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Heroic Roll in Kheda Agitation: Sardar Patel

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Abstract

Sardar Vallabhbhai Jhavernhai Patel (31 October 1875-15 December 1950) is one of the those who along with Gandhiji fought the battle for freedom, won it and have contributed immensely to the construction of modern independent India.¹ The great achievement of Vallabhbhai Patel is his successful completion of various satyagraha movements, particularly the Satyagraha at Kheda which made him a popular leader among the people and at Bardoli which earned him the coveted title of “Sardar”, and made him an idol for subsequent movements and developments in the Indian national struggle.² The present study focuses on the role of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in Kheda Agitation.

Keywords

Sardar Patel, Kheda agitation, Gandhiji, peasants, Commissioner, collector, Satyagraha, Gujarat Sabha

Background of Kheda Agitation

During the First World War, the economic position of the peasants of *Kheda* had deteriorated badly. In the years between 1908 and 1914, there had been a partial recovery from the effects of the great famine of 1899-1900 and its aftermath. Agricultural wages and crop prices had remained stable, coinciding with a run of good harvests, especially in the years 1912 to 1914, so that conditions appeared to be improving. But in 1915 there was very little rain and the *kharif* crop failed. In 1916, the season was better, but by no means good. In 1917, late rains spoilt the harvested crops. The richer peasants were also hit by a sudden rise in agricultural wage rates in September 1916, after a decade of stability. These setbacks coincided with the severe inflation brought about by the First World War. The prices of imported commodities were rising at a far steeper rate than crop prices. This had been caused by the scarcity of imported goods and by the difficulty of moving essential commodities within India when much of the rolling stock was being used for military purposes. The peasants were hit in particular by the increases in the price of kerosene, ironware, cloth and salt; increases made all the greater by the hoarding and profiteering indulged in by merchants throughout *Kheda* at this time. Despite these adversities, the Bombay Government refused to lower the land revenue demand.³

The crop failure of 1917 was of a particularly irritating nature. In 1917, the monsoon rains were more than adequate, and in the *Daskosi* canal tract there were demanding floods. In early October, the bright sunshine which heralded the end of the monsoon brought the peasants out into their fields to cut their staple grain crops of *bajri* and *kodra*. Then, on 22 October, when these crops were lying in the fields to dry, the rains returned for three torrential days. Instead of drying, the crops rotted.

Peasants who had employed labourers at the new, higher rates to buy food to feed their families. Worst hit were the peasants of northern *Nadiad, Kapadvanj, Matar* and *Mehmedabad Talukas*. In these areas, there were few cash or winter crops to relieve them from protracted debt after they had paid their land revenue, due in December. *Charotar Patidars* were in a somewhat happier position, for they had the prospect of a good tobacco harvest in March, assuming that there were no damaging frosts during the winter. Besides the crop failure, considerable anxiety was caused by bubonic plague which raged through the winter, killing 18,067 people in the district. Many spent the whole of the winter in flimsy huts in their fields to escape the disease.⁴

The law entitled the farmers to ask Government to postpone collection of land revenue if in any year the yield was less than 25% and in case, the crops were very poor even in the succeeding year, they were entitled to remission of revenue for the preceding year. Now it had so happened that because of torrential rains in 1917, the yield was extremely poor and the peasants did not have enough grains either to feed their families or their cattle. Distress was widespread and they naturally asked Government to give them the relief to which they were entitled in law, viz. that the collection of revenue for the year be postponed.⁵ Irrespective of this fact, the Government started recovering the land revenue. Gandhiji's view was that if the yield was low, the revenue should not be recovered. But to translate his view into action, first of all, it was necessary to have an enquiry about the crop-estimate in terms of *annas* in a rupee. Who would undertake this work? Under the auspices of the Gujarat *Sabha*, Sardar took it upon himself; and, under Gandhiji's directions, proceeded with his task.⁶ This campaign was undertaken by the Gujarat *Sabha* and Gandhiji was its spiritual leader. The workers of the Home Rule league, Bombay, had also participated in this movement.⁷

Role of Sardar Patel

On behalf of the peasants, Gandhi only demanded a postponement of land revenue recovery, not its total remission. That too, until a full inquiry had been conducted by the government.¹⁰ Gandhiji launched his appeal to the peasants at the first Gujarat Political Conference held at Godhra from 2 to 5 November 1917⁸. The *Sabha* was decided to free the rural poor from the unjust custom of *veth* or forced labour. Another resolution was passed condemning the abuses in the collection of land revenue. The resolution ran thus: 'Farmers without adequate means are put to extreme hardships because of the general practice of collecting revenue dues in one instalment instead of two and are obliged to sell their means of livelihood to pay the dues.' In his presidential address at this Godhra Conference, Gandhiji announced that the nationalist movement was to be for and by the peasants. *swaraj*, he said, could not be attained without peasant support for the nationalist programme. 'We have to demand *swaraj* from our own people. Our appeal must be to them. When the peasantry of India understands what *swaraj* is, the demand will become irresistible. After the Godhra Conference, political activists went to the villages with the message that they would agitate to redress the grievances of the peasants. The stage was thus set for the Kheda movement.⁹

