, a community that many in India had never even heard of until the violent agitation for greater government largesse led by the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti and its so-called leader Hardik Patel began. The Patidars, sometimes referred to as Patidar-Patels make up around 20 per cent of Gujarat’s population.<sup>3</sup> The Patidars originally came from Punjab, and they were often skilled cultivators and good at rearing cattle.<sup>4</sup> When they settled in the Kheda region of Gujarat, six areas were the most important—Nadiad, Vaso, Karamsad, Bhadran, Dharmaj and Sojitra—and Patidars ‘from these were considered to be superior to the rest’.<sup>5</sup>

When the Patidar agitation broke out in 2015 what surprised most people was that this was widely considered a prosperous clan. That, American historian Howard Spodek has pointed out, was perhaps only partially true. Even at the time when Patel was born, the community was full of:

[Y]eoman farmers, holding small private plots under ryotwari<sup>6</sup> tenure, with enough land to taste comfort but not enough to enjoy luxury. Frequently, in addition to holding their own lands, they acted as headmen for villages or groups within villages; they were familiar with the significance and local power of government. They were characterized as

extremely hard working and blunt. Their desire for economic well-being linked with a willingness for adventure.<sup>7</sup>

In time, Patel would have the opportunity to understand and explore both these traits.

What was once *muffossil* in the time of Patel is now the eighth largest, if slightly unkempt, city in Gujarat, but a visitor to Nadiad would be hard-pressed to find many apparent signs of the city taking pride in its famous son.

The woman peered at me from her soapy darkness and reluctantly rinsed off the foam from her hands. She heaved up and with what sounded like a sigh emerged from the shadows. There was, I noticed, a key in her hand. To reach out and cross over to the locked gate outside Patel's house, the woman grunted past a broken drain, and an empty cobalt-shade bottle of Kinley Soda. For a moment, her face and oily bun were framed by the dripping white socks on the clothes line outside the main door. Absently, she adjusted the blue chequered boxers hanging to dry before she bent to open the main door.

One needs to bend one's head to enter the tiny two-room house. There are some rooms upstairs but they are not accessible to visitors. There are two rooms, the first opening into the next, so that they form what seems like a dark corridor. There are some relatively modern fittings in the house. A fan old enough to be from the 1980s stands in the first room as one enters and on one side, grazing against each other, are two cupboards—a smaller wooden one and a taller metal almirah with a full-length mirror attached to the right door and pockmarked with rust.

Squeezed in the dusty corner where the cupboards ended their writ was a wobbly cardboard cut-out of Patel wearing his trademark dhoti-kurta, loose-cut sleeveless jacket and neatly folded cotton shawl across his shoulders.

He is not smiling. This is not unusual. There are only a few photographs of Patel smiling. One is the photo which goes viral on social media every time his birthday, 31 October, a date which he confessed to having randomly made up, comes around. 'I have to bluff when asked how old I am,'<sup>8</sup> he said

about his invention of 31 October 1875 as his birthday—one of the few things that constantly amused him. The other is the photograph of Patel being received at the Begumpet Airport in the princely state of Hyderabad in 1948. This is said to be the only time the Nizam, allegedly the richest man in the world at the time, ever stepped out of his palace to receive anyone.

But we are getting ahead of the story.

The uneven stone floors of the house where Patel was born are cool to the naked feet even on a hot summer's day. I tried to switch on the old Bakelite switches to turn on the fan or the light, but neither worked. There are two other images of Patel in the house—a photo of him sitting on a chair dressed in all-white and a painting of him draped in a brown shawl and carrying a red clothbound book.

The overwhelming impression of these two rooms was darkness. The windows let in a sliver of sunlight but the cool inkiness seemed to swallow it. They were cleaner than I had imagined though shabby and derelict with damaged borders and corners.

A broken television set stands in one corner near a wall which has a coral and azure painting of Srinathji—the version of Lord Krishna worshipped by many Gujaratis. On another wall there was a small portrait of a Jain monk. Was it Mahavir, the founder of the Jain faith? It was not clear.

On the shelves hang dusty ornate maps of India, the kind that are peddled to promote a kitschy nationalism, and some framed photos—one of a young couple looking like they decided to get dressed up during their honeymoon and have a photo taken at one of those studios in touristy places which have several printed curtains as backdrops. If you want the mountains, they can photograph you against mountains—or the sea, if you prefer.

Only in this photograph, they are cradling a baby.

The woman who let me in seemed hesitant initially about following me inside. But soon she decided that I didn't deserve time alone there.

Who was this young couple, I asked.

She shrugged and started to kick aside torn pieces of electricity bills littered on the floor.

On one bit of cornice, an orange poster said ‘SVPM’—Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Memorial. But in the photos on the rectangular strip poster, Patel was only one of several people; I could not recognize any of the others. They seemed like recent local ‘leaders’ keen to get a piece of Patel to boost their fortunes. The poster had the usual vague eulogies of Indian politics written in Hindi—that India was great, that Indians were great, and even Patel, naturally, was great. Gujarat, of course and undoubtedly, was the greatest.

When I was leaving, I noticed an old wrought-iron chest. I tried to open it. The rust had hardened the hinges. The woman, who was still trying to make the scraps of paper disappear, shook her head. Through the entire period that I was in the house, the woman said nothing. She never asked me my name or what I was doing there or why I was interested in Patel. She never asked what I really wanted to see. Or if there was something I could see. There was a matter-of-factness about her which irritated me. This is all there is, she seemed to be telling me without uttering a single word. If you want to see it, fine, if not, that’s fine too.

I presumed, though it was never confirmed, that this meant the chest was empty.

Outside in the sunlight, the vagabond was still waiting for me. He had a scrap of paper in his hand which had two phone numbers.

‘This is Pradeep bhai,’ he said, showing me two names on the piece of paper, ‘and this is Sharmishtha ba.’

Who are these people, I asked.

‘Family,’ he said.

As in?

‘Family,’ he repeated. ‘Call, call.’

I called every day without fail but the two phone numbers were always switched off.

~

Patel was five feet five inches. Mahatma Gandhi was five feet three inches. Subhas Chandra Bose was five feet five inches tall and Jawaharlal Nehru five feet eight inches.

‘Now what does this tell us?’ one of my schoolteachers once asked. ‘It tells us that history belongs to the tall,’ said the teacher, who taught mathematics and was shorter than most of us Class XI boys. ‘Who else was tall?’

Silence.

‘Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Five feet eight inches. Same as Nehru.’ So?—the question hung around the dank Calcutta classroom air for a bit. ‘They both got their own countries.

Comes from being tall.’

Even in an arbitrary lesson in history, from a mathematics teacher, Patel, the first home minister of independent India, the man who many believe could have—indeed *should* have—been the prime minister was getting short shrift.

Over the next several years Patel remained in my memory as a short man and not much else. My schoolbooks in Calcutta, where I studied under the elite-ish ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education) system, didn’t say much about Patel. I call the ICSE elite-ish because there were few schools in Calcutta affiliated to this education board—and the ones that were charged the most fees. But perhaps it was not the board or the school which neglected telling me much about Patel. Perhaps it was the history books and my teachers. To be absolutely honest, if I were to really recall the broad trajectory of history—and historical characters—that I remember from school, it would look something like this:

- ◆ Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa: old cities with good drainage (something Calcutta didn’t have—and later on, when I left Calcutta, I found out most Indian cities do not have)
- ◆ The Mughals: had lots of money, built the Taj Mahal, Akbar created a new religion which disappeared as soon as he died
- ◆ The 200-year British rule: gave us the English language, and therefore English-medium schools—important things if a ‘good job’ was to be had
- ◆ Mahatma Gandhi: the Father of the Nation, spun the charkha, walked the Dandi March, was assassinated, holidays in his name



- Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: raised an army against the British, and according to many Bengalis probably still alive
- Khudiram Bose: threw bombs at Englishmen, got the wrong guy but was hanged nevertheless even though was merely a child when he died, subject of a particularly haunting song about him saying goodbye to his mother
- Jawaharlal Nehru: first prime minister of India, prolific writer and statesman with a world view, earned the epithet Chacha (it was never quite clear why Chacha and not some other moniker, like Mama), red rose in the achkan buttonhole, affectionate towards children, therefore Children's Day, and other holidays in his name too
- Indira Gandhi: daughter of Jawaharlal, saviour of Bangladesh (which was not too far away from Calcutta and where everyone seemed to have some relatives, and one could buy great quality hilsa), assassinated
- Rajiv Gandhi: Indira's son, also assassinated

That sort of summed up Indian history for us. Everything else was a bit hazy. All the names slightly incoherent, obscure; they may have been mentioned once or twice but they were certainly not emphasized enough to have registered strongly.

It was not until I was well into my twenties that I started to wonder and explore other narratives about my own country. Bengal, my state, had produced a legion of revolutionaries, men and women prepared and willing to fight a violent battle with the British colonial rulers for freedom. But their story had got submerged in the grand narrative of the 'non-violent' victory of India's independence movement. I read contrarian positions which questioned (with validity, I thought) how successful our non-violent movement would have been without the devastating losses Britain suffered in the Second World War. By the time the war ended in 1945, Britain was nearly bankrupt, with nearly a million buildings in London destroyed. Back at home a revolt against imperial colonial rule led by sailors in Bombay in February 1946 spread to Calcutta and Karachi, all the major ports of the Raj—in final count the Royal Naval Mutiny is believed to have involved up to 20,000 sailors on more than seventy ships and offices onshore across the country.

Was it so surprising, then, that the world's greatest—though at that time also greatly weakened—naval power rather rapidly gave up the colony that was the jewel in its crown?

But no matter how much I tried—and in the course of writing this book I tried repeatedly—to remember whether I had been taught anything about the naval revolt, so critical a piece of history, on the eve of Indian independence, I am fairly certain that I was not. Maybe the people who wrote our school history textbooks did not think it was important. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they had better things, and people, to teach us about.

But I was no longer in school, and my search for alternative—actually not alternative, just expanded, widened, broadened—narratives of Indian history grew. In this quest, I kept landing up at the door of a man called Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel.

There is a style of writing history, now considered slightly dated, called the ‘great man theory’ of history where events are considered by-products of the achievements of a series of ‘great men’, and it is through their exploits that the history of mankind is considered. This style is not fashionable today as contemporary historians prefer a more, so to speak, bottom-up approach, a sort of worm’s eye view of history which takes into account popular versions, oral traditions and narratives of the history as ordinary people saw it, and not just the leaders. But when I read, or rather the way I was taught, Indian history the sense of great man-ism was acute. But even there, it not was *all* great men; it seemed to be only about *some* great men. When I thought about my history lessons, I remembered the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari writing about the crushing victory of Rome over Numantia (in modern-day Spain) in his bestselling debut work, *Capiens*: ‘The victory of Rome over Numantia was so complete that the victors co-opted the very memory of the vanquished’.<sup>9</sup> It occurred to me that the same could be said of the dominance of one (or more) strains of history in the imagination of the modern Indian nation.

By the time I started working on this book, talk of a Patel statue had begun. There were some statues already of Patel, including one on New Delhi’s Parliament Street, so named because of course it is a road that leads swiftly to the Parliament. The statue, 35 metres (around 115 feet) tall, didn’t seem to be doing too well, though. Even the women assigned to clean the floor upon which it stands ‘don’t really know anything about the person in

the statue',<sup>10</sup> noted the *Indian Express*. And no one knew when it had last been cleaned.<sup>11</sup>

So a new statue would be built in Patel's home state, Gujarat. It was backed by the Gujarat government and the then chief minister (it was announced in 2010), and now prime minister, Narendra Modi. Designed by Ram Vanji Sutar, winner of the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan, and artist of more than fifty giant public sculptures, including iconic ones of Mahatma Gandhi, the new Patel statue would cost more than \$440 million, paid for in part by the state and the rest by public donations.

The Statue of Unity was designed to showcase more than just Patel's life or achievements—it was also about where India saw itself in the world. The statue would be the world's tallest—standing higher than both the Spring Temple Buddha in China (153 metres) and the Statue of Liberty in America (93 metres). It would be 182 metres (nearly 600 feet). (As this book was being completed, the government of Maharashtra, Gujarat's old neighbour and rival, announced an even taller statue of Shivaji, the medieval warrior hero. Why? That story will have to wait for another book.) But not everyone was happy. Some complained that the statue would cost four times as much as India's famously low-cost Mars Orbiter Mission.<sup>12</sup> Others worried: Could a country which still had malnutrition afford such a statue?

In terms of money, the amount being spent on the statue was less than the annual sports budget of the Government of India. It was also a little less than what the Ministry of External Affairs was planning to spend on buying new real estate for diplomacies and offices around the world. Presumably having the world's tallest statue—and the global press that it would generate on inauguration—would contribute significantly to what is known as 'soft power'.

But surely there were other reasons why Patel was deserving of an iconic statue, I thought. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the (modern Indian) Nation, had one in seventy countries around the world, including a latest one at Parliament Square in London, the result of an effort spearheaded by the Indian-born British economist Meghnad Desai. Nehru, who was famously an aesthete, had at least eight around the country, and one in

Mauritius. In fact, Sutar, the sculptor of the Statue of Unity, was initially spotted by Nehru. Later, he was commissioned to build the first major Nehru statue by the prime minister's daughter Indira. That 12-foot bronze lookalike of Nehru now stands in Jaipur. Sutar also made another 18-foot statue of Nehru at the request of the Indian government in 1995, at the Bhakra-Nangal dam in Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh in memory of the statesman who declared dams the 'temples of modern India'.

But the contours, literally and figuratively, of independent India would have never been what Nehru finally presided over—or what we understand them to be today—had it not been for Patel. Arguably (it is certainly my argument) the modern Indian nation state owes as much to Patel for its existence as it does Gandhi or Nehru.

To give Patel credit is not to diminish the unifying power of Gandhi's message or even some of the modernist visions of Nehru. It is to fill a knowledge gap in what ought to be a natural trinity. While most Indians know far more about Gandhi and Nehru and their contributions in making the nation that they call home, few would immediately, in the same breath, give equal recognition to Patel. Such acknowledgement is eminently due, and it is a shame that it has never been adequately given, if for nothing else than those 'four hectic years, 1947 to 1951'<sup>13</sup> when through endless 'toils and anxieties . . . the edifice of a consolidated India'<sup>14</sup> was built with Sardar Patel as the 'light and inspiration'.<sup>15</sup> In his biography of Patel, Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, quoted the first president of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, as saying, 'That there is today an India to think and talk about is very largely due to Sardar Patel's statesmanship and firm administration. Yet, we are apt to ignore him.'<sup>16</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi himself adds:

The establishment of independent India derived legitimacy and power, broadly speaking, from the exertions of three men, Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. But while its acknowledgements are fulsome in the case of Nehru and dutiful in the case of Gandhi, they are niggardly in the case of Patel.<sup>17</sup>

(When I read this sentence, I did a small experiment and checked how many times the two men had been referred to in two most popular recent books about modern Indian history: Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* and Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi*. It was natural, I knew, that Nehru's number would be greater since he had been the first prime minister with a seventeen-year-long rule but I wanted to see by how much. What would be the difference? In Khilnani's book Patel receives eight mentions and Nehru sixty-five, eight times that of Patel.<sup>18</sup> In *India After Gandhi*, Patel has forty-eight references and Nehru is mentioned 185 times—nearly four times more. Gandhi is mentioned twenty-nine times in Khilnani's book and more than 130 times in Guha's. I understand that this has no more than anecdotal value, and this is not meant as a criticism of these two writers, but it still, I feel, gives a tiny glimpse of how peripheral the Patel story has become in the national imagination of our freedom movement—despite previously noted efforts by the Bharatiya Janata Party to appropriate and propel his name—and how, to use Rajmohan Gandhi's term, 'niggardly' the credit that has been given to him.)

Why are these three men the holy trinity of the making of modern India? The easiest answer would be their complementary skills. Gandhi knew how to give the bark of a contemporary struggle for nationhood its real mass bite by connecting it to an old, never-ending conversation about God and being good; he knew that true politics is religious in its fervour and therefore all successful political ideologies are cults. Nehru understood that one of the best ways to talk about the future in a country obsessed with the past was to couch it in the language of aristocracy, in the idiom of aloofness—elitism, he instinctively realized, was a useful tool for enforcing new, difficult ideas, ironically even of egalitarianism. It could be said that he was borrowing almost from the old rajas—many of them great futurists—who knew that the masses had to be pulled, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the future, and that required a slight disdain for the intellectual prowess of the masses, it helped a ruler feel more affectionately towards them, but at the same time not fall into the democratic canard of taking too much advice from the electorate. And Patel? He understood better than anyone else that

democracy isn't so much an everyday plebiscite but a daily judgement—the interplay of incessant retribution and reward that keeps the citizen at bay. It is only by cloaking ruthless jurisprudence in the rhetoric of egalitarianism that real decisions, which keep a country safe and help it grow prosperous, can be made. The politician, Patel may well have said, is first and foremost a benevolent juror. While Gandhi and Nehru governed with coaxing words, Patel ruled with fearsome magisterial silences. Gandhi and Nehru preferred to write history—and indeed they did. Patel, as his daughter and sometime- secretary-and-housekeeper Maniben remembered, used to say: ‘Why not create history rather than waste time writing it?’<sup>19</sup>

It is my contention that not only is Patel deserving of being counted as one of the three strongest pillars of the movement that won India freedom from British rule, but that he was also perhaps the most grounded, literally and figuratively, of the three, and that his contribution from before Independence till his death in 1950, in many ways, surpassed Nehru's.

There is no doubt that Nehru had many fine ideas as prime minister but he would have done well to heed Patel's pragmatic, cautious, earthy wisdom in problematic issues like Pakistan, Hindu–Muslim disputes, and India's relationship with China. That is not to suggest that the Nehru–Patel relationship was overwhelmingly acrimonious, or that the Gandhi–Patel relationship was merely exploitative—to do so would be untrue and unjust; there was undoubtedly a great deal of affection and brotherhood between the three men. They genuinely felt part of a cause that was greater than their own lives and felt compelled to devote all that they had to it. But to any neutral observer it would be clear that it was Patel who threw away personal motivations and ambitions far more than the other two men—indeed he seemed to be able to carry a lighter, nimbler sense of self. A small but powerful example of this is that among the three he was the only one who did not bother to leave behind voluminous writings that explain his point of view on India's epochal journey to freedom. If history is writings by the victors, Patel clearly was on the vanquished side. Patel bequeathed no history that gives his side of the story, that talks about how he saw things, that would explain to future generations his role and importance. Mostly

what remained was what he really focused on—his work—and therefore he is represented in this story largely through his correspondences, unlike both the Mahatma and Nehru who wrote elaborately crafted world views and expansive and detailed memoirs. Naturally, then, of the three, the least amount of writing, both in terms of biographies or monographs, have been published on Patel. It is almost as if, his work done, Patel wanted to erase every bit of his memory from the momentous history of India's independence.

As his daughter Maniben recalled:

The Sardar was a man of few words. He wrote very little; he hardly kept any record of his public or party work. He destroyed letters addressed to him after reading them and replied by hand, not keeping copies. Once, when K. Gopalswami, political commentator of the Times of India, visited him in his flat on Marine Drive, Bombay, the Sardar called for a letter he had received from C. Rajagopalachari, forgetting that he had torn it up and thrown it in the wastepaper basket. Fortunately, I had collected the pieces. It took me some time to paste them together before passing it on to him.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, it is even more critical that credit, though ever so belatedly, is given to him for his arguments, his ideas and his labours.

