

Sardar Patel: Contribution to India's Freedom Struggle

Dr. V. M. Patil

Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu College, Kolhapur

Abstract:- Vallabhabhai Patel is known for his successful accomplishment of various *Satryagraha* movements, particularly the satyagraha at Bardoli, that earned him the coveted title of 'Sardar' and become a path-blazer for subsequent movements and developments in the Indian National Struggle. He was also an active participant in the non-violent Civil Disobedience Movement against the payment of raised taxes. Government had to surrender to this revolt and since then he was known as the Sardar Patel. If we view the freedom struggle as a one long succession of events, ultimately culminating in the attainment of its avowed objective of Independence, we find Sardar Patel enacting different roles in it at different times, and at different places especially India.

Introduction "That there is today an India to think and talk about very largely due to Sardar Patel's statesmanship and firm administration" So said the then President of India Dr. Rajaendra Prasad in May, 1959. Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel (1875-1950) is known mainly for three major achievements of his lifetime. Firstly, he is known for the merger and integration of the erstwhile Princely States into the Union of India, immediately after the dawn of freedom, the work having been completed by him in the record time of three years and that too through a process of persuasion and tough negotiations, as a result of which a united India emerged. Secondly, Vallabhabhai is known for his successful accomplishment of various *Satryagraha* movements, particularly the satyagraha at Bardoli, that earned him the coveted title of 'Sardar' and become a path-blazer for subsequent movements and developments in the Indian National Struggle. Thirdly, although less known, is his contribution to the framing of the Constitution of India, that was popularly adopted by the People of the Sovereign Democratic Republic of India on 26th January, 1950, cannot be overlooked. The vivacious role enacted by Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel in these three spheres of his national life, namely, the Freedom Struggle, Unification of India and the Constitution of India, may be justifiably termed as his contribution to nation-building. The present study has explored and critically evaluated Sardar Patel's Contribution to India's freedom struggle.

Kheda Satyagraha Due to excessive rains in 1917, the crops had failed in *Kheda* district and the Gujarat Sabha was compelled to support the request of the cultivators to the Government for the Postponement of collection of land

revenue. Gandhiji assumed the leadership of this movement and it was during this battle that Vallabhabhai took an active part for the first time in a political movement.

The struggle had made tentative beginnings on 15th November, 1917 in a village named *Kathalal* and soon spread to a larger area, with more and more agriculturists refusing to pay the land revenue. Although, it was basically an unorganized labours' movement, Gandhiji formally changed it into Satyagraha in a speech delivered at *Nadiad* on 22nd March, 1918 Both Narhari Parikh and Rajmohan Gandhi have given detailed account of the struggle that followed and how Gandhiji's leadership and Vallabhabhai's stewardship saw it through. It is pointless here to re-chronicle it here blow-by-blow. The end of this struggle was celebrated in Nadiad on 29th June, 1918. It was during this Satyagraha that Gandhiji discovered Vallabhabhai and between the two, a lifelong relationship of affection and service began. Referring to it, Gandhiji said at a meeting, "I must admit that when I met Vallabhabhai 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 were not for his assistance, I must admit that this campaign would not have been carried through so successfully." The villagers of Kheda district perceived Gandhiji as a saint and Vallabhabhai as a hero. They had also observed the working of Gandhiji's astute mind and Vallabhabhai's selflessness. Essentially, however, it was as a 'saint-and-hero team' that Gandhiji and Vallabhabhai were embossed on the minds of the people of Gujarat, as a whole.

Anti- Rowlett Act Agitation & Sardar Patel:-The Rowlett Bills owed their names to an English judge, Sir Sidney Rowlett, who had headed a wartime committee, charged with finding ways of controlling sedition. It recommended for suspected seditionists' arrests without trial or their trials without appeal and proposed a two year sentence in prison for offences like carrying a seditious leaflet in one's pocket. The Rowlett proposals were translated into two Bills were published on 18th January, 1919, and introduced in the Imperial Legislative Council on 6th and 10th February, 1919. Gandhiji was piqued by these provisions, because these went against his faith in the innate goodness of the English nation'. He told Vallabhabhai that 'something had to be done'. With tentative cajolery, Vallabhabhai made Gandhiji to confess that he had Satyagraha on his mind to oppose the promulgation of these bills. Vallabhabhai and Gandhiji together convened a meeting a meeting of about 20 prominent people at Sabarmati Ashram. All of them signed a pledge reading.

