

SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF SARDAR PATEL

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The Congress Socialist Party, from its very birth, had got off to a bad start with Sardar Patel. A devoted Gandhian and a strict disciplinarian, he had naturally found our leftist deviation and our criticism of Gandhiji and the Congress extremely impertinent. He also had a felling, which was not unjustified, that, while we were honest chaps ourselves, we were allowing ourselves to become a front to be exploited by the communists who were using us as a channel of infiltration into the Congress and the national movement. Soon after the inception of our Party, Sardar Patel had bitterly denounced the socialists, calling us the "sappers and miners of the Communist Party" because of the united front that had been formed. He once went so far as to say, about the Gujarat group of socialists: "Just as I would drive a rabid dog out of my house, I would drive the socialists out of Gujarat." Later in life, I was to come to appreciate the force of his description of the Congress Socialist Party as the sappers and miners of the Communist Party.

Sardar Patel did not have a brilliant or scintillating mind, nor was he a man of great vision. He was not by any standards an intellectual and suffered from neither the strengths nor the weaknesses of that species. My friend Yusuf Meherally once said that the only culture about which the Sardar knew anything was agriculture!

Also, the Sardar had a very harsh tongue. Gandhiji once said that "his tongue is studded with thorns," but he also assured me that his bark was very much worse than his bite.

On the other hand, the Sardar had a big heart under his rough exterior. He was very loyal to those who worked with him and under him and he was also a man of his word. He had to do many unpleasant things because, while Gandhiji laid down the line, it was for the Sardar to give effect to it. Later, when he and I were on friendlier terms, he once bitterly complained to me how, while Jawaharlal sat on the fence on delicate issues and maintained his popularity, he had to do the hatchet work for the Congress, such as removing Khare from the Chief Ministership of the Central Provinces, disciplining K.F. Nariman, keeping Subhas Bose in his place and, he might have added, dealing with us socialists.

I told the Sardar that my sympathies were with him since the situation in the Congress Socialist Party had been rather similar, as while Jayaprakash love and brotherhood all round, it was left to me to do the hatchet job of expelling disrupters and maintaining discipline in the Party. In time I came to have a fellow feeling for the elder man. But that was much later.

Came 1945, the end of the war and the call to fresh elections to the Indian Legislative Assembly in Delhi.

Right through the thirties, I was known to be a friend of Jawaharlal Nehru but somewhat cool in my attitude towards Sardar Patel. I remember an occasion in the late thirties when Achyut Patwardhan and I called on Gandhiji. During the conversation, Gandhiji reproached me for not co-operating with the Sardar. I pleaded guilty to not maintaining contact with him and keeping away from him. I explained my attitude by reminding Gandhiji of

the couple of occasions when, to his knowledge, I had found myself somewhat badly misquoted by the Sardar. Gandhiji nodded thoughtfully, and after a time, said: "All right, we shall dismiss Sardar tomorrow morning on one condition, that you find me someone who has all Sardar's good qualities but not his faults." I burst out laughing. Gandhiji asked me why I was so amused. I answered that he knew I would have no such candidate available. Suddenly Gandhiji became very grave and said: "In our struggle for independence, I have to get the best out of the human material at our disposal. I cannot look for perfection. Are you too pure to make a similar compromise?" I promptly agreed to go on and see the Sardar. Next morning, when I to call on him, the Sardar welcomed me with a smile and said: "So you have come?". "Yes," I said, "I promised Gandhiji I would do so."

I was a little taken aback therefore when one day in 1945 Sardar Patel asked me whether I would like to stand from Bombay as a Congress candidate in the election to the Indian Legislative Assembly. At that time only those who paid income tax voted in these elections. Their numbers were therefore restricted and they consisted mainly of the literate middle class. G.V. Deshmukh was to be my running mate. I agreed to accept the nomination but I explained to Sardar Vallabhai that I was a poor man and therefore would not have the money to spend on the campaign and the Party should not expect me to spend more than Rs. 5,000. What happy days those were!

From papers that have later come to my notice, I find that

the nomination of Deshmukh and myself, which had been suggested by the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee and accepted by Sardar Patel, had met with some private criticism from those who had suggested alternative names. Rajendra Prasad suggested the names of Professor K.T. Shah and Jivraj Mehta, and Asaf Ali from Delhi suggested that of Bhulabhai Desai. These suggestions were turned down firmly by Sardar and on October 22, 1945, he wrote to the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee on behalf of the Central Parliamentary Board approving the nomination of Deshmukh and myself.