It was Patel who saw clearly—and it would be fair to say that perhaps Nehru never entirely reconciled to this—that in Kashmir, 'it is better to have an open fight than to have disguised warfare such as has been going on'.<sup>21</sup>

It was Patel who recognized without fuss—and it would be fair to say that perhaps Gandhi never entirely reconciled to this—that 'if we had not accepted partition, India would have fallen into bits. Now that we have been able to salvage a major part of India and have been able to build it up into an extensive single unit, let us make it powerful'.<sup>22</sup>

It was Patel who had the foresight in 1948 to say to Pakistan, 'Pakistan authorities say that their enemies are conspiring to destroy Pakistan. I would say to them that the enemies of Pakistan are not outside Pakistan but inside'.<sup>23</sup>

Little wonder then that Sir Roy Bucher, the last Englishman to hold the position of the commander-in-chief of the Indian Army said of Patel:

‘Sardar always reminded me of the pictures of Roman Emperors in history books. There was something rock-like in his appearance and demeanour, which bred confidence in him to an extraordinary degree.’<sup>24</sup>

Patel, though, would have most likely rejected such a forceful and grand description of himself. On 5 January 1948, the deputy prime minister of India wrote a letter to journalist Ian Stephens at the *Ctatesman* expressing his astonishment, and perhaps even a little exasperation, at the publication of a photograph which showed him raising a clenched fist during a public speech.

In addressing public meetings, I never use a fist at all. At the most it is a move of the hand or a flourish of the index finger. I am, therefore, at a loss to understand how the photograph appeared as it did. I hope your investigations would yield some results. I would be glad to know the outcome [ . . . ] You can ask your photographer in Delhi to get in touch with my Private Secretary who will give him a suitable time for a photograph.<sup>25</sup>

This photograph it seems was coupled with some quotes from him about Pakistan which Patel, in his letter, denies ever having made.

The words put in my mouth were never uttered by me at the public meeting [ . . . ] I have no doubt whoever has done so has done with a mischievous intention. It is particularly unfortunate, as I am sure, you will see from the speech, that my references to Pakistan were as cordial and friendly as could be possible in prevailing circumstances.<sup>26</sup>

It is unclear how the deputy prime minister defined ‘friendly’, for the *Hindustan Times* report of this speech in Calcutta had him declaring:

But how can any plebiscite be held when fighting is going on? If we have ultimately to save Kashmir by the sword, where is the scope for plebiscite? I should like to make one thing clear that we shall not surrender an inch of the Kashmir territory to anybody.<sup>27</sup>

Well, I suppose this was, as Patel tells Stephens, him being as friendly as possible ‘in prevailing circumstances’. But the fact that even the Iron Man of India was careful about his public image is the sort of humanizing anecdote that, to me, seems missing from the way Sardar Patel is envisaged in the popular imagination today.



Think about it: Gandhi has his non-violent, charkha-spinning heart-warming image which even today produces tender Bollywood blockbusters like *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* and words like ‘Gandhigiri’ which is the opposite of the ‘*goondagardi*’ of lumpens and hoodlums; Nehru emerges as a red rose-bedecked chacha playing with children and telling stories (and writing mellifluous letters to his daughter from jail) with the whiff of a heady romance (with another man’s wife—Lady Edwina Mountbatten, no less) constantly giving him a dandy edge. But what about Patel? There is barely any public-relations halo around him, no love affairs (his wife died early and almost nothing is known about her, and there is no mention of any other woman in his life), not many tender letters to his children. This is a man who spoke (or wrote) little about himself or his needs.

Therefore, it is even more important to try and understand what seems to have replaced many of these sentiments in his life—the uncompromising desire for a powerful India. But power, as we will see through the course of this book, and the search for strength are convoluted things. These are often indefinable and the men who seek them—especially if they don’t even seek these for themselves—are often hard to understand. Such men are easily rendered monochromatic by the sepia tint of history.

Even if we cannot find many details about Patel’s private life, it is important today to understand in detail his public contribution and what that means for us today; for independent India, in scope and size, would not be what it is today had it not been for the astute resolve of Patel. This man, more than any other, constructed almost piece by excruciating piece, India as we know it today—and it is my researched contention that without the stern nerve of Patel there would be no India, but most probably a nasty warring Balkanized mess of fragmented states. We like to talk today about the idea of India. But there isn’t one idea of India. India has a multitude—and then some more—of ideas. It is not my intention to describe one as greater or more valuable than another but it is certainly my belief that without India itself, its outline from coast to coast, from the mountains to the seas, there would not be much use of any of its ideas, such as they are;

for geography is not merely measurements on land, it is philosophy, culture, it is the amalgamated wisdom of a people.

According to veteran Congress leader Dwarka Prasad Mishra, Patel, born to a farmer, had the practical temperament and manner of ‘an Indian peasant’. ‘The simple wisdom of the ages is all his knowledge,’ Mishra said about the England-trained barrister who was also a proficient bridge player.

In 1921, the historian Radha Kumud Mukherjee explained how India’s sense of patriotism comes straight from its Sanskrit literature.

For instance, in the Vedic literature we have a most remarkable passage in the Atharvaveda [sic] called the Prithivi Sukta, which is a string of about sixty-three thousand impassioned hymns to the motherland. Praises are sung of the mother-country as the land girt by the seas and fertilised by the rivers that pour down their bounty in streams of plenty, the land of hills and snowy mountains and forests giving protection to her sons unharassed, unsmitten, and unwounded; the land bearing in many places people of different speech, diverse customs according to their homes, yet yielding a thousand streams of property like a steady, unresisting milch cow.<sup>28</sup>

But this diversity, explained Mukherjee, was never divisive; for even in the ancient times, the seers who wrote the Prithvi Sukta, knew that all the differences coexisted in harmony because they stood upon a foundational unity.

The last passage is indeed highly significant for the unique note it strikes—remarkable for the age—showing a seer’s grasp of the fundamental conditions of nation-building in this land of many peoples of different speech and diverse customs. And yet this very diversity is recognised in a supremely patriotic spirit as a source of national strength, of that richer and fuller unity in which all diversities lose themselves with their several contributions towards the development of a common life, even as a thousand streams merge themselves in the sea.<sup>29</sup>

Patel understood, in the words of Aurobindo, that ‘we shall not perish as a nation, but live as a nation’.<sup>30</sup>

He expresses all this sentiment in his unique pragmatic way—by reminding the rulers of the princely states of India what happens, indeed happened in the past, when the lesson of unity in diversity was forgotten. Here is Patel on 5 July 1947:

It was owing to the country's politically fragmented condition and our inability to take a united stand that India succumbed to successive waves of invaders. Our mutual conflicts and internecine quarrels and jealousies have in the past been the cause of our downfall and our falling victim to foreign domination a number of times. We cannot afford to fall into these errors or traps again.<sup>31</sup>

Geography was not just a romantic, or a merely spiritual, concept for Patel. He understood that our culture is intrinsically, irretrievably tied to our sense of the land. There is an Ayodhya, a Kashi, a Kurukshetra, a Vrindavan—but are they exactly located where the myths say they are? Perhaps not.

However, what matters is the continuing memory of a civilization. What matters is that we remember, that we know where to go. Our cosmography and geography is intertwined.

For over 3000 years believers have dipped their heads under water, then cupped river water in their palms and raised it three times as salutation to the sun, chanting:

O Ganga, O Yamuna, O Godavari,  
Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu (Indus),  
Kaveri, Manifest as it pleases you in these  
waters!

It is not just about the rivers, of course. It is about the recollection of a unified topography in whole.

And without Sardar Patel, there would be none. This statement sounds hagiographic but is far from that. If at all, it is probably an understatement. Between 1947 and 1950 (Patel died on 15 December 1950), through a 'bloodless revolution',<sup>32</sup>—his own words—he effected a transformation in the lives of millions of Indians: to be precise, 28 per cent of the population spread over 48 per cent of the geographical area of pre-Independence India.<sup>33</sup> Impressed by this feat of the Sardar, the Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin exclaimed: 'You Indians are a remarkable people. How did you manage to liquidate the princely states [of India] without liquidating the princes?'<sup>34</sup> Bulganin considered the feat bigger than Bismarck's unification of Germany. The writer H.V. Hodson quoted Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, as saying, 'I am glad to say that Nehru has not been put in charge of the new States Department which would have wrecked

everything. Patel, who is essentially a realist, is very sensible in going to take it over.<sup>35</sup>

These were people living in the princely states of India or in kingdoms ruled by princes—all neatly, and rigidly, divided into a hierarchy, often in terms of ‘gun salutes’.

After the blood-soaked crushing of the 1857 revolt against the British East India Company, the control of Indian territories shifted from the Company to the Crown. At the Allahabad durbar on 1 November 1858, then governor general of India Lord Canning proclaimed that Queen Victoria would now rule over India, and promised that not only would the Crown honour all contracts made by Indian princes with the East India Company, it would also not seek to usurp the territory that belonged to the princely states.

This naturally meant that from that day onwards, step by step,

the colonial state began to annex states and provinces as subsidiaries of the British Empire [ . . . ] It was not simply an idea of conquest but as much an idea of hegemonic administrative control under the mask of governability and accountability that the colonial state emphasized and carried forward in its everyday formal-legal bureaucratic- governmentalised spheres of life.<sup>36</sup>

Simply put, the princes were allowed toys and pageantry while the real power—for instance to appoint key ministers, determine who succeeded to the throne and keep milking large sums ostensibly for providing administrative and military help.

For instance, the gun-salute list was delicately poised and rigidly followed. It was a borrowed tribute originally given to the ruler on the ships of the British Royal Navy, and then later also on land. The Indian princely states had been categorized from grandiose twenty-one-gun-salute states (which meant that their ruler would be greeted with the guns firing twenty- one times) to measly nine-gun-salute kingdoms.

The princely states of Jammu and Kashmir and Hyderabad (both larger at that time than Britain), Baroda, Mysore and Gwalior were all twenty-one- gun salutes. Among the nineteen-gun-salute states (twenty-one was

followed by nineteen, there were no twenty-gun salutes) were historical dynasties like Udaipur, Indore, Bhopal, Travancore and Kolhapur. This was followed by the seventeen-gun-salute states which had most of the Rajput states like Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner and, in the Punjab, Patiala. Among the smallest were nine-gun salutes for the Raja of Maihar (in today's Madhya Pradesh), or the Rajadhiraj of Shahpura (Gujarat).

There were more than 500 princely states, each with hereditary rulers with powers of life and death over their subjects; many with their own currency and railways and stamps. And even though they were all completely dependent on British India for trade and security, many of the rulers had enough men and materials to put up a fight—or at least create enough chaos to delay the process of accession significantly.

Some of the states claimed an unchallengeable heritage. The Kachwaha Rajputs, who ruled Jaipur until Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II acceded to India in 1947, claimed an ancestry tracing back to the Sun God, and styled themselves as Suryavanshis. Down south, in Mysore, the Wodeyars were said to belong to the lunar line going right up to the clan of Lord Krishna in the Mahabharata. Where Sawai Man Singh II was swashbuckling enough to bring home the polo World Cup in 1933, Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar was such an aesthete that he was the chief patron of the London Philharmonic Orchestra for a time and had bankrolled the hiring of a young Herbert von Karajan as conductor.<sup>37</sup>

These rulers en masse gave up their powers in exchange for a privy purse (a yearly government grant for their expenses in lieu of surrendering the right to tax their lands) and the right to retain their title—all without a single drop of blood being shed. (There was bloodshed though, in Kashmir and Hyderabad, and we shall come to that in a bit.)

Suffice to say that the Sardar's India was greater in size (even after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan) than that of Samudragupta (4<sup>th</sup> century AD), Asoka (around 250 BC), and Akbar (16<sup>th</sup> century) and the writ of the Centre wielded an authority and respect never dreamt of by these greatest of Indian rulers.<sup>38</sup>

As veteran Congress leader S. Nijalingappa noted in his diary, ‘A thousand Nehrus could not have achieved it.’<sup>39</sup> That sounds sharper than it perhaps is. It certainly sounds less acerbic when you consider the number of times Patel gave up, without a protest, the position of the president of the Indian National Congress led by Mahatma Gandhi, including in 1947 when not a single state unit of the Congress nominated Jawaharlal Nehru for the position of president because that would mean having him as the country’s first prime minister. Each time that Gandhi indicated his choice was Nehru, in many ways an adopted son, each time Patel quietly stood aside, without a single complaint. In 1929, 1936 and 1946, when Patel was a natural claimant to the position of Congress president. Each time many Congressmen would have liked to see Patel take the chair. Each time Gandhi, in a sense, vetoed his name, often in favour of Nehru.

In total, before and after Patel’s death, Nehru became president of the Indian National Congress Party six times. Patel only once, in 1931, though even other leaders like Maulana Azad and Madan Mohan Malaviya rose to the president’s chair twice or more times.

In 1928, after Patel’s success in organizing peasants in Bardoli, about 35 kilometres from Surat, in a satyagraha against paying taxes to the British, eminent barrister and former Congress president Motilal Nehru himself wrote to Gandhi admitting that Patel deserved the president’s position:

I am quite clear that the hero of the hour is Vallabhbhai, and the least we can do is offer him the crown. Failing which, I think that under all the circumstances Jawahar would be the best choice.<sup>40</sup>

Instead, and even though Patel had for all practical purposes reinvigorated Gandhi’s satyagraha movement which the Mahatma had called off after the murder of numerous policemen at Chauri Chaura in Uttar Province (present-day Uttar Pradesh) in 1922, it was Motilal Nehru who was anointed president of the Congress by Gandhi in 1928.

There are many reasons cited for the lapses against Patel—he was older than Nehru (by fourteen years), he was not as popular among the youth, and even that the Kashmiri Pandit aristocrat was ‘young, light-skinned and of

handsome appearance’ compared to the Gujarati peasant’s ‘quiet healthy appearance, a grey-black moustache [which he seems to have shaved off later in life], a small supply of grey-black hair on the head, a slight redness in the eye, a little hardness in the moustache and the face as a whole’.<sup>41</sup>

Nehru and Patel had studied law at the same time in London, though there is no record of them ever having met. Nehru was at Inner Temple and Patel studied at Middle Temple but, in a pattern that would be replicated time and again over the next forty years, ‘Jawaharlal came to his Inn [Inns of Court] by way of Harrow and Cambridge, not via Petlad, Nadiad and Borsad’.<sup>42</sup> Nehru spent seven years in England, with short trips back home in between, while Patel could barely get through three years and returned as soon as his final examination was over in 1912 and ‘considered it a waste of time to stay on till January 1913 for the Call Night<sup>43</sup>—not even bothering about the solemn grandeur of the occasion which filled many a would-be great man with a sense of pride’.<sup>44</sup>

Even today, fifty-three years after his death, Nehru maintains a bit of a reputation as a dandy, fond as he was of sharply cut achkans, a risqué red rose often in his buttonhole. In contrast, Patel, who had developed a liking for Western clothing when in London—‘He was so fastidious that finding no good laundry in Ahmedabad he got his stiff collars washed in Bombay’<sup>45</sup>

—was motivated by Gandhi’s swadeshi movement and its call to burn foreign clothes and switched entirely to donning simple Indian wear.

This difference in taste and temperament always remained between the two men. It came from a fundamental class difference. Patel was one of six children (and five sons) of Jhaverbhai, a farmer; Nehru, the only child of India’s most powerful lawyer, Motilal Nehru, who owned a mansion so grand that when the Prince of Wales came to India in 1921 the British authorities demanded that the son of King George be invited to stay at Motilal’s manor, Anand Bhawan, in Allahabad. Motilal, who was influential enough for the British to have tried to change their club rules<sup>46</sup> to bypass the ‘No Dogs or Indians Allowed’ rule, refused.

The fathers are important in another way. Jhaverbhai was a devout Hindu and a follower of the Swaminarayan sect, and even at the age of eighty-five,

he would often walk 30 kilometres to go to the nearest Swaminarayan temple. In sharp contrast, Motilal Nehru was a fierce rationalist and atheist. While Patel never embraced every aspect of the religiosity of his father, he never shunned his religious identity either, while, in comparison, 'initially, Jawahar had scorned his father's strict rationalism as unimaginative. But ultimately, as with the temper [which the two Nehrus shared], he could not help but emulate it'<sup>47</sup>. A young Nehru had decided that religion was something women did, and while his view changed significantly, some of the distaste remained. These differing approaches to religiosity, especially to Hinduism, would remain a fractious ground between the two men till the end.

As is almost always true, where they came from determined where they went, and how far they were willing to go. It determined what they felt entitled to, and indeed the manner in which they were prepared to acquire what they felt was rightfully theirs.

Patel, for all his expertise in playing bridge, remained in essence a peasant—with a farmer's obstinate quietude, dour reserve and generosity of spirit. He lacked Nehru's panache and the younger man's flights of fantasy. If Nehru looked to the skies for inspiration and relief, Patel's gaze fell to the ground and observed the minutiae of the ground beneath his feet. Lord Mountbatten said as much: '[Patel] had his feet on the ground while Nehru had his in the clouds.'<sup>48</sup>

A popular contrarian thought experiment on Indian history likes to imagine how the country would have fared had Patel taken over as the first prime minister. This experiment, on either side of the argument, is usually not fair.

The Nehru camp likes to paint their man as a world leader and Patel as a provincial, at best a muffedossil, strongman who had the ability to arm-twist and deliver political victories but possessed not even an iota of Nehru's soaring, picturesque imagination. They see listlessness in his reserve and small-mindedness in his pragmatism.

The Patel supporters consider Nehru as a well-dressed but feeble leader, at best. They claim he was not only weak but also an escape artist and a



smooth-talker with no real ability to handle tough political situations. His oratory is considered largely gaseous and full of romantic but not very useful ideals that have little real impact on the lives of millions of impoverished Indians after Independence.

Both these extreme positions of course are not very useful. They also oversimplify what is really a most complex question. Nehru and Patel did have complementary skills and while there is little doubt that Patel would have been a good prime minister, indeed a great one, he would most certainly have taken a path in many ways quite different from the one Nehru took.

As Rajmohan Gandhi has also accepted:

An imagined Patel 10 or 20 years younger than he was in 1947 may well have made a wonderful PM, and possibly a better PM than Nehru. But the actual Patel of 1947, who was 14 years older than Nehru, was too unwell to be PM.<sup>49</sup>

This much is fact. Patel was ill in those years. His daughter Maniben notes:

In 1941, he [Patel] was afflicted with severe intestinal trouble. He woke around 3:30 every morning because of the pain in the bowels. He spent an hour in the toilet before setting out on his morning walk [ . . . ] After his illness in March 1948 his medical advisers stopped morning walks completely and restricted his interviews.<sup>50</sup>

And as a pragmatic man, Patel would have seen that a newly independent nation needs, above all, relentless energy.

The question also is: which of the two paths would have been better for India? The answer, however, will forever elude us because Patel as prime minister is obviously a purely hypothetical situation.

I am concerned with a more urgent question. Why are Patel's achievements so little known and not widely understood in India? Apart from my Gujarati friends, no one I know remembers much of what they were taught about Patel in school. Everyone knows Gandhi and Nehru, they even have their own holidays in the school calendar, but Patel had no real dedicated celebration until recently when his 31 October birthdate began to receive a bit more publicity.