Mohanlal Pandya and Shankarlal Parikh had attended the Gujarat Political conference at Godhra. On their return to Kathlal they heard that the peasants of the area were demanding that the revenue be suspended for the year as their *Kharif* crop had been spoilt by the late rains. Inspired by Gandhi's message, the two men prepared a petition to send to the government. When shown the petition, some *patidar* landowners remarked that it should be for the whole of Kheda, and not just for Kathlal. In mid-November, the two activists had petition forms printed at Nadiad for circulation in the villages of Kheda. The Nadiad Home Rule League helped them to collect signatures, and on 20 November petitions with a total of 20,000 signatures were sent to the Bombay Government.¹⁰ The Bombay government refused to interfere with the commissioner's authority.

This encouraged the local officials to conclude that "the peasants were complaining only because they had been instigated and their emotions worked up by agitators. So, if the government accepted the demands of the peasants, 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" It was not so with Gandhiji and Sardar Patel. They were fighting for a just cause: noble for its purity of motive in urging the Government to postpone recovery of land revenue.

Despite that, Commissioner Pratt rode roughshod over the people's hopes and aspirations by being dictatorial. He told the secretaries of the Gujarat *Sabha*, on the Congress, that "the responsibility for proper administration in Kheda district is that of the collector," and held out the threat: "If I do not hear from you by tomorrow, I shall write to the government recommending that your Sabha should be declared illegal." It was a serious threat, which Gandhi and Patel could not ignore.¹¹

Since Gandhiji was launching his first satyagraha in India, he and Patel had to prepare the masses for it: and also to educate their lieutenants about how to conduct themselves. Gandhij's advice to them was: "You may be arrested for doing so, but you must regard that as the fulfilment of your work. That is satyagraha" This assumed importance in view of the collector's threat: "If anyone, influenced by the wrong advice which is being given to them, refuses to pay up his land revenue dues, I shall be compelled to take stringent legal measures against him." To this Gandhiji replied, "The government may do what it likes. If the hardship is genuine and the workers skilful, they cannot but achieve success."¹²

Gandhiji and Sardar Patel moved nearer to the "battlefield": from Ahmadabad to Nadiad. They opened a camp office in the local orphanage, and conducted an on-the-spot inquiry into the conditions of peasants. They jointly visited about 60 villages, while a team of workers surveyed 425 villages out of a total of 600. Their joint operations were at Gandhiji's bidin. He had laid down the condition that a *Sabha* worker should accompany him and devote all his time to the campaign until it lasted. "As no one else was prepared to give up his other activities wholly, Vallabhbai offered his services, much to Gandhi's delight."

Sardar Patel enjoyed two advantages: First, he belonged to Karamsad in Kheda. He was born and brought up on its soil and amid its environment, and had practised as a lawyer at Borasad earlier in the century. Second, being the son of a peasant, he knew and understood the people better than Gandhi. Both worked together, moving in the dusty countryside on foot long distances.

The satyagraha was launched on 22 March 1918 at a public meeting of peasants at Nadiad.¹³ At this meeting, attended by about five thousand people, Gandhiji delivered a rousing and inspiring speech to inaugurate the Satyagraha. Gandhiji said: "I have only this to say to the *Talatis* and chiefs of villages who are present at this meeting "Let them by all means be loyal to the government but that loyalty does not lie in oppressing the people." the land revenue must be realized, as ordered, but the Government certainly would not ask them to beat the people. Surely, the law can never authorize such an order. If there should be any such order, the *Talatis* are not bound to obey it. Anyone acting in this manner will be committing treason against the country, the State and God. They may execute the orders of superiors loyally, but they have no right to molest the people."¹⁴

If they are convinced that the crop is below four *annas* they should say so boldly to their superior officers. Thus Gandhi tried to win over the support of the local village officials by rousing their moral sentiments. He applied the same approach to the peasants in his bid to mobilize them against the injustice of the Government. He appealed to the peasants to show moral courage in their fight against injustice, and to prepare themselves for severe suffering for the sake of justice. 'When the crops have failed, to pay up the dues out of fear is cowardice. We are human beings, not animals. To refuse a thing firmly and plainly in the name of truth-that is Satyagraha.

We have assembled today to do the spade-work for satyagraha. We don't propose to pay up the revenue to the Government; we want to fight it out. We have to prepare ourselves, then, for the suffering that may follow. We must visualize what we shall have to face:

The Government may recover the assessment by selling our cattle and our movable property.

