

## The Needle's Eye



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It is high time we paid true tribute to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the hero of the Kheda and Bardoli satyagrahas, who was honoured with our highest honour, the Bharat Ratna, only in 1991...

# The Sardar, the Pandit and the Loh Purush

The two men were born fourteen years and fourteen days apart. They died fourteen years apart, one just three years after independence. Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru were both London-educated lawyers. They both worked very closely with Mahatma Gandhi in the long fight for independence. Both went to prison several times. Both were involved in the thankless partition of the subcontinent in 1947. They were forced to work closely together after independence and had to sometimes publicly proclaim their regard and respect for each other. Patel was the popular choice of the Congress party to lead it into independence, but Gandhi anointed Nehru, whom he regarded as a son, and wanted Patel, whom he regarded as a brother younger by only six years, to do the heavy lifting in moulding flesh and bones into Nehru's idea of India.

Patel was always willing to give up his place if asked, and this was one of his great virtues. But he could stand very firm when it came to the interests of the nation he wanted to see emerge from British-ruled India and a patchwork quilt of princely states. In just three incredible weeks Patel, at the head of the vital States Department and very ably assisted by the master-bureaucrat VP

Menon, engineered the accession of 554 states to the Indian Union just ahead of the August 15th deadline. As India and Pakistan took birth in an orgy of communal savagery, Patel worked day and night to persuade millions of refugees that they had, even if ravaged and penniless, a future in their new homes.

This Friday we will all celebrate Rashtriya Ekta Diwas, national unity day, to mark Sardar Patel's 139th birthday. The Central Board of Secondary Education, which has jurisdiction over 15,799 schools in India and 23 other countries, has declared that each student will have to take a 71-word pledge that includes the solemn resolve "to make my own contribution to ensure internal security of my country". So will hundreds of thousands of government employees nationwide. The University Grants Commission has asked colleges across the nation to administer the pledge. Young women and men will be asked to run a 'unity lap' around the nearest playground; unity quizzes will be held; and questions will be asked about Patel's life and work.

It is somewhat ironical that National Unity Day also happens to be the 30th anniversary of Indira Gandhi's assassination; will the new government mark it? I don't remember Patel's 100th birth anniversary



**Made for Each Other**  
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sary in 1975 being celebrated with any joy: on that day India was frozen in the grip of Indira's Emergency.

So yes, it is high time we paid true tribute to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the hero of the Kheda and Bardoli satyagrahas, who was honoured with our highest honour; the Bharat Ratna, only in 1991, the same year Rajiv Gandhi got his after his assassination. Both Nehru (in 1955) and Indira (1971) awarded themselves

the title while they were alive and in office. A set of Sardar Patel commemorative coins was issued only in 1996. The BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee, in his six years as PM, did not attempt even a minor deification of Patel.

It is probably not coincidental that Narendra Modi, who is called *Loh Purush*, wants to be remembered as the man who built the tallest statue in the world. The 182-metre Statue of Unity will be built over the next four years on a small island near the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat. Patel the original Iron Man will be twice the height of the Statue of Liberty in New York and five times the height of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. It will cost the taxpayer Rs 2,979 crore.

But what intrigued me was why

Modi has been resolute for so many years about elevating Patel to the pantheon of the BJP's heroes. Reading several accounts (interestingly Patel never wrote his autobiography) I realised that although a lifelong Congressman, he was a Hindu nationalist to the core, and here he was in the company of other Congress grandees like Rajendra Prasad, Sampurnanand, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai and Purushottam Das Tandon. Soon after independence Patel vowed to rebuild the Somnath Temple in the then just-acceded Junagadh state; after Patel's death, President Rajendra Prasad went to the site to consecrate the foundation, badly irking Nehru.

In early January 1948, just weeks before Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, Patel made a speech in Lucknow that bared his sympathies, and his antipathy for Nehru's idealised notions of secularism. "In the Congress, those who are in power feel that by the virtue of authority they will be able to crush the RSS... They are patriots who love their country. Only their trend of thought is diverted." Patel saw the RSS as an ally in the task of rehabilitating the huge flood of Hindu and Sikh refugees. He was also unambiguous about the large Muslim population that had chosen

to stay back in India after Partition. "... mere declaration of loyalty to [the] Indian Union will not help them at this critical juncture. They must give proof of their declaration," he said.

Many have said India would have been very different if Patel had been its first prime minister: no Kashmir problem, no war with China, everything ship-shape. Does the rediscovery of Patel mean Nehru is dispensable? For me, both were crucial in the first few years after independence when we did not have a constitution, when an unelected government had to bring 345 million people together. Nehru was a visionary, a thinker and planner; Patel was a doer, a negotiator, a chief operating officer. When LIFE photographer Margaret Bourke-White asked Nehru about his differences with Patel, he answered: "The important point is—do the differences outweigh the agreements?"

History is someone's story, and the story changes with each sutradhar or narrator. We are seeing a new hagiography being constructed. The Sardar deserves every bit of our respect and admiration. But we need not redact the 'old' history for that. Enough histories have been written that show Patel as an extraordinary politician, strategist and nationalist. We just have to read them.

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