There are very few papers or even books written about Patel; few seminars dedicated to him. On JSTOR, one of the world's largest aggregators of academic papers, there are but a handful that delve into Patel, his ideas and his actions. For instance, in Kashmir, which Patel rescued from being splintered away by tribal gunmen sent by Pakistan, there is little talk about what his formula for a peaceful settlement would have been. This, at a time, when perhaps deliberating on what Patel would think or do is of utmost relevance as justifications for the further partition of India crop up in the public discourse all around us from shows in TV studios to florid literary fiction.

'Gandhian', 'Nehruvian' and even 'Ambedkarite' have become adjectives but has anyone ever heard of 'Patelian'?

Why not?

As this book will argue, from being the pillar of strength behind some of Gandhi's earliest successes to holding the country together after the partition of India and Pakistan when there was every chance of more fractures, Patel's influence is deeply felt at every level in India. Yet it is almost as if his contributions and his memory have been systematically allowed to fade so that future generations can never know his ideas.

Are Patel's ideas so dangerous? Could it be that the tough love that Patel brought to the table is unpalatable to us today? Patel's patriotism is never maudlin or trite. Its sentimentality is firmly rooted in real achievement and it cannot be blackmailed, emotionally or otherwise, into negotiation or barter.

While we of course cannot make an outright comparison between what Patel would have done and what India did do after Independence, what we can speculate about is the choices Patel would perhaps have made based on the reading of choices made during a long public life. With Patel we would not have had the overbearing focus on socialism. Nehru was a committed socialist. Patel was not. He made this quite clear on several occasions including in a speech in January 1948 at a lunch organized for him by Badridas Goenka, chairman of the Imperial Bank of India from 1933 to

1955 and, later, the first chairman of the State Bank of India when it was formed in 1955.

In the speech Patel argued that before any ideas of nationalization could be considered, a vibrant environment of private industry needed to be created. He alluded to widespread disappointment and panic among industrialists about the taxation policies of the government on business and the lack of incentives for enterprise. We shall see later in this book how Patel strove to save Indian industry from ruin, including pushing in his preference for finance minister, but for now it is important to note one small bit of Patel's speech to the industrialists:

We must remember that socialism in England came after England had advanced considerably on the road to industrialization [ . . . ] You should realize that industry is to be established before it can be nationalized.<sup>51</sup>

Nehru was more inclined towards a more government-led model of development than Patel but here it must be noted that at least some major businessmen had actively sought government intervention and control on the economy in 1944 in a document that later came to be known as the Bombay Plan. The question of control of course is entirely dependent on the extent to which control is leveraged and there is little doubt that Nehru was naturally inclined to a greater degree of control than Patel. In fact, it is prescient that Patel talks about nationalization in his 1948 speech because not only was Nehru himself keen to ensure government ownership of large companies—indeed the Indian government did start businesses in everything, from infrastructure to hotels and watch-manufacturing under him—his daughter, Indira, during her time as prime minister, nationalized the banks and started a spiral of economic collapse that almost bankrupted India by 1990 when, faced with the prospect of having to sell gold reserves, the government reluctantly started to open the economy.

Patel also would have been horrified at the moniker India's stuttering economic growth, restrained by state control under Nehru and chocked after him, received: the Hindu rate of growth.<sup>52</sup>

Patel, the son of a peasant, would most likely have focused more on building India's agrarian economy and primary education and healthcare, building the country from the grassroots while Nehru, who had a global footprint in mind from the very beginning, aimed at big dams, big factories, a space programme and institutions of higher learning like the famed Indian Institutes of Technology. Undoubtedly, there is some benefit to be seen in both approaches, and which one would have been better in the long run is a matter of speculation. While some have argued that Nehru's priorities were all wrong<sup>53</sup> and the meagre resources of the newly independent country would have been better spent on primary education, who can deny that pioneering institutions like the IITs or the Indian Space Research Organisation, propelled into existence by him, are not a matter of great pride for India today?

Nehru was a visionary prime minister in many ways. And like many politicians who reach the very zenith of their ambition, he was also susceptible to vanity. Some would argue that he was delusional about many of his beliefs, especially those relating to certain aspects of foreign policy.

Patel was perceptive about the reasons for the creation of Pakistan, and, once created, what the intentions of its founders were. Where Nehru saw only minor hindrances, Patel perceived imminent dangers. He wanted to use India's bargaining powers more effectively to resolve disputes with Pakistan. But Nehru, and indeed Gandhi, seemed convinced that peace, and at least the facade of friendship, must be maintained even at the risk of irretrievably damaging India's interests. There was no doubt some element of the difference between the utopian and the realist in these arguments but, as we shall see in this book, Patel's instincts proved correct more often than not. India's first deputy prime minister and home minister had a clear, uncompromising vision of the troublesome geopolitics of the subcontinent. His warnings on Pakistan, Tibet, China and India's dealings with the United Nations were prescient. It was his determined effort that stopped an annexation of Kashmir by Pakistan.

It also might be safe to suggest that if Patel had become prime minister, it is unlikely that he would have allowed the newly independent country,

indeed his own government, to award him, the prime minister, the head of the government, the Bharat Ratna—India's highest civilian honour in 1955, barely some years after India won independence. The first president of India, Rajendra Prasad, whose accession Nehru tried his best to prevent and Patel pushed strongly, took full responsibility for recommending Nehru's name:

In doing so, for once, I may be said to be acting unconstitutionally, as I am taking this step on my own initiative and without any recommendation or advice from my Prime Minister; but I know that my action will be endorsed most enthusiastically.<sup>54</sup>

Let us assume that Prasad was being truthful and not trying to win Nehru's favour. But some facts still remain worthy of questioning. What we do know is that Nehru had favoured C. Rajagopalachari, governor general of India, popularly known as Rajaji, for the chair of the first president of independent India. Patel disagreed and ensured that it was Prasad who got the position. Later, when Patel was able to outmanoeuvre Nehru and ensure that Purushottam Das Tandon won the election for Congress Party president, he described it as, 'At the time of Rajen Babu's [Rajendra Prasad's] elections, he got a slap in the face. This is the second.'<sup>55</sup> What we also know is that Prasad remains the only president in the seventy-year history of independent India to have served two terms in office. In 1957 when the second presidential elections came, Nehru preferred Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to Prasad but allowed himself to be convinced by Maulana Azad not to make himself a hurdle, especially since the party favoured Prasad. We also know that Nehru's daughter, Indira, during her term as prime minister, decided to accept the Bharat Ratna from her own government. Other prime ministers like Lal Bahadur Shastri and Atal Bihari Vajpayee have been awarded the Bharat Ratna but never while they were serving prime ministers. Shastri received his posthumously in 1966 and Vajpayee in 2015. Patel was awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously in 1991.

Gandhi had seen in Patel and Nehru the perfect balance that India needed, but he would have also realized that such balancing acts are rarely

ever equitable. Lack of equality seemed like a price all three men were willing to pay—even Patel, at his own expense. It is, then, unsurprising that right after his great victory in the Bardoli satyagraha Patel gave a speech on his mentor and guru, Gandhi, where he refused to take any credit for the success of the campaign.

On 9 July 1928, in Ahmedabad, Patel said:

I do not deserve the honour which you are bestowing on me because of Bardoli. The condition of the peasants in India is akin to that of a bed-ridden patient suffering from an incurable disease, waiting only, as it were, to depart from this world and then suddenly restored to life by taking some miracle medicine given to him by a sanyasi. I am merely the instrument through whose hands the sanyasi administered the medicine to the patient. [. . .] If we have such men of whom the whole of Gujarat is so justly proud, the credit again goes only to Gandhiji.<sup>56</sup>

So what had been his role? Patel explained:

You have all heard of the Bhil disciple of Dronacharya in the Mahabharata. He never had the good fortune of learning directly under Dronacharya, but he used to worship an earthen figure of his guru. It was through his devotion that he acquired all that Dronacharya had to teach. Indeed he learnt more than what Dronacharya's other disciples ever learnt. In my case, I have access to the guru whose disciple you say I am. So far from being his chief disciple, I doubt if I am fit even to rank among one of his many disciples.<sup>57</sup>

What is Patel talking about? Rather, who is he talking about?

Eklavya.

Dronacharya was the greatest teacher of the art of war. He taught boys to become warriors. But he only taught princes, not commoners.

Eklavya, a tribal boy, wanted desperately to learn archery. Though he had natural talent he knew Dronacharya would never accept him.

So, hidden in the forest, he watched the guru teach the princes from time to time. Then he made a mud idol of Dronacharya and began practising before it as if he was receiving instruction from the guru himself.

One day when Dronacharya was teaching his pupils they came across a dog in the forest whose mouth was full of arrows so that the animal could

not bark. But not one arrow had hurt the dog—such was the precision with which they had been fired.

Dronacharya saw this and realized that only the greatest archer in the world could have done this—but he had promised his favourite pupil, the prince Arjun, that he would make him the world's greatest archer. And yet, here was a clear sign that someone else was far more talented than the prince.

Dronacharya inquired about this archer and found Eklavya. Where did you learn archery, the guru asked the boy.

From you, replied Eklavya and showed him the mud idol.

Dronacharya was deeply moved but he felt honour-bound to fulfil his promise to Arjun. So he asked Eklavya for his guru dakshina, a pupil's tribute to the guru.

What can I offer, asked the boy.

Your right thumb, said Dronacharya, knowing that without his thumb to pull back the arrow and the string of the bow, Eklavya's talent as an archer would be doomed.

Aware of the consequences, without another question, Eklavya took out a knife and sliced off the thumb of the hand he used to pull back the string of his bow.

The injustice of this story has echoed through the thousands of years since the Mahabharata was written and is still one of the most repeated and remembered tales from the great epic. Some retellings add that the story of Eklavya did not end there and that he still went on to become a great archer.

It seems prophetic that even at the very beginning of his political career, Patel saw himself as the Eklavya to Gandhi's Dronacharya. We may never know the exact reasons why he believed this but as the tale unfolds we might be able to gather how his prophecy about himself, in a sense, came true, and who might Arjun be in this story.



## ONE

### ‘WE DON’T WANT TO LISTEN TO YOUR GANDHI!’

2010 was a big year for the Gujarat Club in Ahmedabad. It was 122 years old and in desperate need of some repairs. It boasted 1100 members but not many had bothered to get any spring cleaning done for years. But now a budget of Rs 75 lakh had been sanctioned and, among other things, two billiards tables were being imported from England.<sup>1</sup> This club, after all, was where Geet Sethi, who won the World Billiards Championship three times as an amateur and six times as a professional and had two world records, had cut his teeth.

The last time the club got some repairs and spring cleaning done was twenty-five years ago when film-maker Ketan Mehta wanted to shoot some scenes on the premises. Mehta wanted to portray the club as it would have been in June 1916, barely twenty-eight years after its creation. The scene had barristers playing bridge under *punkha* who pulled giant fans to keep the place cool, and one of them getting progressively more irritated because of the disturbance caused by a political activist.

One of the card players, a barrister, was in winning form and in high spirits when the boy brought in tea. At that moment someone dashed into the room to invite the players to meet a Mr. Gandhi and hear the lecture he was giving that evening. No one paid any



attention. The players went on drinking tea, eating English-made biscuits and discussing their next rubber.<sup>2</sup>

The barrister was Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. We find him returned from England now, having finished his legal education and learnt to 'buy some well-cut clothes'.<sup>3</sup> He was now determined to be the star of a wealthy fraternity which he thought was 'pompous, status conscious'<sup>4</sup> but where he swiftly made a mark 'with his domineering personality'.<sup>5</sup> He now towered over the men who had intimidated him once upon a time when he was but a pleader.<sup>6</sup> He was not only their equal as a barrister, often a more successful one at that, but he was also a better bridge player!

While he was a pleader, Patel's family was in a financial crisis, which is apparent from a letter he wrote in 1904 to his brother Narsibhai.

I have written to return the money with interest and so you need not worry in the matter [. . .] you have written about the mortgage of sister's ornaments that does not behove you [. . .] You have written that you are in debt. But I understand that your debt is my debt. So you write to me the names of creditors, so I will relieve you as quickly as possible from the debt so that you heave a sigh of relief.<sup>7</sup>

By 1916, he was on far firmer ground.

One aspect of his personality as a barrister seems to have been 'a firm and pensive expression, almost as if one looked down upon the world with a sort of superiority complex'.<sup>8</sup> But attitude alone could not have brought Patel the success he saw as a barrister in Ahmedabad. He was also willing to take perilous chances, going so far as to chastising a judge for being prejudiced against people from his home region of Kheda. The astounded judge granted his client the bail that Patel wanted.<sup>9</sup>

Barrister Patel, then, with his sturdy pragmatism had no time for soft-spoken, barely clad political activists, even if they were fellow barristers of considerable renown in South Africa. 'I have been told he comes from South Africa,' Patel said when asked if he had met Gandhi. 'Honestly, I think he's a crank and, as you know, I have no use for such people.' On yet another day when Gandhi's arrival was announced at the club, Patel is said to have shouted out: 'Go away! We don't want to listen to your Gandhi!'<sup>10</sup>

But the astute lawyer had noticed something: this frail man spoke more like a sadhu than a politician. Why was a man who wanted to talk about greater freedom for India speaking of ‘the power of Truth which is the same as Divine Love’?<sup>11</sup> What did divine love have to do with fighting colonial injustice?

He had also realized something else: Gandhi was gathering some clever people around him, people who had Patel’s admiration—D.B. Kalelkar, Narhari Parikh, Mahadev Desai, (Swami) Anand and K.G. Mashruwala.<sup>12</sup> Of these men, Parikh and Desai were competent lawyers whose work Patel respected. What was it, he wondered, that was drawing men like these to this Gandhi?

Patel was forty-two years old when he met Gandhi, who by then was forty-eight. The age difference between the men was barely six years. Compared to this, Nehru was twenty years younger than Gandhi—it is easy to see how the Gandhi–Nehru relationship would be paternal. It is also easy to see how the relationship between Patel and Nehru could have transitioned (or even veered) from familial to rival, for aren’t siblings ever so often rivals?

Three key relationships had an abiding impact on the founding of modern India, those between Gandhi and Patel, Gandhi and Nehru, and Nehru and Patel. Of these the most layered and subtle was the relationship between Gandhi and Patel.

Patel, like everybody else, called Gandhi ‘Bapu’ but the relationship was more intricate than a simple familial tie. Patel had been brought up to respect his elders—especially his elder brothers. Even though when he had first saved up money with great difficulty and prepared his papers to go and study law in England, his elder brother Vithalbai had cheated him out of the chance. The papers came in the name of V.J. Patel, which were the initials of both brothers, and

[E]xercising an elder’s prerogative [. . .] Vithalbai took it to be his opportunity first—not the younger brother’s, no matter if the latter had sweated to save money for this visit [. . .] Not only did he surrender his travel documents to Vithalbai, but also willingly agreed to bear his entire expenses.<sup>13</sup>

Patel refers to his relationship with Vithalbhai in a speech in March 1921:

He [Vithalbhai] told me: 'I am your elder brother and I should go first. You may get an opportunity after I return, but if you go first, I would never have any chance of going abroad.' I went to England after the return of my brother three years later. After I had returned, we two brothers decided that if we wanted independence, we would have to turn into ascetics and serve the country without any thought of self. My brother then left his roaring practice and engaged himself in the service of the country. The looking after of the family fell on my shoulders. The good work was for him and the inferior enterprise was for me.<sup>14</sup>

This anecdote about Patel is not one of the more popular ones. In fact, it is not even the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Patel, the 'Iron Man of India'. But I believe it is indicative of a pattern in Patel's life, of an occasionally misguided sense of duty that haunts critical points of his public life and journey as a leader. As we shall see, this relationship with Vithalbhai would also guide one of his biggest battles within the Congress Party—with Netaji.

It certainly could be, as we will see in this book, a metaphor for a part of his intricate relationship with Gandhi. What did Patel expect of Gandhi, and indeed what did Gandhi expect of Patel? As one of Gandhi's earliest and most formidable lieutenants, Patel was, in a sense, the bad cop to the good cop played first by Gandhi and then by Nehru in the Indian freedom movement. Some writers have painted Patel as the villain in the dispute between Netaji and the Indian National Congress, and finally Bose's breakaway from the Congress, claiming that

So fond of Bose had Vithalbhai become that he willed a portion of his fortune to him to be spent for the 'political uplift of India and for publicity work on behalf of India's cause in other countries'. But the will was challenged by Vithalbhai's sibling, Vallabhbai Patel as a consequence of which Bose didn't receive a penny.<sup>15</sup>

We shall look at the Patel–Bose relationship, and their quarrel, in greater detail later but for now suffice it to say that their relationship was perhaps the most acrimonious in the Congress, even more so than Patel's equation with Jinnah. In both cases, Patel started by defending something extremely precious, not only to him but also to Gandhi—the control and guidance of

the Congress, and therefore the national freedom movement and the unity of India. Indeed in the quarrel with Bose, Patel was defending Gandhi's very position and importance in the Congress and at the helm of the national movement, which Bose felt was negotiable. Sarat Bose, Bose's elder brother, wrote to Gandhi in 1939:

What I saw and heard at Tripuri [near Jabalpur in present-day Madhya Pradesh] during the seven days I was there, was an eye opener to me. The exhibition of truth and non-violence that I saw in persons whom the public look upon as your disciples [targeting Nehru, Patel, Azad and company] and representatives has to use your own words, 'stunk in my nostrils'. The election of Subhas was not a defeat for yourself, but of the high command of which Sardar Patel is the shining light.<sup>16</sup>

In his outrage, Sarat Bose directly targeted Sardar Patel, and interestingly not Gandhi (even though in a sense it was Gandhi's will that Patel was trying to uphold and protect). This is one of the many times that Patel faced the wrath and shielded Gandhi. Bose wrote:

The propaganda that was carried on by them against the Rashtrapati [Subhas Bose who was president of the Congress in 1938 and was re-elected in 1939 against the explicit wishes of Gandhi] and those who happen to share his political views was thoroughly mean, malicious and indicative and utterly devoid of even the semblance of truth and non-violence.<sup>17</sup>

Never one to take what he felt were unjust and malicious attacks on him, Patel growled back: 'The lion becomes a king by birth, not by an election in the jungle.'

Why was Patel willing, again and again, to take the hit for Gandhi? Was it because having played the elder in his family, and covering up for the shortcomings of even his older brothers, Patel sought an older, familial mentor figure? Was it because he saw in him the best chance for India to attain freedom? Was it because he had witnessed Gandhi's ability to transform Bal Gangadhar Tilak's reverberating declaration—'Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it'—and 'translate that mantra into action, to turn it into a reality by carrying it to India's teeming millions in her villages'?<sup>18</sup>

The truth probably lies in a combination of all these. But what is undisputed is *where* it all started, at the point when Patel took his plunge into politics independent of Gandhi, and then his definitive transformation after having seen, spellbound, Gandhi's rousing of the revolt at Champaran.

The Ahmedabad municipality was the first site of Patel's own kind of swaraj or self-rule. Municipalities were some of the rare institutions where Indians those days enjoyed some sort of self-government. But in 1914, a change in the District Municipal Act allowed the appointment of an officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS)—naturally, British—at the head of municipalities. This was done very slyly.