Patel suggested that I go with him and get Gandhiji's blessings. The old man was in Poona in Dr. Dinshaw Mehta's clinic. I went up to see him one day, Gandhiji said: "Oh, so you have brought Masani." Sardar said: "yes. We want to put him up as Congress candidate for the election to the Legislative Assembly and we have come to get your blessings." Gandhiji looked pleased and said: "Of course you have my blessings." Then, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he added: "I have always thought well of him."

Both Deshmukh and I were elected on November 26, 1945. Though Deshmukh was a very well established and fashionable surgeon, the votes secured by me were 21,630, while Deshmukh got 19,934 votes. It was a runaway victory as the candidate nominated by the Hindu Mahasabha got only 4,667 votes, and had to forfeit his deposit.

Between the formation of the Interim Government in the middle of 1946 with Jawaharlal Nehru as Chief Minister and Liaquat Ali as Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister, and with Jahn Mathai as one of the ministers, and the transfer of power on August 15, 1947, a great many interesting things happened.

Liaquat Ali's budget was introduced on February 28, 1947. It was a vicious budget obviously designed to give a parting kick to Indian industry before the partitions. Unfortunately Mathai, who was also affected by Jawaharlal Nehru's leftist and anti-business stand, supported the budget. Sardar Patel was furious. Being a realist he saw what this would lead to. Fortunately, the Bill was referred to a select committee of Parliament, a healthy practice of the British which we have discarded since Independence. There were some staunch Congress members who saw the mischief in the budget. Encouraged by this K.C. Neogy and I put in minutes of dissent against the vicious taxation proposals. There were two such proposals-one was the Capital Gains Tax and the other the Excess Profits tax. K.C. Neogy and I drafted the minutes of dissent. Both drafts were shown to Sardar Patel who approved of them. When the report was presented and a re-opening of the issue was asked for, some improvements were made in the measures of taxation as a result of our fight.

The cleavage over the Liaquat Ali Budget was the first divergence of views visible to us between Sardar and Nehru. From then on till Sardar died, there were frequent clashes since they did not see eye to eye on many issues.

I personally had been made aware earlier of the lack of empathy between the two men which went back to the thirties. There was an occasion in the late thirties when Sardar complained to me bitterly: "Jawaharlal will never do anything unpopular. If anything unpleasant has to be done, I must do it. Sardar mustoust Khare; Sardar must expose Nariman." I told Sardar that I sympathised with him on this point as there was a similar division of work between my colleague Jayaprakash and myself, where all the dirty work of expelling communists

and fighting disruptive activities had to be done by me.

Some time during the life of the interim government, Mathai casually told me that there were reports that I was being thought of as Food Minister in the new Cabinet. The Statesman had already referred to this. He added that Nehru was seriously thinking of this. He then asked me a question: "If you were taken into the Cabinet, who would you support, Nehru or Patel?" I immediately realized that my answer, which no doubt be reported by Mathai to Nehru, would decide whether in fact I would be Food Minister or not. I decided to be frank and take the consequences. My reply was that the question of supporting one against the other did not arise. From my point of view the question was - who would vote on the same side as I on various issues? I had no doubt that Nehru and I would be in unison on issues concerning minorities and the non-denominational character of the state and the approach to modernization, while Sardar Patel and I would agree on issues of foreign policy and Communism. I am afraid that answer did it. I was never asked!

On January 30, 1948, returning from a stroll in New Delhi, I heard the news of Gandhiji's assassination at the hands of a fanatic named Godse. We soon heard on the radio the grim details. The next day we marched behind the gun carriage on which our great leader was carried to the cremation ground which is now his samadhi at Rajghat

Gandhiji's assassination had an immediate echo in our Parliamentary Congress Party where the question of banning the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh came up for discussion on the ground

that the R.S.S. was a party to the conspiracy that led to the assassination. Jawaharlal was inclined to go along with the proposal but Sardar Patel, the Home Minister, was against it.

I expressed my lack of sympathy for the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh but argued against it being banned by law . I pointed out that the logical consequence of such an action would, if carried to the extreme, be a system of licensing of political parties which had no place in a democracy but only flourished under a dictatorship. I therefore suggested a going slow and studying the matter further. Jawaharlal, who was in the Chair, responded to my suggestion as perhaps it expressed his own doubts. On the other hand, Sardar Patel smiled at me happily with satisfaction.