For the first time in the history of freedom struggle, prominent Indians publicly pledged their defiance. Gandhiji called on the Viceroy in New Delhi urging the withdrawal of the two Bills. Indian representatives in the Imperial Legislative Council, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Vallabhabhai Patel, also opposed the Bills. Consequently, one of the Bills was postponed, but the other one, sufficiently deterrent, was rushed through the Council with the help of officials and nominated members on 18th March, 1919. Four days later, with the Viceroy's signature on it, it became the Rowlatt Act. Gandhiji, thereupon, gave a call for a countrywide day of fasting and stoppage of work on 6th April, 1919. The call was enthusiastically responded to by both rural and urban people, irrespective of their caste or social status. With this began the Satyagraha. At Vallabhabhai's initiative, on 11th July, 1920, the executive committee of the Gujarat Political Conference adopted a resolution supporting the non-cooperation movement. On 1st August, 1920 (the day Lokmanya Tilak died), Gandhiji returned to the Viceroy his Boer War Medal, the Zulu War Medal and the Kaisar-e-Hind Medal awarded by the British Government and announced the countrywide commencement of the non-cooperation movement.

Bardoli Satyagraha – I :-The Congress Session began on 27th December, 1921. In his brief address, Vallabhabhai said, on 30th January, 1922, Gandhiji and Vallabhabhai jointly addressed the residents of Bardoli. Gandhiji told them that the Government would most assuredly seize not only their standing crops but also the cattle, ornaments, household goods and lands which would put them to extreme difficulties. The gathering resolved that they would not pay revenue unless and until Gandhiji asked them to do so. On 1st February, Gandhiji sent the ultimate missive to the Viceroy that in seven days, prisoners should be released, bans lifted and the Congress allowed working without hindrance for *Swaraj* and *Khilafat*; else, a war would break out at Bardoli. The Viceroy replied that he was not agreeable to these demands. The whole country waited with a bated breath. But before Gandhiji could relay his final marching orders to Bardoli, he was stabbed in the back and called the imminent revolt off. What had happened was that on 5th February, a Police contingent with a handful of ammunition fired on the procession of non-cooperators in a known village called Chauri Choura in eastern United Provinces. When the Policemen's stock of bullets finished, violent men in the procession hacked to death at least 22 Policemen. The news utterly shocked Gandhiji. He perceived it as a divine intervention.

Everyone was stunned by Gandhiji's decision to suspend the so diligently planned Bardoli Satyagraha. Different people, from Lala Lajpat Rai to Motilal

Nehru, from incarcerated Rajaji and Jawaharlal Nehru, to 30,000 other political prisoners, reacted with different sentiments to Gandhiji's decision. Many were frustrated at Gandhiji's brinkmanship. Was it a deliberate ploy on Gandhiji's part, or the inopportune rekindling of his trust in the British chivalry, or the quivers that went down his spine at the thought of the atrocities that the hapless residents of Bardoli would have to undergo at the British hands, or the thought of the countrywide volatility that he was about to ignite, that held back his hand? Are the questions that political historians shall never be able to answer fully? One thing for sure, Congress' moles in the Government administration, if it indeed had any, had failed to discern how close Gandhiji was to his objective, as revealed to a British journalist by Lord Lloyd, the then Governor of Bombay.

1. Wage a Struggle against Injustice He had implored the peasants that if the law itself is defective or if the Government is implementing it defectively, then the people will have to take on a long drawn out struggle against these injustices, that it is people's right. The Government was acting as – the more taxes you pay, the more are imposed on you. Throw away your burden and struggle for justice.

2. Eliminate Leader- Follower Distance:-By his own behaviour, Vallabhabhai set an example that the leader must always be near his followers. Hailing from an agrarian family, he firsthand knew the poor peasants' daily struggle for survival and the wretchedness of their hand-to-mouth existence. For eliminating the leader-follower distinction, he shifted from his well-appointed residence in Ahmedabad to a typically peasant's household in Nadiad. The gesture established his instant rapport with the peasants. In his routine interactions with them, he treated them as his own family members – counseling, guiding and mentoring them to scale ever newer heights of solidarity and fellowship. This would stand him in good stead in 1928 when Bardoli flared up once again.

3. Motivation to Sustain Hardships:-Vallabhabhai had told the peasants that the Government had decided to forcibly extract unilateral taxes from them and the peasants should be determined to disobey the Government in a civil manner. In the circumstances, there is bound to be an extreme coercion from the Government and the peasants will have to withstand it, no matter what happens. Later on, his prediction of coercion came true fully. In an attempt to harass the peasants, the tax collectors would seize the peasants' milch buffaloes, although there would be other realizable assets.