The Government camouflaged its real intentions through a devious device; by first making ad hoc appointments of non-ICS Indian officers for short spells. Most of them served only for six to seven months. M.A. Dixit was there for 17 days, while Bhaishankar Nanubhai Bhatt just for one day! Finally came the appointment of J.A. Shillidy, ICS, in November 1915.<sup>19</sup>

The eminent members of the Gujarat Club were incensed. Its members served as municipal president and the head of the managing committee detested the 'arrogant, high-handed and ruthless officer who became a terror for the citizens of Ahmedabad. The educated classes and the intelligentsia were greatly upset and wanted to teach him a lesson'.<sup>20</sup>

Enter Vallabhbhai Patel. In 1917, Patel was convinced by his friends at the Gujarat Club to fight a bypoll to the municipality. He joined the board of the municipality and became chairman of its sanitary committee.

Before we go further, it is pertinent to understand how novel the whole business of participating in municipality elections really was—indeed how relatively new municipalities themselves were. Municipalities only appeared in India around 1845. Twenty years later, a few paid councillors started to run them. Schools and other bodies came under municipal purview with the introduction of a special act of 1870 and it was under another act in 1882 that proper local self-government at least to a degree was introduced. This was when non-government members began to be elected to municipal bodies in larger numbers than government members—

and the posts of president and vice president became elected posts. 'However, the government was to keep its control from the outside through commissioners and other mechanisms'<sup>21</sup>—Ahmedabad got its first elected municipality president in 1915. Patel's time at, and indeed his quarrels in, the Ahmedabad municipality, especially against a series of British officers, also advances our understanding of how cities that grew under colonialism transformed. The scholar Siddhartha Raychaudhuri has pointed out that

processes of transformation in cities in the non-western world during the colonial period have often been described as one-way processes through which European colonial regimes restructured the physical and social environments of the cities and established their domination there.<sup>22</sup>

The restructuring of Ahmedabad in the first half of the twentieth century, says Raychaudhuri,

was not a one-way process of the establishment of domination by the colonial government but was instead one where a section of the Indian elites contested the restructuring that the government was carrying out in the city and appropriated it to bring about their own reorganization of the urban centre. In carrying out the reorganization, the elites also established their political and social hegemony in the urban centre.<sup>23</sup>

The hub of this reordering was the Ahmedabad municipality. And even among the local elites vying to control it, there was one significant difference.

Whereas the previously dominant group had chosen to ally themselves closely with the colonial government, a distinguishing characteristic of the new elite leaders was their stand against the government.<sup>24</sup>

The leader of this new group was Patel.

The elite group led by Vallabhbhai Patel had strategically used the grievances generated among the city's populace, as a result of the various schemes for restructuring carried out by the government, to establish themselves politically in the urban centre. Consequently the government lost control over the process and the new Indian urban leadership took it over, marking a decisive shift in the balance of local political power.<sup>25</sup>

What convinced Patel to take the plunge into politics? And what made him the natural choice for people who wanted to fight the likes of the British agent Shillidy?

One of the main reasons was clearly his reputation as a pugilist—even as a schoolboy Patel had taken on indolent teachers and had even engineered the defeat of a wealthy boaster who was fighting municipal elections against one of his favourite teachers,<sup>26</sup> and his acerbic victories in court had added to his fame. Therefore, many felt that Vallabhbhai was a match for any number of arrogant and overbearing British officers who were in the municipality. But when he entered the Ahmedabad municipality, ‘nobody could think that in the not too distant future, Vallabhbhai was to be a comrade-in-arms and trusted lieutenant to Gandhiji’.<sup>27</sup>

Upon his arrival, Patel soon clashed with the Englishman on the issue of white residents of the cantonment area receiving clean water regularly, while supply to the rest of Ahmedabad where Indians lived stuttered. Patel’s took on Shillidy and henchmen like municipal engineer V.M. Macassey and demanded their removal for incompetence and prejudice. One British officer had to resign when Patel demanded a medical certificate, as per regulations, after a long medical leave of absence. He also charged Shillidy with ‘deliberate insubordination’ when the Englishman tried to sneakily prevent the municipality from taking control of a lake and the adjacent land because it was being used by one of Shillidy’s friends.

The facts of the case being overwhelmingly against Shillidy, the Government was left with no alternative but to bow to the wishes of the Councillors. And for the first time in India, perhaps, such an action was taken against a British ICS official.<sup>28</sup>

Here we must pause to admire the forcefulness of the tone used by Patel against Shillidy in his letter.

The Board is sorry to note that the Municipal Commissioner did not consider it his duty to protect the proprietary rights of the Municipality [. . .] By doing this, he is guilty of putting his personal interest above those of the people [. . .] His impudent reply, his baseless charges [. . .] he has tried to create discontent and dissensions [. . .] the least that can be said about it is that his conduct was extremely objectionable.<sup>29</sup>

In 1917, barely six years after the grand imperial durbar in Delhi where George V and his wife Mary were declared Emperor and Empress of India, this letter from an Indian against a British ICS officer in His Majesty's Service, as it were, is startling fare.

Patel was one of the many future leaders of the national movement who cut his teeth in municipal politics. He became president of the Ahmedabad municipality as did Nehru in Allahabad, C.R. Das in Calcutta and Prasad at Patna. Prasad even refers to this in his autobiography:

As the Congress, though it had expressed itself against Council entry, had not prohibited Congressmen from contesting local bodies' elections, the Patna Congress Committee, following the precedents of Ahmedabad and Allahabad, where Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru had become the Presidents of the Municipal Councils, decided to participate in the municipal elections which were held in 1927.<sup>30</sup>

It must be mentioned here that Patel had decided, in consultation with his older brother Vithalbai, to leave politics to Vithalbai and focus instead on the practice of law. With his entry in the Ahmedabad municipality that agreement ended. Patel was involved with the workings of the Ahmedabad municipality in various capacities, including as president, for eleven years from 1917 to 1928 'with a short break, from 1922 to 1924, when the Municipality was suspended by the Government'.<sup>31</sup>

Both Vallabhbhai and Vithalbai presided over the Municipalities of Ahmedabad and Bombay almost at the same time [ . . . ] Their work and activities in the Municipalities also bear a very close resemblance. Both worked hard, started building of hospitals, arranged for a civic address to Gandhiji, and conducted their work in Gujarati.<sup>32</sup>

Gandhi even supported a part of Patel's struggle against the English ICS officer Shillidy at a public meeting in January 1918.

During his time at the Ahmedabad municipality,

Patel, along with volunteers, cleaned the streets of Ahmedabad with brooms and dustcart, beginning with Harijan Basti [Dalit quarters]. As the Plague broke out in Ahmedabad in 1917, he worked almost round the clock with his volunteers to help the victims and their families. He worked at great personal risk of infection as Bal Gangadhar 'Lokmanya' Tilak had done during the Pune Plague, 1896. The strain broke Patel's robust health, but sealed his reputation as a mass leader.<sup>33</sup>



Perhaps some of his steadfastness in taking on the plague came from his earlier experience with the epidemic in 1901 in Godhra; in a letter from that year written to his brother Narsibhai, Patel says:

The plague is spreading here virulently. Everyday there are about ten cases and rats are dying in large numbers. It is possible that the epidemic will continue for some time [ . . . ] I am not losing courage.<sup>34</sup>

In a sense, Patel was unafraid of the epidemic because he was a plague survivor.

In November 1917, at the first Gujarat Political Conference, Patel heard Gandhi say: ‘In the running of local government lies the key to Swarajya [ . .

.] Unless we improve the condition of our cities, Swarajya will have no meaning for us.’<sup>35</sup> He certainly seems to have taken this idea to heart— during his time in the municipality, Patel would do his best to improve Ahmedabad, even at great personal risk.

Patel’s contemporary, Congress leader G.V. Mavalankar, adds to the story of his recklessness during the plague:

As Chairman of the Municipal Sanitary Committee, he stuck to his residence in the city of Ahmedabad when plague was raging and refused to move out for personal safety. His was a familiar figure moving in the streets of Ahmedabad, getting the sewers cleaned and the plague-stricken areas disinfected. When his friends argued, he simply looked at them, and his silence was more eloquent than his words. It appeared as if he wished to say, ‘I have undertaken the duty as Chairman of the Sanitary Committee, and how can I ask safety for myself?’<sup>36</sup>

As his secretary Moolshankar Bhatt remembered:

Immediately after getting the news in the night that plague had broken out in the city, he came out of his house and started helping out people till early in the morning. Municipal workers who came in the morning were astonished to see Patel volunteering for the affected people.<sup>37</sup>

His work involved everything from town planning and water supplies to sewage line construction, building schools and lighting works. Having become involved with the municipality at a time when Gandhi was just starting to make Ahmedabad ‘the nerve centre of national politics’,<sup>38</sup> Patel

ensured that the city's municipality also remained at the forefront of its own kind of political activity.

His dealings with the British officers [. . .] and their quick removal from the Municipality marked, as it were, a weeding out process which he was determined to follow before he took up other constructive activities of welfare [. . .] The period was marked by a new approach of not only fighting the Municipal elections but of creating and forging a band of people who were to be the nucleus round which party building was to take place.

These moderates were soon to discover that a new group of non-cooperationists had entered the Municipality under the leadership of Vallabhbhai.<sup>39</sup>

Patel tasted blood in the early years of municipality politics. Here finally was evidence that the British could be defeated—using their own bureaucratic systems and processes. Here finally was a clear path for enforcing the role of Indians on Indian institutions. Patel was what we would today call an instinctive nationalist. His sense of politics did not come merely from the absorption of ideals, theories and values learnt in England. His sense of self and freedom needed no theories by what we call Dead White Males,<sup>40</sup> erudite as they no doubt were. Patel's patriotism was far earthier (where Nehru's was lofty and he knew a lot of Dead White Male Theory by heart): It came straight from a connection with the soil, from the earth that he had seen his father till, from the village that had always been his home. In many ways, the difference between the village and the city, urban and rural, urbane and rustic, is the distinction between Patel and Nehru. Even with their common educational background in law, Patel was first and foremost a son of the soil, his attachment and pre-occupations rooted to a sense of home. Unlike Nehru, he did not need to travel across the country to discover it. In his book *The Hidden Ways*, Alistair Moffat writes of his beloved Scotland:

Anyone who wants to understand something of the elemental nature of our history should try to walk through it, should listen for the natural sounds our ancestors heard, smell the hedgerow honeysuckle and the pungent, grassy, milky stink of cowshit, look up and know something of shifts in the weather [. . .] This is not nonsense, but a necessity for anyone who seriously wishes to understand the feel of the millions of lives lived on the land of Scotland [. . .] To walk in the footsteps of our ancestors is to sense some of that everyday experience come alive under our feet.<sup>41</sup>

As a village boy, Patel already knew the hidden ways; he did not have to write about his discoveries—they were ingrained in his hands.

Nehru, in comparison, was the consummate internationalist. Nehru in 2018 would have been at ease in calling himself a ‘global citizen’, whereas Patel would probably argue that there is no such thing, really, and people who claim to belong everywhere, perhaps in reality land up belonging nowhere.

While I was writing this book, I read Nehru’s *Discovery of India* twice, from cover to cover. It is, as many have pointed out, sweeping, bracing fare. I had last read the book as a school student. Now, when I read it again, I found myself wondering why Nehru had written so voluminously about trying to comprehend his own country and why Patel had never bothered. There is, no doubt, a certain sincerity of intent in Nehru’s writing, a sense of query and incredulousness that seamlessly go together which is perhaps the charm of his work. He is conversational and questioning, both natural states of man.

In the book, Nehru writes that he had been asked by an American publisher to pen an essay about the philosophy of his life. And though he was initially keen,

[T]he more I thought over it, the more reluctant I grew [. . .] What was my philosophy of life? I did not know. Some years earlier I would not have been so hesitant. There was a definiteness about my thinking and objectives then which has faded away since. The events of the past few years in India, China, Europe, and all over the world have been confusing, upsetting and distressing, and the future has become vague and shadowy and has lost the clearness of outline which it once possessed in my mind.<sup>42</sup>

Patel of course gives us a sense that at every point he was far more concerned about the immediate task at hand—saving those afflicted by the plague in his municipality, getting people clean drinking water, organizing peasants for a satyagraha—and was not disoriented, usually, by the state of the world.

As his daughter Maniben wrote about Patel’s philosophy of life: ‘Action appealed to him as nothing else. He believed that a man of words and not of deeds is a garden full of weeds.’<sup>43</sup>

But what kind of deeds would these be? A clutch of indigo farmers led by one rickety man would transform Patel's ideas on the subject.



## T W O

‘GANDHI IS A MAHATMA. I AM NOT.’

It had been two years since the frail-looking civil-rights lawyer from South Africa arrived in Bombay. The success of his methods of non-violent protest against apartheid in South Africa had prompted Indian leaders to ask him to return to India. He returned after staying away for twenty-one years. But what would he do now?

Gandhi had been invited back to India to give greater momentum to the national movement against the British rule. What did this movement really want to achieve?

He had returned home partly on the request of his friend Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a leader in the Indian National Congress. The Congress had been started by the bird-loving ICS officer Allan Octavian Hume, one of the fathers, if not *the* father, of modern Indian ornithology. Hume started a journal called *Tray Feathers* and upon his death the British Museum received forty-seven deodar wood cases from which more 75,000 preserved specimens of birds were placed at the museum.

Gokhale was a social reformer, an educationist enamoured by the ideas of thinkers like John Stuart Mill and Edmund Burke, a leader who wanted greater freedom for India but also sought the constructive impact of colonial rule on Indian societal reform. When he was making his name as a forceful

young speaker in politics, Gokhale had spoken at the 1890 session of the Congress in Calcutta on 'the inequities of the salt tax'.<sup>1</sup> Gandhi would one day use the anger against this tax to stir the entire country. But when Gandhi first landed in Bombay, the Gokhale who went from Poona (now Pune) to greet him represented only one part of a divided Congress, and the mild-mannered, debating society-esque part at that. The more radical Congressmen (Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo) had had a falling out with the moderates led by Gokhale. While Tilak, released in 1914 after a six-year sentence on charges of sedition, attended one of the welcome meetings for Gandhi, strong differences persisted between the groups, and also between the Congress and the Muslim League. The League was led by Jinnah, like Gandhi a London-trained Gujarati barrister, but unlike the non-smoker Gandhi, a fifty-Craven "A"-cigarettes-a-day<sup>2</sup> man. Gandhi had promised Gokhale that he would mostly listen and watch but barely six weeks after his arrival in India, Gokhale was dead. Gandhi was free from his role as a mere observer but equally regretful that 'this influential figure who believed in him and had offered a political and financial umbrella was no more'.<sup>3</sup> But in time, Gandhi would find other backers, among them wealthy industrialists like Ambalal Sarabhai and Ghanshyam Das Birla, and along with them a man who was adept at raising funds from Indian business barons: Vallabhbhai Patel.

Patel had heard both Jinnah and Gandhi at the October 1916 Gujarat Sabha-organized Bombay Provincial Conference held in Ahmedabad. One of the main roles of the Gujarat Sabha was to bring moderates and radicals in the national movement on the same platform and try and bridge their ideological gaps. Jinnah had led the Ahmedabad session on Gandhi's recommendation. This seems to have been one of the places where Patel's opinion about Gandhi softened and he considered with greater care the older man's words.

Both Patel's and Gandhi's lives were about to change due to the work of a German chemist called Adolf von Baeyer. Till the very end of the nineteenth century, Europe was importing around eight million tonnes of India-made indigo, the finest in the world at the time, finer certainly than

Germany's blue woad dye. In his well-documented book on India that came out in Leipzig in 1880 Emil Schlagintweit wrote 'that the best indigo came from Bihar'.<sup>4</sup> Indian indigo gave better, more intense hues and could colour fabrics from cotton to flax, while the German dye only worked on wool. So irritated were German producers with the near monopoly of Indian indigo in the market that they called it 'devil's colour'.

This state of affairs continued until the late 1800s when Baeyer discovered a new chemical formulation to prepare an indigo dye which was much better than what was being produced using plant extract in India. In 1881 the Royal Society of London awarded the Davy Medal to the German chemist for his work on indigo, and in 1905, Baeyer won the Nobel Prize for his contribution to chemistry.

But in faraway Bihar, Baeyer's invention, combined with the First World War, was wreaking havoc.

Regardless of the fame of Indian indigo, the farmers who produced the crop and the dye had always had a miserable living, crushed under the brutal land tenancy laws of the British and exploitative Indian zamindars. The indigo workers' violent uprising in Bengal in 1859 inspired the Bengali writer Dinabandhu Mitra to write his play *Neel Darpan*<sup>5</sup> that was translated into English by the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta and published by Reverend James Long, the Anglo-Irish priest, translator and essayist. The play caused such a stir, shocking audiences in Calcutta and England, that Long was fined and even briefly jailed for publishing it. *Neel Darpan* was the first play to be staged commercially at the National Theatre in Calcutta.<sup>6</sup>

As Baeyer's German dye became popular, several indigo farmers in Bihar managed to break free of their abusive tenancy clauses. But when the First World War broke out, supplies from Germany thinned and once again the farmers faced immense pressure to resume growing indigo.

This was when Rajkumar Shukla entered Gandhi's life. Shukla was from the Champaran region of Bihar, a hub of indigo cultivation. By local standards, Shukla was not too poor.

He held about five hectares of land, owned two houses, and lent money [. . .] He had been involved for years in organising resistance for the planters, had served three weeks in jail

in 1914, had submitted petitions to various officials including the viceroy, and was a member of the Bihar delegation to the Lucknow Congress, at which he spoke. Champaran [like much of India] had not yet got an active Congress organisation, but it was not innocent of political activity.<sup>7</sup>

Soon after he arrived at Champaran, Gandhi's presence naturally clashed with the interests of the planters.

Energised by Gandhi's presence, the peasants acclaimed him as their guide. The planter's objected and declared [in line with South African precedents] that Gandhi was 'An Unwelcome Visitor'. But Gandhi claimed the right to study the peasants' grievances, and the duty, thereafter, to advise the government.<sup>8</sup>

Within days Gandhi received government orders 'to leave Champaran by the first available train'.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Gandhi toured the region and spoke to every peasant he could find, sometimes travelling on elephant back.<sup>10</sup>

Later, in a courtroom in Motihari, the district headquarters of Champaran, he said: 'I have disregarded the order served upon me, not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being—the voice of conscience.' Over 2000 people had gathered at the court that day to hear Gandhi proclaim that he would plead guilty and violate the order.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi's words soon reverberated across India. 'The Indian press was ecstatic.'<sup>12</sup> So were members of the Gujarat Club like Rao Saheb Harilalbhai and G.V. Mavalankar. Champaran may even have inspired Patel in his tussle against Shillidy. When Gandhi accepted the offer to become the president of the Gujarat Sabha, the two men, the bespoke barrister who was used to having his collars laundered by Bombay's best laundry<sup>13</sup> and travelling second class in trains, 'a luxury for Indians in those days',<sup>14</sup> and the fakir-like man clad in the barest hand-spun white cotton started to develop a bond that would last till their death.

As drawn as Patel was beginning to feel towards Gandhi and his ideas, he was still not ready to surrender every aspect of the life, including his fondness for good food, which he had so painstakingly built for himself.

Even though he started to follow Gandhi, Patel refused the offer to stay at



the Mahatma's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, 'frankly telling Gandhiji that he could not accede to his wishes [of staying at the ashram] as he was not in agreement with conditions prescribed by Gandhiji for living at the Ashram.'<sup>15</sup>

Gandhi insisted on eleven pledges or vows from the residents in his ashram. He expected them to renounce untouchability or caste discrimination, respect all religions, eat only what one laboured for, remain chaste, never steal, follow the path of non-violence, not form attachments to possessions, be fearless, be completely committed to the truth, 'control the palate' and adopt swadeshi or use only India-made things. It is unclear which of these vows Patel found most difficult to accept but he certainly refused to stay at the ashram.

However, what he did instead was far more valuable. After Champaran, Gandhi's public profile had been transformed. One day he was trying to teach farmers about everything from health and sanitation to basic schooling, the next he was responding to attacks on him for being partial to the idea of cow protection as a Hindu by arguing that 'the Christians and Muslims living in India, including the British, have one day to give up beef', and the Hindus would have to realize 'the folly, the stupidity and the inhumanity of the crime of killing a fellow human being for the sake of saving a fellow animal.'<sup>16</sup>

When Annie Besant, who had started the Home Rule League with Tilak demanding self-government along the lines of the Irish Home Rule movement, was arrested and confined in a hill station, Gandhi wrote fervently against her confinement and worked on building a public petition to set Besant free. One of the people who worked to spread the petition was Patel.<sup>17</sup> Besant was freed in the autumn of 1917.

Meanwhile a project that would engage Gandhi and Patel's new partnership had already mushroomed: in Kheda, Gujarat.

The Kheda satyagraha, like the Champaran movement, is really the story of how Gandhi paved the way for the national movement for freedom to reach even the smallest alcoves of the country, right down to its villages.

Gandhi and Patel travelled to ask the question: How does one spread a

revolution? What must one do? Stop people on the streets and tell them about it? Write letters? Rage over megaphones? How does one take the dreams of the great debating shops of Delhi and Bombay and Ahmedabad and make villagers take full ownership of these ideas?

In a sense these two London-trained barristers were venturing out to rediscover their own country, to change it. But before they could do so, a lot about them had to change as well. In Gandhi, Patel saw an example of how, when faced with injustice, a man could alter his very self. Everything from Gandhi's clothing to his mode of transport had altered beyond recognition from his early days as a barrister. His journey to self-realization had been triggered after being thrown out of a first-class train compartment meant only for Whites at Pietermaritzburg in South Africa. In South Africa, he was adamant that if he had a first-class ticket, he would travel first class; in India, he turned travelling in third-class compartments into a philosophy, even writing an essay on it titled 'Third Class in Indian Railways'. He wrote:

Having resorted to third class travelling, among other reasons, for the purpose of studying the conditions under which this class of passenger travels, I have naturally made as critical observations as I could. But I think that the time has come when I should invite the press and the public to join in a crusade against a grievance which has too long remained unredressed, though much of it is capable of redress without great difficulty.<sup>18</sup>

He further observed:

The compartment itself was evil looking. Dirt was lying thick upon the wood and I do not know that it had ever seen soap or water . . . At the Imperial Capital [one assumes Gandhi means Delhi] a certain third-class booking office is a Black-Hole fit only to be destroyed. Is it any wonder that plague has become endemic in India?<sup>19</sup>

Sardar Patel stuck largely to second class, as his daughter Maniben has informed us:

The Sardar travelled second-class by railway before he became a Minister. I would spread his bedding at night and retire to a third-class compartment. But from 1934, when there was much correspondence to attend to even on train journeys and people came to see him at stations, I kept company with him in his second-class compartment.<sup>20</sup>

Although he maintained his train travel preferences, Patel's clothing had completely altered.

When Gandhiji started the swadeshi movement and burning of foreign clothes, the Sardar burnt all his European clothes, socks and hats. He never wore any type of headgear, even a khadi cap, after he cast aside his black Banglora cap. From then, he always wore dhoti and kurta and a chaddar on his shoulder, adding only a warm jacket in winter.<sup>21</sup>

The khadi cap, worn at a slightly jaunty angle, was of course a particular favourite of Nehru's.

Patel, when he started to follow Gandhi, and in a sense till the very end, tried his best to retain a sense of independent thought and inquiry even as one of Gandhi's most loyal—if not, the most loyal—supporters.

For Patel, Gandhi embodied the same sort of transitions, to and fro, that he himself was struggling with. From small-town Porbandar, Gandhi had managed to sound the clarion call of justice in distant South Africa, and now he was challenging himself: could he give voice to millions of his countrymen in far-flung villages with little apparent understanding of ideas like 'a nation' in their struggle for independence? What did independence mean in an Indian village? What could it?

Patel understood the village only too well, but his journey had been to escape that identity and carve for himself a new persona. He would have to revisit all that he had ostensibly left behind.

When rains flooded Kheda district in 1917, it gave both men an opportunity to test their determination. The issue was straightforward: the floods had destroyed the kharif crop and the rabi crop had been ruined by a pestilential attack of rats and other miscreants. The government rules were clear:

If the crop is considered to be less than 37½ per cent but more than 25 per cent, the cultivators are allowed to pay half their land revenues assessment a year later; if the out-turn (crop assessment) is estimated at less than 25 per cent, the collection of the entire assessment is postponed. If the crops fail in the following year, the portion of the land revenue, postponed in the previous year, is remitted altogether.<sup>22</sup>

When word reached Gandhi, he urged that the revenue collection be postponed (not waived off) and gathered signatures from 18,000 peasants<sup>23</sup> to petition the government in November 1917.

But the government refused to relent. This was a matter of land revenue, and for the British administration, as it had been for the Mughals before them, land revenue was everything.

Obsessed by notions of prestige, they felt that whatever they decided in the matter of land revenue must be accepted as final. In a sense, therefore, the point in dispute was, who were the real well-wishers of the agriculturists? The contention of the Government officers was that agriculturists were complaining only because they had been instigated and their emotions worked upon by agitators. So if the Government accepted the demands of the agriculturists it would be the agitators who would gain in reputation, while the reputation of the officers would decline. Thus, to Government officers the fight on this occasion was one chiefly of prestige.<sup>24</sup>

But it was a matter of prestige not only for Gandhi but also the man who would be instrumental in ensuring the success of the protest: Vallabhbhai Patel.

Why?

Before we answer that question, it is important to put the Kheda satyagraha in context. As we have noted early in this book, Patel was a Patidar, that is, he belonged to the same community that came together for this protest.

In fact, he understood much better than Gandhi the terrain where the protest was to unfold. What had been happening in these lands?

During the Great Famine of 1899-1900 and the years of plague and drought which immediately followed, the population of Gujarat endured its greatest test since the advent of British rule. In the eighteenth century there had been a severe famine roughly every seventeen years on average, and that extending over 1812 and 1813 was severe enough to have lingered in public memory . . . but after 1836 there had hardly been a single year of scarcity until the 'Chappan' [according to the Hindu calendar 1856 or 1899 AD] famine sixty years later.<sup>25</sup>

The 1899 famine brought down Kheda district's population from around 10 lakh to 7 lakh by 1901.<sup>26</sup>

It had taken the area till about 1917 to really recover, and writing in that year an assistant settlement officer in Kheda observed:

Having met and talked to many persons who went through the famine of 1900, and having myself seen the scarcity years of 1911-12 and 1915-16, I am greatly impressed with the progressive ability of the people to cope with famine conditions [. . .] they have made a wonderful recovery.<sup>27</sup>

The floods came just as Kheda got back on its feet.

By December 1917, Patel and Gokuldas Parekh were touring the flood-affected region to understand the extent of the crisis. Patel arrived in Kheda several weeks before Gandhi with the Mahatma merely advising from Champaran that ‘the workers observe the greatest restraint, to use courteous language in their discussions and speeches and, above all, to adhere strictly to facts’.<sup>28</sup>

But all initial attempts at a negotiated settlement failed—including Gandhi’s suggestion that an independent inquiry commission be set up. By February 1918, Gandhi and his trusted lieutenant Patel were in Kheda making a detailed location-by-location assessment of the damage due to the floods. The Mahatma even made an offer of final compromise to the government: ‘If you are able to postpone the land revenue recovery work until my inquiry is completed, it will help a great deal in reducing the discontent that has now spread among the people.’<sup>29</sup>

This too was rejected.

Gandhi was determined to conduct his inquiry but he had a demand of the Gujarat Sabha—someone from the Sabha would have to devote himself full-time to this project.

Patel stood up. There was no doubt about his criticality to the mission. He was a native. He knew the landscape and the people. He spoke their language. These were not negligible factors, especially since research on the Kheda satyagraha has shown that a complex, indeed bewildering, set of factors led to the protest. It wasn’t that the farmers were absolutely impoverished—in fact, as has been mentioned previously, the floods came at a time when the region was back on its feet. Also,

[A]s soon as the no-rent campaign was called off in June 1918, the Patidars, helped by a successful Rabi crop, had no difficulty at all in paying their dues [. . .] Why did the rising Koli cultivators, who were worse hit by the great famine and the bad seasons which sporadically followed, not also refuse to pay government revenue demands? The cohesiveness and militancy shown by the Patidars at such times suggests that much more lay behind rural protest than could ever be explained by straightforward 'economism'.<sup>30</sup>

It needed a strongman from the Patidars' own caste to trigger and then hold together a revolt led by them against the British. It needed someone inspirational like Patel who not only brought the whiff of power with him from the big city but also knew how to speak the language of the village:

Remember that a potter puts about a maund<sup>31</sup> of things on his donkey. If it is able to carry it, he increases the load to two maunds. Similarly as you carry the load, the government goes on adding to it. Throw away the load which you have been carrying so far and do not be afraid.<sup>32</sup>

It was only Patel, because he was one of them, who could express his explicit annoyance when he found farmers from his own village vacillating about joining the satyagraha.

When I see the condition of this village today, I am taken back to my childhood days, when the elders of the village carried themselves with such dignity that the revenue officers accepted their advice and sat most humbly in front of them. Today the position is quite the reverse and I see you frightened of officials. This is clearly due to lack of unity amongst yourselves. If even on an occasion like this you are not able to get rid of disunity when will you be able to do so?<sup>33</sup>

Patel also had a reputation for standing up to the British from his work in the Ahmedabad municipality. In fact, he had even confronted the prime antagonist from the British side in the Kheda struggle, Commissioner Frederick Greville Pratt, at the municipality.

Without Gandhi, Kheda would not be a satyagraha, but without Patel, there may not have been a resistance movement at all. Gandhi himself later acknowledged, 'The more I came to know him, the more I realized that I must secure his help.'<sup>34</sup> It was the perfect partnership with the moral imperative provided by Gandhi and action on the ground coordinated and

delivered successfully by Patel. This blueprint of coordinated action would last the lifetimes of both men.

After the assessment, Gandhi, Patel and the farmers sent in a petition: the poorest farmers (those paying less than Rs 30 as revenue) should be relieved from paying, and for the rest the collection of land revenue should be postponed by one year. The government relented just a little and exempted the collection of Rs 1.75 lakh out of a total of Rs 23 lakh; the collection for the remaining amount continued relentlessly using *talatis* or village revenue officers.

A Muslim farmer reported that [. . .] two days the people had been unable even to eat their food. The talati used language of the foulest kind, and the presence of women did not deter him from using grossly abusive terms. He asked them to pay up their assessment, even if in order to do so, they had to sell their homes, their jewels, their land, their cattle and even their wives and children.<sup>35</sup>

The satyagraha began on 22 March 1918. ‘The people are fighting for a principle, while the officials are fighting for their prestige.’<sup>36</sup>

On 27 March 1918, Patel told the farmers of the region not to pay taxes.

I have neither given wrong advice nor have I incited anybody in an unjustified way [. . .] I have given them only reasonable and right advice. I estimate the crop in my village to be a 25 per cent crop and, therefore, even in accordance with the normal rules, the people of my village are within their rights in not paying land revenue. I do not think that in doing so I am breaking any law or encouraging bad behaviour in any way. Nevertheless, if there is any breach of law, I am prepared to undergo the requisite punishment.<sup>37</sup>

Then, in the sort of line that captures the essence of his dry and stoic wit, Patel said:

Nevertheless, since you have invited me to attend, I have come, and I am grateful to you. Whether you will make me still more grateful by sending me to jail is for you to decide.<sup>38</sup>

The government tried to confiscate cattle, usually enough to scare farmers. When that failed they tried to capture land outright. That too failed. In response, Patel was seen telling people: ‘This fight will act as a spark which will set the whole country afire.’<sup>39</sup>

Then, they sent in Pratt.

Pratt started by threatening to declare the Gujarat Sabha illegal<sup>40</sup> and then when that threat didn't seem to have the desired effect, he displayed the slyness that had allowed a few thousand Englishmen to rule a nation of millions of people. He asked Gandhi to facilitate his going and talking to the farmers. This, too, was coordinated by Patel.

Once in front of the protesters, Pratt threw in an emotional fig leaf by calling Gandhi by his Indian epithet 'Mahatma'. The crowd cheered.<sup>41</sup> But Pratt's tone soon hardened.

The power to fix assessment is in the hands of the government [ . . . ] We are the final arbiters [ . . . ] It is not in the hands of Mr. Gandhi or Mr. Vallabhbhai. You may bear fully in mind that any amount of your effort in this matter is bound to be futile.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout his speech, Pratt, who spoke fluent Gujarati, constantly veered between effusively praising Gandhi and clearly stating that the struggle of the farmers was futile.

Mr. Gandhi is a very good man, a very holy man and he gives you advice because he genuinely believes that it is in your interest. He thinks that by not paying up the land revenue assessment, you will be protecting the poor [ . . . ] But isn't the Government the protector of the poor? If you continue this fight against the Government it will be you who will have to bear the consequences and not these gentlemen [ . . . ] They will not suffer in any way. They are not the people who will go to jail. When a movement of this kind was started in Africa, Mahatma Gandhi went to jail. In this country he will not go to jail. Jail is not a fit place for him.<sup>43</sup>

Pratt's speech is an underappreciated specimen of the duplicity that lay at the very core of the British Raj—the cloying display of affection that cloaked the steel of the exploitation, simultaneously embracing and rejecting the Indian opinion. In it, Pratt even dismisses Gandhi's experience and understanding of his place of birth.

I have 28 years of experience of land revenue law. Mahatma Gandhi is my friend. He came to this country from Africa only two or three years ago; he has spent the greater part of his life in Africa. He is well-versed in religion [ . . . ] but in political matters, in matters concerning land and land revenue assessment, he knows very little. I know far more about these matters [ . . . ] and I have only this to say that it is the duty of the agriculturists to pay



up their land revenue dues [ . . . ] If you will not pay your assessment, your land will be confiscated<sup>44</sup>

This is where Pratt, who by now was convinced that he was swaying the crowd and destroying the foundations of resistance that had been laid and nurtured by Gandhi and Patel, made a mistake.

He took on Patel.

You will recollect what happened in Ahmedabad. There was a struggle recently between mill owners and the mill hands. The latter had taken oath that they would not go back to work until they got an increase of 35 per cent in their wages. But what happened in the end? When they realized that their pledge is not reasonable they could not adhere to it, they broke it and accepted an increase of 27½ per cent and resumed work. In the same way, I tell you that when you took this pledge, you made a mistake.<sup>45</sup>

This gave Patel just the opening he needed.

But before we continue with the action between Patel and Pratt, let us take a small aside to understand the beginnings of the formation of Patel's economic mind. For this we are moving from Kheda to Ahmedabad, the second most important (Bombay being the largest) textile centre in India, where, in 1917, on the heels of a debilitating plague epidemic, tremendous friction is brewing between the textile mill owners and their workers. Textiles, at that time, had become one of the most, if not the most, important business activities in the city. The first textile mill in Ahmedabad opened in 1861 and by 1900 the city had twenty-seven mills, the number of which rose to fifty-two by 1910.<sup>46</sup> It had not been easy to get this industry going. In fact, the first businessman who tried to start a textile mill in Ahmedabad had to wait for twelve long years to gather investment from the rich in the city. Ranchhodlal Chottalal had tried to set up a textile unit in 1847 with the help of some British technology which he would have imported from England had he managed to raise the money. But there was no one to give him money in Ahmedabad. In the meantime, three mills came up in neighbouring Bombay. Finally five moneybags ponied up the cash; among them was Hutheesing Kesarisingh who also built Ahmedabad's exquisite Jain temple for a million dollars to provide jobs and

employment in the mid-nineteenth century during a terrible drought.<sup>47</sup> This local financing was an important distinction between the mills of Bombay and Ahmedabad: while the former mostly had mills where Indian owners inevitably had British partners, the latter's mill owners were entirely homegrown, and were 'financed by local capital and managed exclusively by Indians'.<sup>48</sup> It gave the city a novel industrial texture and climate quite different from Bombay's and would one day endow upon it the sobriquet the 'Manchester of India'.

Along with the mills, the number of people working for them in Ahmedabad also grew rapidly—in the first half of the twentieth century the number of mill workers grew from 16,000 to 1.3 lakh.<sup>49</sup> This didn't necessarily make the city any better. 'In 1916 the mortality rate of the city population was still 39.22 per thousand or double that of Surat. To the existing mud were now added smoke and soot.'<sup>50</sup> The city's fortunes changed with the end of the First World War: 'before the war, Ahmedabad was an unknown, parochial place lightly ruled by the British [but after the war it became] a financial and political base for the Indian National Congress and a leader and prototype of New India'.<sup>51</sup> The First World War also transformed the face of the textile businesses of Ahmedabad. 'The war converted the mills and their agents into powerful industrialists. Still, in keeping with traditional policy [of saving rather than over-capitalisation], this success was achieved so quietly that even competent observers failed to notice that Ahmedabad was destined to play a very important role in the near future'.<sup>52</sup> One man, however, caught on early: Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi could do no better than settle in a modern place that had preserved some ancient structure, so that from there he would travel and study what he later came to call the 'four sins [economic, political, social and cultural] of an Indian identity'.<sup>53</sup>

When the plague came in the monsoon of 1917, mill owners offered workers bonuses of up to 70–80 per cent of their salary to stay on in Ahmedabad—instead of running away as any sensible person confronted with plague would do. When the disease receded, the bonus was withdrawn. But for mill workers earning a bare minimum salary taking money away

was unacceptable. The workers demanded a minimum of 50 per cent raise in their salary but were offered a 20 per cent raise instead. The threat of a lockout grew.<sup>54</sup>

As 1918 rolled in, the dispute reached a flashpoint. By February, Gandhi was asked to intervene. There were two reasons for asking Gandhi to come in and his subsequent success in resolving the dispute:

[A]part from the great pressure he could bring through his prestige [. . .] Ahmedabad's business leaders seem never to have forgotten that Gandhi was by caste a bania [trader caste] like themselves. During negotiations with Gandhi who was representing the labour union, the president of the Millowners Association remarked that he and Gandhi could find a compromise since both were banias.<sup>55</sup>

This conflict led to Gandhi declaring that he would fast—neither eating food nor using a car—until the mill owners and workers came to a negotiated settlement.<sup>56</sup> The talks settled at around a 35 per cent pay hike. The mill owners told Gandhi that they would do whatever it took to break his fast but Gandhi was resolute: it had to be a genuine compromise which worked for both sides. He said, ‘You must not give anything for my sake; do so out of the respect for the pledge of the labourers, and in order to do justice.’<sup>57</sup> By this time popular opinion was also starting to swing towards Gandhi who had emerged as a national leader.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, an arbitrator was appointed and the mill workers agreed to accept a 27.5 per cent rise in wages and await the arbitrator's decision on a higher final settlement. This movement also paved the way, partly due to sympathies among many mill owners for Gandhi's cause of ‘maintaining harmony between capital and labour’,<sup>59</sup> for the creation of the Textile Labour Association or Majoor Mahajan Sangh in 1920. This was also one of the starting points of Gandhi and Patel's relationship with capitalists and labour, and their being the interface between the two. As we will see later in this book, both Gandhi and Patel had a far more accommodating and tolerant attitude towards Indian businesses and businessmen compared to other prominent leaders like Bose or Nehru. (Nehru also subscribed to the Marxist idea that capitalism is in a sense a stepping stone towards fascism,

and considered business as inherently exploitative and reactionary; it certainly didn't help matters that the British had entered India through what became one of the world's first multinational corporations, the East India Company). Gandhi's Theory of Trusteeship where he imagined evolved business leaders holding their wealth 'in trust' for the benefit of society and not consuming more than their needs was considered utopian and a cop out by many Congress socialists. But Indian industrialists had supported the Congress with funds and in kind for years, and the mass growth of the Congress had come with the financial assistance of the homegrown business community.