4. Maintaining Unity:-Vallabhabhai had advised peasants that against the united might of the people, no Government would be able to anything. If the Government claims itself to be just, how can it force injustices on the people?

He declared, “Peasants are one, their occupation is one, their justice is one and injustice also is one, their war and their God also are one”. He was Gandhiji’s trusted lieutenant and implemented Gandhiji’s strategy to the last ‘t’. Although Kheda Satyagraha had met with a limited success, it fine-honed Vallabhabhai’s organizing skills in a purely rural environment.

Bardoli Satyagraha – II (1928) Gandhiji’s withdrawal of Bardoli Satyagraha back in 1922 had only temporarily smothered the anti-British fires in the Bardoli peasants’ bellies, but the embers were still smoldering beneath the outwardly cool cinders. Sooner or later, these were bound to burst forth in a blaze. At the same time, there were other events occurring on the country’s political scene, in many of which, Sardar Patel was instrumental. Relying on his intuition, as early as 1925, Vallabhabhai had already started groundwork towards strengthening his rapport with the villagers in Bardoli taluka. He and some other disciples of Gandhiji had forged a bond with the villagers. They had taught spinning and weaving to all castes, helped Dublas (the weak) and tribals to read and rescued the villagers from liquor. He had sensed that one day the bond would be used in the on-going battle with the Government. In 1928, the Bardoli taluka contained 137 Villages with a collective land area of 222 square miles (575 square kilometers). The peasantry in this tract of land was already reeling under heavy land taxes and for two years, was petitioning the Government against further increases looming on the horizon. Despite these beseechments, in January, 1928, land taxes were escalated by at least 22 percent and 23 villages were raised to a higher tax bracket, which meant double the earlier rate. Now, with the tax axe hanging over their heads, the peasants ran to Sardar Patel for succor. But Vallabhabhai was still unsure of the firmness of their will to confront the Government. So he did not right away commit himself to lead their agitation. Two months later, they again implored him, upon which he instructed their emissaries.

The aftermaths of the Bardoli Satyagraha were far and wide both in time and space and its reverberations echoed well into the Independence. Rajaji spoke of vallabhabhai’s ‘great part in Indian history’, Subhash Chandra Bose referred to his ‘glorious victory’, and there was a flood of congratulation messages from all across the country. Sarojini Naidu noted that Vallabhabhai had shown ‘an amazing power of organization... twice within year’ and had translated Gandhiji’s teachings into a practical, dynamic action’. Eventually, vallabhabhai Patel was stuck with the honorific title of ‘Sardar’ on the conclusion of Bardoli Satyagraha. Now emboldened by the victory at Bardoli, Sardar Patel became more aggressive. He pointed out that the arbitrariness of land taxes was not

limited only to Bardoli taluka but quite widespread all over the Bombay Presidency and wanted immediate redress. He further demanded that the legislative assemblies, and not the revenue officials, should have the power to determine the land taxes. Considering the pros and cons of the demand and the ramifications of the just bygone Satyagraha, the Government abandoned its plans to revise land taxes elsewhere in the presidency until after the forthcoming visit of the Simon Commission. For Vallabhabhai, all over the country, his name had become a household term, representing determination, perseverance, courage and adroit handling of the day-to-day confrontations and counter-confrontations. The country, *en masse*, recognized him as a leader of national stature. With this recognition came more and heavier responsibilities and expectations of his leading a frontline role in the national struggle that was picking up momentum steadily.

Conclusion:

Vallabhabhai Patel is known for his successful accomplishment of various *Satryagraha* movements, particularly the satyagraha at Bardoli, that earned him the coveted title of ‘Sardar’ and become a path-blazer for subsequent movements and developments in the Indian National Struggle. Sardar Patel got heavily influenced by the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi His works started with peasant movement in Kheda, Bardoli and other parts of Gujarat. He was also an active participant in the non-violent Civil Disobedience Movement against the payment of raised taxes. Government had to surrender to this revolt and since then he was known as the Sardar Patel. If we view the freedom struggle as a one long succession of events, ultimately culminating in the attainment of its avowed objective of Independence, we find Sardar Patel enacting different roles in it at, different times, and at different places especially in western India.

Reference:

1. Parikh, Narhari (1953), *Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel*, Navajivan Pub. House,
2. Panjabi, K. L (1969), *The Indomitable Sardar* (3rd ed.), Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan
3. Ravindra Kumar, *Life And Works Of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel*, [Atlantic](#) Publication
4. B. Krishna, *Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel*, Rupa & Co. publishers