While Gandhi couched his support for indigenous businesses and industrialists in lofty rhetoric, Patel was far more direct and clear that having taken consistent assistance from industrialists through the freedom struggle, it was the job of the Congress to ensure that the Indian business community thrived after Independence, which he believed would naturally bring the added and much-needed benefits of jobs and wealth creation in an impoverished country. G.D. Birla, one of the industrialists both Patel and Gandhi had close association with, said about Patel:

Sardar Patel was not a revolutionary. He was essentially a man of constructive ideas. Many a time he utilized my help and money. I would get a telegram, sometimes just two words—'Come immediately'—and when I arrived he would tell me what I had to do.

Inevitably the question of collection [of money] would come up. Once I told Patel what Gandhi said to me, 'I do not like the Sardar collecting money from businessmen.' His reply was characteristic: 'This is not his concern. Gandhi is a Mahatma, I am not. I have to do the job.'<sup>60</sup>

It was Sardar Patel who perhaps first realized, long before Sarojini Naidu would joke about it, that it cost a fortune to keep Gandhi in poverty.<sup>61</sup> As Patel's biographer D.V. Tahmankar wrote, 'It is claimed, not without reason, that Mahatma Gandhi's triumph over the British Raj was due very largely to Patel's extraordinary powers of organization'<sup>62</sup> powers that included the ability to raise vast sums of money needed for the freedom movement.

Lest it seem that this relationship between the Birlas and Gandhi was always friendly, it must be pointed out here that although Gandhi was staying in Birla's mansion in Delhi when he was assassinated in 1948, and Nehru requested the Birla family to donate the property to the government for a memorial to Gandhi, it was not until 1971 after many rounds of protracted financial negotiation, according to Gandhi's great-grandson Tushar, that the Indian government was able to buy the property off the Birla family. K.K. Birla, the Birla scion, Tushar Gandhi has written, sold the house for Rs 5.4 million and 7 acres of prime real estate within Delhi, 'while deciding the sale price of the family mansion, he even calculated the value of the fruit bearing trees and all the saplings that had been planted'.<sup>63</sup> In 2002, Tushar Gandhi himself tried to sell the rights to use an image of Gandhi to an American credit card company but withdrew after public uproar.<sup>64</sup>

As early as 1923, the Majoor Mahajan Sangh failed to prevent a crippling conflict and keep mill owners from stopping the yearly bonus. 'After 1923, the TLA [Mahajan] concentrated on social welfare activities for the workers. While the workers supported the nationalist movement, the industrialists [at least sometimes] wavered.'<sup>65</sup>

In our story, we now return to Kheda district where Patel has been given the opportunity he had been looking for. Even though Pratt had not referred to his old adversary at all through his speech, the barrister now jumped into the fray. Patel said:

I was one of those who intervened in that dispute. It is not correct to say that the mill- workers were forced to break their pledge. On the first day of resumption of work the workers received an increase of 35 per cent; thereafter they accepted an increase of 27½ per cent on the understanding that when the arbitrators declared their award, whatever adjustment was necessary to be made in their wages to make it accord with the award will be made in due course. When this settlement was reached, our Commissioner [Pratt] was also present. He has great regard for Gandhiji and Gandhiji too has great regard for him; so have I. In that meeting the Commissioner told the workers: 'Gandhiji will give you right advice. If you follow it, you will do well and get justice.' I am telling you the same that if in this matter too you follow the advice of Gandhiji, you will receive justice at the hands of this very Commissioner.<sup>66</sup>

Note that 'so have I'. It is a classic, fine Patel touch. It rubs in with delicacy and firmness the point that he wants to emphasize but without any acerbity.

His words had the desired effect. Villager after villager now started asking what can only be described as teasing questions to Pratt. One farmer even compared the honesty of his tribe to Raja Harishchandra, the king renowned for his exemplary truthfulness in Hindu mythology!<sup>67</sup>

All this pushed Pratt to the brink. 'I have finished,' he declared sternly. 'The final decision rests with you. To a sanyasi the loss of property may not matter at all. But you are not sanyasis!'<sup>68</sup>

The dig was at Gandhi and his frugality. And the Mahatma was quite capable of responding in kind. He retorted:

He [Pratt] seems to regard the relationship between the Government and the people as similar to that between parents and children. If so, has anyone seen in the whole history of the world an instance of parents having turned their children out of their homes for having resisted them in a non-violent manner?<sup>69</sup>

The dispute went on.

It had become clear to Patel that this struggle had reverberated far beyond Kheda, for a few days later he told farmers: 'I would request you that whatever happens, you must stick to your decision. If you do it, the name of Kheda district would find an honourable mention in the history of India. The whole country is looking towards you.'<sup>70</sup>

The government started to toughen its stance. Land was seized, as were animals, including milch cattle, and the ornaments of women. People, among them trusted lieutenants of Gandhi and Patel, were arrested. Entire villages turned up in court to see them being sentenced. Each time Gandhi travelled outside Gujarat, Patel took charge of the overall movement, and even when Gandhi was in Gujarat, it was Patel who led the organization of the movement on the ground from village to village and tehsil<sup>71</sup> to tehsil. He told the farmers that this was 'a bitter war [. . .] between the public and the blind administration'.<sup>72</sup>

By June, the government had agreed to Gandhi's terms: those who could pay would, but for everyone else, collection and confiscation would be

postponed. 'Until today it was a matter of honour not to pay up the land revenue; now it will be a matter of honour to pay it up,'<sup>73</sup> said the statement issued by Gandhi and Patel.

Patel was enthused by the success of the satyagraha. Could it be that here at last was the tool for mass mobilization that he needed at that point?

For hundreds of years India has been suffering from a mortal disease. She had not so far been lucky to find a good doctor. The doctors who looked after her believed in prescribing sweet medicines. Now a sweet medicine cannot cure an incurable disease. Some people might find it strange that a person who has been fighting the government can give such advice. But let me remind you that the doctor who has arisen to cure your illness has nothing but the spirit of service of the people in his whole being. If you think that his medicine is the right one accept it.<sup>74</sup>

The fight had come to an end but perhaps as a foretaste of things to come, it was a not a peaceable conclusion.

It was strange that neither the public nor the workers were informed of these orders. Indeed, for a whole month after this order was issued, the work of confiscation went on with full vigour. Gandhi and Patel said: 'The fight has come to an end but we have to say regretfully that there is no grace in the manner of its conclusion. Postponement has been agreed upon, but not in a generous frame of mind [. . .] By their courage the agriculturists of Kheda have drawn towards them the attention of the whole country. For the past six months they have shown great loyalty to truth, fearlessness, unity, firmness and self- sacrifice. We hope that they will develop these great qualities still further and bring credit to their motherland. The public of Kheda have rendered great service to themselves, to the struggle for independence.'<sup>75</sup>

From their words it will be apparent that both Gandhi and Patel understood that Kheda, for all the British intransigence, had changed something.

Coming as it did right after Champaran, it had proved to the people, in cities, and more crucially in villages, that the movement for freedom against British rule was not an aberration. There could, actually, be a process, a system through which the real injustices of the British Raj could be countered, resisted and forced to change.

Any resistance is primarily a leap of the imagination, and no one understood this better than Gandhi. If people can be taught to imagine freedom, they can acquire it. But for people to acquire this imagination of

liberty there must be a sense of inherent, unquestioning trust. At Kheda, Patel was able to inject, indeed extract, some of this trust from the villagers. 'Kheda saw Gandhi as a saint and Vallabhbhai, the son of the soil, as a hero.'<sup>76</sup> When someone went to prison during the struggle, and then was released, Gandhi and Patel would walk miles to go and receive them outside the prison.<sup>77</sup>

Why had Patel chosen to follow Gandhi? Some have argued that it was because he sought a guru 'in the Hindu tradition'.<sup>78</sup> Be that as it may, what is undeniable is that in Gandhi, Patel found someone who could reach out to the masses in a way that most people keen on fighting the British at that time could not. Although, spurred on by his deeply pronounced sense of justice and his inability to tolerate injustice, Patel had already started the fight against the exploitations of the British Raj, it was Champaran that showed him what Gandhi was capable of, and the way forward. There is little doubt that he was personally moved by Gandhi's piety, consistently pitching the older man as a bit of an ascetic with a higher sense of moral and ethical values.

Gandhi too had a clear-sighted opinion of Patel's use. When it was all over, Gandhi said of Patel:

Many people were prepared to follow my advice, but I could not make up my mind as to who should be my deputy commander. I then thought of Vallabhbhai. I must admit that when I met Vallabhbhai first, I could not help wondering who this stiff-looking person was, and whether he would be able to do what I wanted. But the more I came to know him, the more I realized that I must secure his help. If it not for his assistance, I must admit that this campaign would not have been carried through so successfully.<sup>79</sup>

But the site of their first great success also gave the two men their first failure. Gandhi had promised the British government that he would recruit Indian soldiers from among the peasants for the First World War effort.

Some believed this was an inherent contradiction to the principle of non-violence or ahimsa that Gandhi so powerfully propagated. To which the Mahatma responded that non-violence was not cowardice and only a warrior (Kheda's peasants prided themselves in having warrior ancestry) can attain the true state of ahimsa.



During this process of trying to recruit villagers, Gandhi was asked again and again: How could the messiah of non-violence ask people to join the military? Pushed, Gandhi even published a leaflet where he argued:

[A]mong the many wrongs that the British Government has done to India, the blackest is the law by which the whole population was disarmed. If you want to have this law repealed and want to learn the use of arms, this is a golden opportunity. If at a time when the Empire is in difficulty the educated and the middle class assist the Government voluntarily, the Government will naturally lose its distrust of them and it may be possible in future for anyone who wishes to bear arms to do so.<sup>80</sup>

Gandhian non-violence is today oversimplified into a cliché—sometimes it becomes an excuse for lethargy and cowardice. Gandhi himself had a nuanced, even contradictory, journey in understanding and preaching the lesson of non-violence, and it was, as we shall see; perhaps Patel who most effectively comprehended the idea of Gandhian non-violence: only the well-armed and the brave can truly apply the lesson of ahimsa.

Patel was never entirely convinced about unqualified non-violence. He was more enthused by Gandhi's idea that this was an opportunity for the peasants to get some military training—and if a time came when they needed to use that training at home, these trained men would fight the British in India. Jinnah refused to join in the recruitment campaign.

But the Kheda villagers weren't buying all that. They hated the Raj, and they had seen an even uglier face of the British in the struggle to reduce and defer taxes after the floods. It didn't matter that a saint and a Patidar were pitching military service to them—they didn't want it.

In the end, the duo was able to gather together barely 100 recruits, but there was no training centre in Gujarat. The government suggested that the men be sent to a different training centre in another province but Gandhi was insistent that a new centre had to be set up in Gujarat so that 'if the public saw prominent men of the Province learning drill, marching, shooting etc., they would be encouraged to join, and by the time the first platoon was trained and ready to leave many more people would join'.<sup>81</sup> While these deliberations were going on, Gandhi fell seriously ill, and was

bedridden for nearly two months during which the First World War came to an end.

It must be recalled here that Gandhi had created the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps in South Africa to serve in the Second Boer War. His logic had been, as it was in India, that if Indians wanted parity in respect and treatment from the British, they would have to do their fair share of service. Using funds of the Indian community in South Africa, Gandhi had raised a force of 300 'free' Indians and around 800 indentured labourers for his Corps that ferried the injured in the Battle of Spion Kop in 1900. 'The Indians served without pay, and would march up to twenty-five miles every day, bearing the British Empire's wounded on stretchers back to their camps.' For his labours, Gandhi won not only the Queen's South Africa Medal but also, in 1915, the year he landed in India, the Kaiser-i-Hind (Emperor of India) medal which was pinned on to him by Rabindranath Tagore who had been knighted, which meant he was now Sir Tagore, the same year. Both would return their respective honours within the next five years.

Gandhi may have thought that raising forces for the British in the war would grant him the leeway to demand the freedom that he desired. But his countrymen, impoverished peasants many of them, had other ideas. They had, it seemed, a more independent mind than their leaders, even Gandhi, sometimes imagined.

It was a lesson that Patel learnt more intrinsically than even Gandhi—the art of listening to what the people really wanted, above idealism, above piety, and above politics. Never again would he get carried away by mere rhetoric. Not even Gandhi's.



### T H R E E

#### ‘IS THERE LESS RISK IN DOING NOTHING?’

It was barely thirty years old but, by the end of 1918, there was already a rift within the Congress. This was nothing new. Even as early as 1907, the party had split into two quarrelling camps—the moderates and the extremists.

The issue was the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms. Designed to grant more autonomy to India, these reforms were drafted by Edwin Montagu, a former secretary of state for India, and Lord Chelmsford. They were not a dull pair. Montagu, who was later suspected to be homosexual, was mentor to John Maynard Keynes, the sometimes gay, sometimes not, rising star of an economist (who kept detailed notes of his own sexual encounters). Frederic Thesiger, the first Viscount Chelmsford, was a Freemason. The series of self-rule governance reforms proposed by Montagu and Chelmsford formed, in 1919, the Government of India Act.

Within the Congress, the moderates led by Tej Bahadur Sapru, V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and M.R. Jayakar were in favour of accepting the recommendations, but a much larger group, the nationalists, argued that the reforms didn’t go quite far enough. The most vocal among them was the reputed Bengali lawyer Chittaranjan Das, popularly known as Deshbandhu (‘Friend of the Nation’) C.R. Das.

Barrister Das in a sense outdid Motilal Nehru in grandeur. He was known to send his clothes to Paris for washing and maintained a regular laundry in that city. Both men gave up their luxuries when they joined the freedom movement, though Motilal kept up one treat—a nightcap of excellent whisky. Das was joined in the criticism of the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms by the fierce Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

As various factions of the Congress quarrelled, the opportunity for Gandhian satyagraha emerged again with the Rowlatt Act, 1919. The bills, aimed at punishing sedition, find echo even today in the sedition laws of modern India. The laws proposed in 1919 recommended ‘arrests without trial or trials without appeal and proposed a two-year sentence in prison for offences like carrying a seditious leaflet in one’s pocket’.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi spotted an opportunity, but his torturous asceticism was already taking a toll. He had been bedridden, operated upon for nasty boils, and severe dysentery had broken his body. ‘I was reduced to a skeleton,’<sup>2</sup> he wrote. He was only fifty years old but had led a torturous life of physical deprivation and austerity combined with incessant travel. Not least to find volunteers for the British war effort throughout Gujarat. Now the government he had been showing loyalty to was returning the favour—by strengthening sedition laws. This could not be tolerated.

So Gandhi called the one man he trusted—Vallabhbhai Patel. Shaking with rage at the Rowlatt bills, he told Patel that his satyagraha would never happen without Patel’s aid. Still unable to leave his bed, the Mahatma swore civil disobedience, and the first person to commit to his programme was Patel. Even if a handful of people would swear allegiance to the path of resistance, Gandhi told Patel, there would be disobedience, there would be satyagraha. Among the others who signed the pledge were Sarojini Naidu, the feisty poetess whose daughter Padmaja would become Nehru’s lover after the death of his wife, Kamala; two prominent wealthy merchants, one Hindu, Shankerlal Banker, and one Muslim, Umar Sobani; and the Irish editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, B.G. Horniman (the man who would later tell the world about the horrific mass murder at Jallianwala Bagh and whose name is now on Mumbai’s Horniman Circle). Gandhi had entrusted Patel

with ensuring that the right kind of people gathered to take the vow of civil disobedience—and Patel delivered. Together they vowed, ‘[W]e shall refuse civilly to obey these laws and such other laws as a committee to be hereafter appointed may think fit and we further affirm that in this struggle we will faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence to life, person and property.’<sup>3</sup>

This was a turning point in India’s struggle for freedom. It was an open declaration—without any caveat of overarching loyalty or a demand for justice within the framework of the British Raj. Gandhi described the pledge as ‘the most momentous in the history of India’.<sup>4</sup> ‘I give my assurance that it has not been hastily taken. Personally I have passed many a sleepless night over it,’ wrote Gandhi.<sup>5</sup>

It could have been the year when British concession and the frailty of Gandhi (and indeed, the Congress’s accommodative stance) could have brought a conciliatory mood to the national movement and a gradual process of freedom. Instead, a bedridden Gandhi transformed the tone and tenor of the independence movement—the protest would no longer be about local injustices or topical prejudice but against the sheer presence of the Raj itself. No longer would the flames be contained locally—from this point on every voice of dissent would, in a sense, echo across the land.

What followed transformed not just the freedom fighters but also the British attitude towards the freedom struggle—no longer was it just an overactive debating club with some success in local confrontation. It was recognized as something far more potent, and with the potential of not just non-violent agitation but real violence.

The Governor of Bombay, Sir Llyod George, said to a British journalist: ‘Just a thin spindley shrimp of a fellow he was, but he swayed 320 million people and held them at his beck and call. He did not care for material things, and preached nothing but the ideals and morals of India. You can’t govern a country with ideals. Still, that was where he got his grip upon the people. He was their God. India must always have its God [ . . . ] He gave us a scare. His programmes filled our gaols. You can’t go on arresting people for ever, you know, not when there are 320 million of them.’<sup>6</sup>

The British got it wrong partly because they thought they had been here before—and knew how to play this game. Before an earlier set of so-called governance reforms, the Minto–Morley Reforms of 1909 which allowed the election of Indians to legislative councils, ‘the Government passed with indecent haste the Seditious Meetings Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act [the first in less than four hours!] which enabled the authorities to send hundreds of political workers to prison, and to curtail severely freedom of speech’.<sup>7</sup> This was when Tilak had been sent to jail, in near solitary confinement, in Burma for six years, and ‘when the new India Act was introduced in 1910 there were 1,900 political workers in prison’.<sup>8</sup>

But 1919 was different. The dour and conservative viceroy of India Lord Chelmsford could not grasp the power of Gandhi’s message. He also failed to comprehend that the First World War had shattered the myth of British superiority and invincibility. ‘It changed the entire pattern of political agitation and focused [the] attention of the civilized world on what was happening in India’,<sup>9</sup> and the pledge that a small bunch of people signed at Sabarmati Ashram echoed from hamlet to hamlet and town to town. Years of groundwork by powerful activists like Tilak and Besant had prepared the soil for a mass movement. Tilak’s slogan ‘Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it!’ had captured the imagination of the people.

Far from 1919 being the year in which India’s freedom movement was quelled by the gentle concessions of the British Parliament, it marked the start of serious agitation. The outspoken tactics of Gandhi appealed to an entirely fresh audience, and the Congress was now transformed from the club of India’s civilized elite into a populist political organization. It gained the financial backing of Marwari and Gujarati bania merchants and industrialists, and Gandhi set up an efficient central organization to run it.<sup>10</sup>

There was only one man who could set up this command and control centre for Gandhi, and then run it effectively: Vallabhbhai Patel. One by one, many others joined hands with Gandhi but there is little doubt that not only was Patel the first, he was also in many ways the hub that held all the disparate spokes together.

By March, Patel was telling the traders of Ahmedabad to rise against the Rowlatt bills. Patel pitched the bills—coming as they did right after the

First World War when millions of rupees had been raised in India for the war effort—as a betrayal. What India had hoped for, Patel told his audience, was a more empathetic consideration of its demands but what it got instead infuriated and hurt the country—this was no just return for services rendered. ‘Such laws as the Rowlatt Act are not found in any other country.’<sup>11</sup>

On 6 April 1919, many across the country fasted with Gandhi. A couple of days later, while he criss-crossed the country by train, Gandhi was arrested. Patel was immediately wired. As word spread, protests and demonstrations turned into riots.<sup>12</sup>

In Ahmedabad, crowds burnt police stations, government offices and even the collector’s office; among those who died was an English sergeant. In Amritsar, after two local leaders, Satya Pal and Saifuddin Kitchlew, were arrested, mobs killed at least five Englishmen.

Patel was once again on the front lines in his city. And as he had done when plague swept through the town, he and some of his aides went from one part of Ahmedabad to another trying to calm the crowds.

When Gandhi finally arrived at his own ashram, he was too weak to address the more than 2000 people gathered there. It fell upon Patel to deliver Gandhi’s words:

Brothers, I am ashamed of the events of the last few days. Those responsible have disgraced me. In the name of Satyagraha, we burnt down buildings, forcibly captured weapons, extorted money, stopped trains, cut off telegraph wires, killed innocent people, and plundered shops and homes [ . . . ] If a redress of grievances is only possible by means of ill-will for, and slaughter of, Englishmen, I for one would do without Swaraj and without redress.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi and Patel struggled to douse the flames they had ignited but the explosion was about to happen somewhere else.

It was Baisakhi Day. On this day in 1699, the tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, had created the Khalsa, the warrior tribe of the Sikhs, merging the martial history of the people with religion to create a new identity.

In 1919, in the town of Amritsar, people gathered for festivities at a small square called Jallianwala Bagh. Most of them had no idea there was a

curfew in the city, and many had come from the outskirts to join in the celebrations, and for a peaceful demonstration. The ban on assembly had been communicated intermittently at best, and sometimes in English.

But none of this stopped General Reginald Dyer, who had arrived to take control and calm Amritsar down, from ordering his troops to fire on an unarmed crowd without warning and preventing people from fleeing from the square by blocking the only exit. The hundred rifles fired for about ten minutes; the men were instructed to aim low so that not one bullet would miss its target in the 5000-strong crowd. Official estimates said that 379 had died, and 1200, at the very least, were injured.

As soon as the news reached Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore returned his knighthood. Another 'Sir', Sankaran Nair, resigned from the viceroy's executive council, and 'Gandhi's meteoric rise to unrivalled leadership received a powerful impetus'.<sup>14</sup>

It also propelled Patel to the position of Gandhi's most important deputy, and brought another man to Amritsar, and closer to his father's politics than ever: Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru travelled to Amritsar to make extensive notes for his father on the situation and happened to share a railway coach with Dyer and his men who were returning after deposing before the Hunter Commission, which had been set up to investigate the massacre.<sup>15</sup>

[Dyer] pointed out how he had the whole town at his mercy and he had felt like reducing the rebellious city to a heap of ashes, but he took pity on it and refrained. He descended at Delhi station in pyjamas with bright pink stripes, and a dressing gown.<sup>16</sup>

More than 100 people died and more than 7000 were imprisoned in the protests against the Rowlatt Act which, as it so happens, was never implemented. But the protests also brought two men who would change the destiny of India face-to-face within the Congress: Patel and Nehru.

That year, at the Congress session, the shamiana was placed very close to Jallianwala Bagh, so that the delegates could not, even if they wanted to, forget the shots that had been fired on innocent men, women and children,



or that, as Patel would later write, the grounds nearby had ‘only a little earlier been drenched with blood’.<sup>17</sup>

At Gandhi’s insistence, the Amritsar session of the Congress would adopt a moderate stance. This meant that the Congress resolution not only attacked Dyer’s butchery but also criticized the agitated crowds. This criticism of the crowds was sternly opposed by many Congress stalwarts, including Pal and Das. But that was not to be the end of the story. As the Gujarati littérateur, lawyer and activist K.M. Munshi, one of those protesting the coupling of Dyer with angered Indian crowds, wrote:

We went home happy but the next morning it came to be talked about that Gandhiji had spent a sleepless night because the latter part of the resolution was lost. Some of the great leaders grew sarcastic over the reported vigil. They had an uneasy feeling. I had no doubt that this saint, with his fasts and vigils, was scarcely safe company.<sup>18</sup>

In 1919 at Amritsar, Gandhi ‘spoke as if his whole life depended upon the question. For the best part of an hour, he kept us spell-bound. The magic influence of his words and his presence swept us off our feet. When he stopped, we were at his feet’.<sup>19</sup>

Gandhi had won the day. The resolution was passed as he had wanted. Every word as he had willed. He was now the ‘unquestioned master’<sup>20</sup> of the Congress.

Thus began the split in the Congress that would lead to the exit of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Munshi and others, the emergence of a new leadership under the undisputed control of Gandhi and the end of a united Hindu–Muslim front against the British. Ironically, the final split would come through the idea of a mass movement to protect Muslim rights—not in India but in Turkey.

In the First World War, Turkey had fought on the side of Germany. When the war ended, a British plan to end the control of the Turkish Ottoman sultan over Islam’s holiest sites Mecca and Medina emerged. Indian Muslims had participated on the side of the British in the war under the assumption—fuelled by a statement by British Prime Minister Lloyd George—that the control of the Khalifa, or the sultan, as the supreme ruler

of the holy sites would not be challenged. But after the war a new state, Saudi Arabia—with a king favourably disposed towards the British, Faisal—became the owner of Mecca and Medina.

For many Indian Muslims in 1920 this was sacrilege.<sup>21</sup>

Gandhi entered these troubled waters on the side of the Muslims, supporting the demand for the Caliphate to be in control of the holy sites. He said he considered the decision of the British government to be a 'betrayal'.<sup>22</sup>

As this issue threatened to boil over, the Hunter Commission's report came out. It concluded that Dyer had been, at best, guilty of 'an error of judgement'.<sup>23</sup> In London, the House of Lords cheered the decision. A British campaign to assist Dyer raised 20,000 pounds and gave him a sword of honour.

The time for non-cooperation was nigh.

As always before Gandhi made the grand announcement, Patel was busy drumming up support. On 11 July 1920, the executive council of the Gujarat Political Conference met at Nadiad and, urged by Patel, passed a resolution supporting non-cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

On 1 August 1920, Gandhi cut his umbilical cord with the empire—returning his Kaiser-i-Hind medal, the Zulu War medal and the Boer War medal. With this, he had returned every honour he had received for cooperating with the British Empire and fighting to become a loyal subject. From then on, it would be an antagonistic relationship.

By the end of the month, Patel was back in Gujarat, speaking in Ahmedabad about the importance of non-cooperation. It is important to note that even in August, when the movement had just been announced, Patel hinted that this was a breaking point within the Congress and called it 'directly opposed to the policy which has been followed hitherto'.<sup>25</sup>

Reading this speech today is to listen to one of Patel's great defences of Gandhi at a time when he, and indeed Gandhi himself, would have known that they would face serious opposition within the Congress. It is also one of the early distinct examples of the pains Patel took to explain, defend and win people over to Gandhi's point of view.

In 1914 when the First World War began, it was said that England had been forced to enter the war for the preservation of the independence of smaller states and also in the name of truth and justice. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers went from India to fight in the battlefields of Europe, Africa and Asia [ . . . ] But what did we get in return for this when the war was over? We were given the Rowlatt Act which deprived us of freedom of action. When the people protested against such a tyrannical piece of legislation, the government decided upon a policy of suppressing all resistance by force.<sup>26</sup>

He provided a spirited explanation of the mass violence that had occurred.

Smarting under a sense of injustice, a section of our people in a fit of temporary insanity committed atrocities. We cannot defend these mad acts of our people. When innocent people are murdered, when government buildings are burnt, when women are attacked, it is only to be expected that the government would react strongly and act without moderation in taking effective and deterrent action. But government officers exceeded all bounds of reasonableness, and the government passed a law to exonerate those officers [ . . . ] finally, it appointed a committee ostensibly to investigate the happenings in Jallianwala Bagh and Lahore, but actually, as has turned out, to hush up everything.<sup>27</sup>

Patel went on to fire a few barbs at those who he said had always had complete and unwavering belief in the British government and its justice system:

There are people in this country who have greater faith in British justice than even in the existence of God. But these discussions in the British Parliament have opened the eyes of even such people. [ . . . ] Our condition today is what it is because of the blind faith we have had in British justice [ . . . ] Can we easily forget this attempt to dishonour India? The coming generation have a claim on us, who are their trustees; if we leave them only a heritage of insults and dishonour, of what use would all the wealth and all the comforts be that we may leave to them?<sup>28</sup>

Patel knew there would be those sceptical of non-cooperation even among his Gujarati audience. So he reminded them that Tagore had given up his knighthood and ‘the person whom you regard as a prophet, worthy of the greatest respect, has surrendered his medals’.<sup>29</sup>

He then took on any potential criticism of non-cooperation head-on.

Is there less risk in doing nothing? Has anyone ever for fear of possible risks given up great experiments which might, if successful, greatly benefit the people? If the British, empire builders that they are, had been afraid of the risks they ran, could they have survived for so long? When we see our people suffering injustices, what help do we

render if all we do is to emphasise the obstacles in the way and refrain from adopting any course of action, designed to save them from such injustices?<sup>30</sup>

But for all of Patel's criticism of those who had blind faith in the British justice system, of course he would have known that his own guru, Gandhi, had been one of its greatest believers. That is perhaps why Patel returned to this theme at the end of his speech, directly targeting those who wanted to continue to work within the British system.

What difference will it make, if we merely replace some foreign officers by Indians? How are we likely to benefit by the appointment of an Indian as a Governor, instead of a Briton? There must be a radical change of outlook in the administration. The Government of India must be run for the people of India. What indeed do we stand to gain by entering the trap of the reforms, so long as the government is run in the interests of the foreigners, and only such concessions are granted to us as are acceptable to the British?<sup>31</sup>

Who are the people Patel was so vehemently referring to?

This became apparent on 2 October 1920 in a session presided over by Gandhi in Bombay. It is here that, under Gandhi's urging and wishes, the demand transformed from 'Swaraj means responsible government within the Empire' to simply 'Swaraj'.<sup>32</sup> Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the man who had brought the word 'Swaraj' into national consciousness, was dead (in August 1920), and, in a sense, the ownership of that word in the freedom movement went to Gandhi, who had been thinking about it since 1909.

Jinnah moved an amendment to retain the spirit of Swaraj within the British Empire, but it was defeated, as was a similar petition by Munshi, and then a third, again by Jinnah. 'Jinnah then pointed out that, according to the rules, the constitution could not be changed except by three-fourths majority and without a proper notice being given. But Gandhiji, as president, overruled Jinnah's objection, whereupon we left the meeting,' writes Munshi.<sup>33</sup>

That December, the Congress met in Nagpur. Munshi says he saw a majority support Gandhi, and even Das, who was determined to oppose the Mahatma, buckled under. Soon, Jinnah along with twenty other leaders left the Congress.

When Gandhiji forced Jinnah and his followers out [ . . . ] we all felt, with Jinnah, that a movement of an unconstitutional nature, sponsored by Gandhiji with tremendous influence he had acquired over the masses, would inevitably result in widespread violence, barring the progressive development of self-governing institutions based on a partnership between educated Hindus and Muslims. To generate coercive power in the masses would only provoke mass conflict between the two communities, as in fact it did. With his keen sense of realities Jinnah firmly set his face against any dialogue with Gandhiji on this point.<sup>34</sup>

It is Munshi's final observations on this episode that grabs our attention. His is a rare and ruthlessly candid assessment of Gandhi—of the Mahatma's tremendous abilities and the fallout of those powers.

Thorough my intimate contact with Gandhiji I was to discover later that if he was a statesman he was also a practical mystic; an apostle of the moral order; a prophet who gave us a vision of a non-violent world. When a personality of such stature descends on a people, he becomes an avalanche overwhelming every resistance.

The only way to escape was to run away, and that we did.<sup>35</sup>

But one man was doing exactly the opposite of running away. In fact, from this point on, Patel's antagonism with Jinnah would be relentless and legendary. The two Gujarati barristers had chosen their sides. They would go on to literally carve out the land that they wanted from the Indian subcontinent. Though, at the time, Jinnah had no thought about Pakistan.

Within the party, it was not the Congress that was subsuming and moulding Gandhi but Gandhi who was transforming the party from within. And perhaps his greatest instrument for applying this change, for effecting this transformation, was Vallabhbhai Patel.



## F O U R

‘I AM NOT A LEADER; I AM A SOLDIER.’

So what had the Congress declared in Nagpur?

That India wanted to leave the British Empire—nothing more, nothing less. But such an aim would require rebuilding the organization from the ground up, signing up thousands of new members to make a mass movement and, most importantly, raising lakhs of rupees to fund the movement.

To achieve this, Gandhi got the Congress to open its doors to anyone who would pay an annual membership fee of 4 annas and pledged to support its causes. New targets were set: a Tilak Swaraj Fund would gather Rs 1 crore; 1 crore new 4-anna paying members would be enrolled into the Congress; and 20 lakh khadi-spinning wheels would be set up in homes around the country.

And who would take charge of delivering this target? Patel, of course. Ideally, Gujarat’s quota should have been to raise around Rs 3 lakh, but Patel led the campaign from village to village collecting Rs 15 lakh. His fundraising skills would only improve in the years to come, and it would be fair to say that Patel became one of the main, if not the main, fundraisers for the Congress through most of the freedom movement.

One letter written from Yerwada jail gives a sense of the kind of urgency to raise money that constantly plagued Patel, which we don't really see in the notes and letters of Gandhi or Nehru. Written in July 1933, in one short letter there are four separate mentions of monetary worries. 'Is the money of flood relief fund trust well preserved? [. . .] Please write to me two lines about it so that even an iota of anxiety will be removed,' wrote Patel.

Is there any trace of drought relief fund for our Gujarat Sabha? Were you able to collect anything from Achubhai's building, or is everything lost? If we need that fund now it can be used for drought relief. Influenza fund must have been increased by now. Can it be used for some work in Vadilal Hospital? Arrangement for the memorial needs to be done and the fund may be used. It is useless to keep it there.<sup>1</sup>

His letter contains a line which is, in essence, the monetary promise he maintained for the Congress Party till his death (and after he died, his daughter went to Jawaharlal Nehru to submit a bagful of cash donations that had come in and was pending for deposit into the party funds, but more on this later).

When we require money for such work we will get it. Think about it. It is worthwhile to arrange for attachment of medical school or college with Vadilal Hospital. In Ahmedabad, there is B.J. Medical School. Three hundred students applied for admission and only fifty were admitted, other two hundred and fifty were stranded. It would be better if we can arrange for it. It is worthwhile to prepare a definite plan and estimate. There is education fund in Kasturbhai's<sup>2</sup> father's name. If he wishes that can be utilized in this project. If you like this suggestion you can talk to him when you meet him.<sup>3</sup>

As the spirit of non-cooperation spread, with lawyers giving up their positions and students their classrooms, with mass burnings of foreign goods and with spinning wheels being set up everywhere, Besant 'said that Gandhi was sowing anarchy'<sup>4</sup> and Tagore warned that freedom for India would also have to mean freedom from 'indolence and ignorance' and not just British rule.

Patel in his own pragmatic way understood this well. He was, as he would often admit, not a romantic. He said that independence for India would have to mean freedom from starvation—after all, British rule in India had seen some of the worst famines in the history of the world—that

administration is no longer carried out from only one location and in a foreign language, that military expenditure would not be too heavy, that the difference in salary between the highest- and lowest-paid government employees would not be too vast and that justice would not be too difficult or expensive to obtain. This is especially ironic considering the state of present-day India. The concern for food security would remain till the end. Here is Patel in February 1949:

In this country, the greatest need of the hour is food. We import millions of tons of food and pay crores of rupees as freight charges. We have no ships to import the food that we want. We have no mercantile marine. We have a long coast with deep seas on the three sides of India [. . .] Look at our railways. It is like an old decrepit widow.<sup>5</sup>

India did face food shortages, and ignored the potential of its long coastline for a long time, and struggled to upgrade its railway—all as Patel had worried.

In a moment of great and effervescent uproar, Patel was level-headed enough to acknowledge the challenges that India faced and would continue to face even when the British left. Many of these challenges remain viciously alive in India even after seventy years of independence, especially Patel's prescient warning of a slavish imitation of the West:

Some are propagandists of the Western way of life; they see in the spinning-wheel a sign that the country is going back a hundred and fifty years. But they fail to realise that Western advancement is really the cause of the unsettled state of the world today.<sup>6</sup>

In 1921, though, excitement about the English way of life, and their royal customs, would hit a feverish high in India. On 17 November, the Prince of Wales arrived in Bombay on the *HMC Renown* with a man whose destiny would be intertwined with that of Patel, Nehru and Gandhi—Louis 'Dickie' Mountbatten, who would, in time, become the last viceroy of India. (On 22 November, in Surat, Patel said that 'they [presumably the nationalist leaders] bore no ill-will to the prince and if they resolved on observing complete hartal on the day of his arrival in India, it was mainly because they protested against the way in which the visit was sought to be



exploited'.<sup>7</sup> In this he was echoing Gandhi who had asked in September in Calcutta, 'If the Prince of Wales is not coming for political reasons what is the purpose of his visit? And whose money is he spending on his visit?')<sup>8</sup>

When the prince emerged through the 'half-finished roseate arches of the Gateway of India [. . .] The Times of India estimated that 200,000 people lined the route between Apollo Bunder and Sandhurst Road'.<sup>9</sup>

The prince had arrived in his kingdom even as the flames of non-cooperation were spreading, and soon after his arrival in Bombay, a police station in the city was attacked and three constables murdered. In spite of Gandhi's fervent appeal to quell the violence, it would take at least thirty-six lives, and cause the Prince of Wales to hurriedly depart to safer climes—in the princely states of Rajputana for a royal welcome.

As the Prince of Wales toured India with Dickie Mountbatten, who was later joined by Edwina Ashley, being entertained by herds of canopied elephants and pig-sticking shikars in the princely states, there were widespread boycotts in British India, including in Allahabad where both Nehru and his father, Motilal, had been arrested. So successful was the boycott of the prince in British-ruled India, and the Civil Disobedience Movement, that the government had to arrest, by conservative estimates, around 30,000 people. In the many bonfires of foreign goods was also one in which Patel cast away his 'barrister's robes, about a dozen suits, 250 collars, neckties and pairs of shoes'.<sup>10</sup> He would never again wear anything but hand-spun khadi made by his daughter Maniben. By 1922, he was comparing wearing English clothes to slavery:

A parrot which is kept in a cage for years does not like to come out even if the cage is kept open. Slaves even if they find out a way to free themselves from the bondage they hesitate to go that way. Long-time slavery generates a fascination for a state of slavery. Our condition is the same [. . .] Mahatma Gandhi showed us the way: 'Swaraj by spinning, wear khadi and have your Swaraj' [. . .] But we who had lost their identity, being fascinated by the lure of slavery could not give up our dress material and style of wearing cloth [. . .]<sup>11</sup>

There is a bit of local business push in this speech too.

Today in Gujarat, production of khadi is very high, but khadi produced in Gujarat is not consumed in Gujarat, which is proof of our weakness [. . .] Women are not fully swadeshi-minded. It is said that in marriage season khadi cannot be used. So our condition is like a parrot in the cage. We found out the way to freedom, but we have not freed ourselves from the lure of slavery, till then we shall have to rot in slavery.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after Christmas in 1921, Edward VIII, or David as Mountbatten called him, inaugurated the Victoria Memorial and reminded the cream of Calcutta society that his great-grandmother had promised in 1858 that ‘in their [Indian] prosperity will be our strength; in their contentment our security; and in their gratitude our best reward’.<sup>13</sup>

Contentment was not to be easily found in British-ruled India though. In February 1922 more than twenty policemen were murdered by protesters who set ablaze their chowki at Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur.

This, in the middle of the princely visit, could have given the Civil Disobedience Movement a devastating edge. But a horrified Gandhi stopped the movement and fasted to the astonishment of his closest followers, including Patel and the Nehrus.

Bose, the charismatic rising leader from Bengal, wrote: ‘The dictator’s decree was obeyed at the time, but there was a regular revolt in the Congress camp. No one could understand why [the] Mahatma should have used the isolated incident at Chauri Chaura for strangling the movement all over the country.’<sup>14</sup> Maulana Azad, the Muslim leader in the Congress said later, ‘This caused a severe political reaction in political circles and demoralized the country.’<sup>15</sup>

Even Nehru could not help exclaiming:

For it seemed to us to be impossible to guarantee against the occurrence of some such untoward incident. Must we train the three hundred odd millions of India in the theory and practice of non-violent action before we could go forward? If that was the sole condition of its function, then the non-violent method would always fail.<sup>16</sup>

At least one prominent historian, the formidable R.C. Majumdar, has suggested that the repressed frustration of Gandhi calling off the mass movement for the Chauri Chaura incident finally led to a rift, and violence,

between Hindus and Muslims in India in the freedom movement. Majumdar wrote:

This frustration was the main cause of the ensuing political inertia of the masses, and as it always happens, the pent-up energy of the masses found an outlet in Hindu–Moslem riots [. . .] it is difficult to acquit Gandhi of [this] serious blunder which retarded the progress of the national movement to a very considerable extent.<sup>17</sup>

But to Gandhi the Chauri Chaura violence was a ‘sin against God’ and even though he had been preparing, with Patel’s assistance, a mass satyagraha and refusal to pay taxes in Bardoli in the Surat region of Gujarat, which would have potentially brought his movement even closer to the dream of Swaraj within one year, he declared he would rather be called a coward than deny his oath against violence.

The British government was stunned. It had been preparing to jail Gandhi, and the reverberations of his sudden stalling of the Civil Disobedience Movement reached right up to the House of Commons. In India, almost every top Congress leader disagreed with Gandhi, but he was adamant: ‘The drastic reversal of practically the whole of the aggressive programme may be politically unsound and unwise but there is no doubt that it is religiously sound.’<sup>18</sup>

He had started mobilizing forces in Bardoli but now he was abandoning the entire plan. Patel, though astonished, did not join in the chorus against Gandhi’s decision. He seems to have stoically accepted that non-violence was for Gandhi ‘the first article of my faith’ and ‘the last article of my creed’.<sup>19</sup>

Later, in November 1923, the British Governor of Bombay would say of Gandhi’s decision to call off the Civil Disobedience Movement after Chauri Chaura:

[I]f they had taken his next step and refused to pay taxes, God knows where we should have been! Gandhi’s was the most colossal experiment in the world’s history, and it came within an inch of succeeding. But he couldn’t control men’s passions. They became violent and he called off his programme.<sup>20</sup>

In March 1922 Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to prison. The dream of Swaraj within one year seemed to recede into the distant horizon. Tagore despaired that Gandhi was choosing to fight merely for India and not the whole of mankind. C. Rajagopalachari, also in prison, worried that the wretched poverty of India would keep its people from coming together as one. The anglicized Nehrus, especially Jawaharlal, were appalled at the religious overtones of Gandhi's message—was he making the struggle for freedom some sort of holy war? Bose too thought this was foolishness— why give up clear gains for one mishap?

In Turkey, the army officer Mustafa Kemal Ataturk kicked out the supposedly revered sultan and established not an Islamic but, ironically, a secular state.

What on earth had Gandhi been fighting for? And who would be able to resurrect, on the ground, his struggle?

In jail, Gandhi read books—Edward Gibbons, Jules Verne and the story of the apostle Paul, among others—while outside, a few determined men refused to let his work stop, even in the face of a disunited and disillusioned

—some would even say hopelessly divided—Congress. Patel, who had opposed Gandhi in November 1921<sup>21</sup> when the Mahatma had first spoken about calling off the Civil Disobedience Movement after instances of violence in Bombay, was far more stoic after Chauri Chaura.

Since the Congress pledged non-cooperation in its Nagpur session in 1920, Patel had been stoking the fires of disenchantment in his old hunting grounds, the municipality of Ahmedabad.

The Municipality had no objection to cooperating with the Government in the matter of lighting, sanitation, water supply etc. Nothing of national significance was endangered, for example, by the Government lighting the streets. To let the Government, however, have complete freedom to develop the minds of our children, as it chose, was something intolerable.<sup>22</sup>

By 1921, Patel was urging the municipality to throw off government control of primary education and refuse funding—and then refuse inspection or the conduction of final examinations by British authorities. These triggered

months of intense battle between the schools, their teachers and the education authorities, ending in a sort of truce. While Patel could not entirely eradicate government control, he at least ‘could be assured that Government control over schools would be nominal’.<sup>23</sup>

It was Patel who had recommended Bardoli to Gandhi to spread civil disobedience and to refuse to pay taxes. The toss-up seems to have been between the site of his earlier success in Gujarat—Kheda—and Bardoli.

His view was that while the people of Kheda District were clever and keen, they were somewhat excitable and might under provocation lose control over themselves and resort to violence. On the other hand, the people of Bardoli were more placid and peaceful by temperament.<sup>24</sup>

These peaceable people had been primed for action—government bodies were totally boycotted and everybody bought a spinning wheel and started to make their own cloth, and the preparation for the people to stop paying land taxes was complete when Chauri Chaura happened.

More than any other leader, perhaps, it was Patel whose immediate and elaborate plans were aborted at Bardoli. The day after Gandhi was arrested, Patel said, ‘Many sacrifices have been offered by India to the British Lion, but never before had it been its good fortune to receive so sacred a prey.’<sup>25</sup>

But the absence of the Mahatma almost immediately meant the widening of fissures in his flock. Gandhi and Patel had opposed the Congress contesting elections to the local legislatures, because how could the demand for complete self-rule and participation in polls within the scope of British-ruled India go hand in hand?

But there were other powerful leaders in the Congress—among them Das and Motilal Nehru—who believed that showing the strength of the Congress by winning seats in the legislature would take the party closer to their dream of independence. Some like Motilal Nehru had been power centres within the Congress even before Gandhi arrived on the scene. They were backed by other strong voices like Hakim Ajmal Khan, the renowned physician and educationist, and one of the founders of the Jamia Millia Islamia university. Patel’s own brother Vithalbhai supported those who

wanted to participate in legislative polls, arguing that with many members within the elected bodies the Congress could, if the need arose, bring work in these bodies to a standstill, protesting colonial atrocities.

In December 1922, the Congress had a volatile meet in Gaya where Das argued furiously:

Our task is either to reform or to destroy these Legislatures. Until now we had boycotted them and our action has reduced their prestige [ . . . ] The country knows that those who are in them as members are not the true representatives of the people. Nevertheless, the Legislatures continue to function. It is, therefore, the duty of the Congress to go inside the Legislatures and carry out a more effective boycott. When an Army enters the enemy territory, it does not mean that it has cooperated with the enemy. In the same way, if we enter the Bureaucracy's stronghold, we are not cooperating. Everything depends upon the object with which we enter.<sup>26</sup>

These views were not new. Das had been arguing with Gandhi on them for a while, at least since 1920. But he had always been vetoed. Now, in the Mahatma's absence, this was Das's moment to make a valiant push—not least because he was at that point in time the president of the Congress party.

But Patel rose to counter Das, and was once again the most vocal supporter of Gandhi in a time of vulnerability—even at the cost of taking on his own brother.

Until the Congress at Gaya, Vallabhbhai had never spoken either at a Congress Session or in meetings of the All-India Congress Committees [ . . . ] At the Congress in Gaya, for the first time he spoke in Hindi. Thereafter he spoke often in Hindi, and although his Hindi was always full of Gujarati words and Gujarati expressions, neither Hindi nor Urdu speaking people had difficulty in understanding them.<sup>27</sup>

When Patel rose, he was emphatic:

I am not a leader; I am a soldier. I am the son of a peasant and do not believe that we can gain independence by merely talking. [ . . . ] Once we enter the Legislatures, the people will lose their enthusiasm for independence and the Congress will lose the confidence of the people. [ . . . ] It is only when the Congress announced its policy of non-cooperation that it began to be supported by agriculturists, labourers and women [ . . . ] only such activity which gives scope for participating in the national struggle and for making

sacrifices. Even if you conducted your campaign for a hundred years, through the Legislatures, you will not get independence.<sup>28</sup>

A soldier, and not a leader—this was Patel's sotto voce refrain. The more leadership he showed, the more he emphasized this point. Was it this attitude that kept him forever away from the final, pivotal roles of power? Perhaps.

For now, his argument would win the day—against the Congress president at that. At Gaya, most Congressmen voted for continuing the policy of boycotting the legislatures.

When the conference ended, Das resigned from his post. Soon he formed a competing party—Swaraj—and his closest compatriots in that endeavour were Motilal Nehru, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Vithalbhai Patel. In 1923, the Swaraj Party won a number of seats in the legislative elections, especially in Bengal, but after the death of Das in 1925, the party collapsed and Motilal Nehru returned to the Congress fold.

But for now, while Gandhi languished in prison, his party had split.

Patel wasn't despairing, though. Instead he seemed to have wondered about the role of Gandhi's acolytes in the absence of their leader, and answered the question in an article titled 'The Test of Faith' in which he argued that though Gandhi's 'colleagues have neither his sweetness of manner nor that complete self-control that is so essential in public life [ . . . ] if they too like him work tirelessly'<sup>29</sup> they could achieve some of the goals. His actions in the months and years that followed would prove that Patel, at least, meant to propel his leader's agenda, even if single-handedly. In Gujarat he pushed the programme of a mass boycott of foreign cloth, urging merchants to cancel purchase orders for months, and one of the most significant moves was his defiant leadership in May 1923 of what would later be called the Nagpur Satyagraha.

The question was about the right to fly the Indian national flag. What sort of flag was this and why was this controversial? This flag, which had been approved by Gandhi, was actually quite similar to the one India adopted after Independence. It had three sections—saffron, white and green. Some

said this depicted Hinduism, Islam and white for the other faiths, but in classic Gandhi style, the Mahatma insisted that saffron represented sacrifice, white purity and green hope. The only difference was that it had a *charkha*, or spinning wheel, in the middle, and the flag independent India chose has the chakra, or the twenty-four-spoke discus, representing the principles of justice. At the time of Independence, Gandhi initially refused to accept a national flag which did not have the charkha or the spinning wheel, even exclaiming,

I must say that if the flag of the Indian Union will not contain the emblem of the Charka, I will refuse to salute the flag. You know the National Flag of India was first thought of by me and I cannot conceive of India's National Flag without the emblem of the Charka.<sup>30</sup>

But Nehru convinced him that the twenty-four-spoked chakra from the Sarnath pillar of Emperor Ashoka was the spinning wheel without the spindle and the mal.

This spinning-wheel flag was quite different from the older flags of India's yearning for freedom. For instance, the flag that Bhikaji Cama, the Parsi revolutionary from Bombay, had raised in Stuttgart in 1907 had three strips of red, green and yellow, representing Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, with eight white lotuses for the eight provinces of British India on the top green band, the words *Vande Mataram* (We bow to the Motherland) written in the middle yellow strip and a white crescent and sun painted in the bottom red for Islam and Hinduism. This flag itself was based on the one the freedom fighter Sachindra Prasad Bose unfurled in Calcutta in 1906 which had the same design elements—lotuses on the top band, sun and crescent at the bottom—but the colour scheme was different. Sachindra Bose's flag had a top band of orange, followed by yellow and green. But 'the flag's first political baptism in Calcutta was almost a quiet affair: no public speeches, no official declarations, no artistic or literary acclaim accompanied its passage through processions'.<sup>31</sup> A few reports suggest that it may have been presented to the famed nationalist Surendranath Bannerjea in 1906, which is unsurprising as Sachindra Bose was a follower of



Bannerjea. The following year, even though Bhikaji Cama, while unfurling her flag, declared that ‘Indians wanted independence’,<sup>32</sup> ‘the flag excited no political reaction from nationalists in India’.<sup>33</sup>

By the 1920s, the demand for one flag to bind together the independence movement was gaining steam. Gandhi wrote:

[A] flag represents an ideal. The unfurling of the Union Jack evokes in the English breast sentiments whose strength it is difficult to measure: the Stars and Stripes mean a world to the Americans, the Star and Crescent will call forth the best bravery in Islam. It will be necessary for us Indians—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Parsis and others to whom India is their home—to recognize a common flag to live and die for.<sup>34</sup>

Coming from Gandhi, this was critical. After all it was he who changed, entirely, the flag of the freedom movement. Before his arrival, there had been other notable suggestions—Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda’s most well-known pupil, had recommended a flag with a thunderbolt,<sup>35</sup> representing, no doubt, the power of the civilizational teachings of her dashing mentor. The Home Rule movement led by Tilak and Besant had brought about a flag with ‘five red and four green alternating bands, seven stars, a crescent and a star, and the [(British)] Union Flag in one corner, it symbolized India’s demand for self-government.’<sup>36</sup> Gandhi had not only insisted on the use of khadi, or hand-spun cotton cloth, for the flag but had also asked that the charkha be placed right in the middle.

But raising this flag in Jabalpur troubled the British authorities, who started to beat down and jail hoisters. Among those jailed was Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, who is still remembered for her eulogy to the Rani of Jhansi, the hero of the 1857 revolt against the British, recited by schoolchildren to this day: *Khub ladi mardani woh toh Jhansi wali Rani thi* (How wonderfully she fought, this queen of Jhansi!).

Naturally this incensed protesters and the movement spread to neighbouring Nagpur, where Patel rallied forces, getting scores of satyagrahis to pour into the city almost every day.

The movement Patel led established without doubt the primacy and adoption of the Gandhian flag as part of the mass movement against the

British, no mean feat when Gandhi himself was behind bars. By June 1923, even as the flag satyagraha was raging, Rajagopalachari was arguing in Nagpur, propelled by the enormous response to the satyagraha:

You don't find on our flag a tiger or lion or unicorn but only a charkha. It represents industry, good will and our new weapon against brute force. The government wouldn't have minded if we'd put the sign of a gun on it, as they have bigger guns. But the charkha represents thirty crores of charkhas and they can't resist its force.<sup>37</sup>

Despite numerous beatings and arrests, attempts to march with the flag continued until September, when more than 2000 protesters set free from prison, and they celebrated with a march through the town waving the tricolour flag.

It must be remembered that when the skirmish about the flag started in Jabalpur and spread to Nagpur, most top politicians in India at that time thought it unimportant. Motilal Nehru described it as inconsequential and the Congress took weeks to decide whether it would be a relevant fight, coming soon after the debacle of the Khilafat Movement. In fact, even when the battle was won and the flag marched up and down Nagpur, Motilal Nehru sneered that all this was 'Pickwickian'.<sup>38</sup>

But both Gandhi and his lieutenant Patel understood the relevance of this victory. After the Khilafat mess, even sitting in jail, Gandhi had been able to score one against the British—all thanks to the leadership of Patel.

The location of the satyagraha made it even more significant. Nagpur was the old base of the Home Rule nationalists, an area of political activity nurtured by Tilak himself. It was geographically at the heart of India, 'the seventeenth largest city [. . .] with a population of 145,000'.<sup>39</sup> 'This major area of cotton production had had a tradition of strikes and political agitation since the first Indian labour strike in 1877 in the Tata-owned Empress Mills over the issue of workers' wage rates.'<sup>40</sup>

But Patel did more than keep alive Gandhi's mission at a time when the Mahatma seemed to have faced a crippling setback. It was a struggle where Patel, no doubt with the blessings of Gandhi, took major decisions—like asking Gandhi's wife, Kasturba, to be prepared to go to prison if required

and also issuing an appeal with her signature asking women in Gujarat to come to Nagpur and join the struggle. Gandhi's imagination of the flag was directly linked to his undisputed leadership of the Congress and the national movement. The charkha was Gandhi's symbol. He had introduced its insignia and the entire philosophy behind it to the Congress, in effect completely transforming the nature of the party and the national movement for independence.

But was everyone buying into his vision? Clearly not.

Gandhi had proclaimed his flag in 1921 but there was no Congress resolution endorsing it. It was almost as if the whole thing existed in Gandhi's mind—which of course it did. But this also meant that the flag did not pop up in many protests. Congress workers did not wield the flag as their totem and most people would not immediately think of Gandhi's flag as a necessary emblem of the countrywide struggle for independence. Some wanted a more sentimental design for a sentimental people, the Indians. The charkha could be, at best, a party symbol but surely not a national emblem? Others argued—notably in a letter to the editor of a newspaper—that having the charkha as a symbol on the national flag would be akin to providing the Indian Army bows and arrows and flint axes to modernize them.<sup>41</sup> Patel even lamented the initial lack of support from other leaders and in the media, in a letter in July 1923: 'But here we have an orchestra in which every person plays whatever tune he likes. All the English newspapers are either opposed to the struggle or are indifferent.'<sup>42</sup>

To make up for this lethargy, Patel even tried to arouse enthusiasm in his native Gujarat asking the Gujaratis:

Have you heard the mysterious sound of drum-beats from the holy warfield of Nagpur? Remember the flag that was hoisted on the pandal of the Congress session, held on the banks of the Sabarmati in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi, is being dishonoured in Nagpur [ . . . ] No country has got the most precious object like this without sacrifice.

Today we are fighting for the retention of our flag [ . . . ] Get yourself recruited as satyagraha soldiers, sign the pledge and march towards Nagpur when ordered.<sup>43</sup>

In the end, the Nagpur satyagraha became a turning point—for Gandhi and for Patel. The latter was able to establish a single visual insignia around