1) It may impose fines. 2) It may confiscate *jagidars*. 3) It may even put people in jail on the ground that they are defiant.¹⁵

After the Nadiad meeting was over, about one hundred people went to the *Hindu Anath Ashram* of Nadiad to sign the vow. The vow demanded that the revenue be suspended for those peasants who could not afford to pay it.¹⁶ The headquarter of the movement was the *Hindu Anath Asharam* at Nadiad.¹⁷

The Satyagraha had run for a few days while Gandhi had to leave for Indore to preside over the Hindus Sahitya Sammelan. He handed over charge to his deputy commander on March 30th. In his new position, Patel displayed unmistakable evidence of the great qualities of leadership he possessed, so complementary to his master's. If Gandhi had a *bania's* suave, courteous veneer hiding his firmness and determination, Patel had the bluntness of a soldier and the astuteness of an organizer.¹⁸

On March 30, Sardar Patel addressed a public meeting at Nadiad when a number of prominent members of the Home Rule League of Bombay were present. He declared,¹⁹ “This fight will act as a spark which will set the whole country afire”, happiness cannot be obtained without undergoing trials and tribulations, and if perchance you get happiness easily, it does not last very long.”²⁰ Paying a glowing tribute to Gandhiji, his new leader, he said: “The brave man (Gandhiji) who has inspired this fight is capable of converting the cowardly into the bravest of persons, and in India, Kaira district is the land of brave men.”²¹

Sardar also told the peasants, “A state ought to be proud of a people who are strong and determined. There is nothing to be gained from the loyalty of a cowardly and cringing public. The loyalty which you get from a fearless and self-respecting people is the loyalty which a Government should welcome...it is only if you are prepared to face hardships now and get the Government to change its policy that you can remove the source of hardship for all time.”²²

In his public speeches during Gandhi’s absence, Patel always struck the same inspiring strain as the Mahatma, attempting to build up his master’s image as one who had taught them the new mantra of truth and ahimsa.²³

Gandhiji arrived on 2 April and on 4 April, Vallabhbhai took him to his native place of *Karamsad* and Gandhi made his first speech in a Charotar village since 1915.²⁴ The enthusiasm and commitment of the people to Satyagraha was fairly visible. Their response was overwhelming. This proved how hard Vallabhbhai had worked to arouse the people which did not escape the notice of Gandhiji. He commended. “This is the land of Vallabhbhai, his birth place. He is new in the field of politics but he shows all the signs of an astute player. He needs your blessings, well wishes and cooperation to bring you a victory. You have so endearingly served him sweet *laddoos*. But be ready to swallow pitter pill when it is served by the foreign rulers. Do not yield or break down whatever harsh measures they take against you. Stand firm. No one pays any revenue.”²⁵ On 8 April, Gandhi made his first appearance in Borasad *Taluka* at a meeting attended by 4000 people in Borasad town.²⁶

Since first week April Gandhiji, along with Vallabhbhai Patel and other workers, made extensive tours of Kheda villages to strengthen the people’s determination to stand by their pledges,²⁷ In Sardar Patel’s own village, *Karamsad*, things were not shaping well. Some non-landholders seemed to be willing to avail themselves of the auctions. Patel was deeply hurt. He implored them, “When I see the condition of this village today, I am reminded of 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. I see you frightened of the 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?”²⁸

The Commissioner, Pratt thought of making capital out of Gandhi’s innate goodness. Since it was difficult for him to reach the boycotting peasants through his

officials, he hit upon the ingenious device of asking Gandhi to help him address peasants.²⁹ Gandhi “immediately issued a circular asking the people to listen the Commissioner.”³⁰ Gandhiji asked the peasants to attend the meeting to tell the Commissioner the whole story from the beginning to the end, and to remain loyal to the satyagraha vow.³¹

In response to Pratt’s request, Sardar Patel arranged for a public meeting of the leading agriculturists of the district to enable the Commissioner to present the Government points of view before them, some 2,000 peasants of the district came to attend the meeting held near the Tahsildar’s office at Nadiad. Gandhiji was not present, but Sardar Vallabhbhai and other workers were present.³² The Commissioner was accompanied by the district Collector and other Revenue Officers.³³

The Commissioner tried to win the farmers from Gandhiji’s influence. Pratt used the prefix “Mahatma” for Gandhi and the suffix “Saheb” for Vallabhbhai. His Gujarati was excellent.³⁴ The commissioner, Pratt, took advantage of the opportunity and made a long speech. He said:³⁵ Pray listen to my speech and hear my advice ...The power to fix assessment is in the hands of the Government and the officers of the Government...We are the final arbiters of a legal right you may fight in a court of law. The sole authority to issue orders in the matter rests in the hands of the officials. It is not in the hands of Mr. Gandhiji, nor of Mr. Vallabhbhai. you may bear fully in mind that any amount of your efforts in this matter is bound to be futile. my words are final orders. They are not my personal orders, but they are the orders of His Excellency Lord Willingdon. I have a letter from His Excellency in which he has been pleased to say that he would confirm whatever orders I may pass in the matter and every word that I may say...You may understand that it is not I who say this. It is His Excellency Lord Willingdon.³⁶

By mentioning the governor’s name, Pratt expected to make the innocent, illiterate villagers fearful of the supreme authority whom he represented. Thereafter, Pratt attempted to deflate Gandhiji influence by deviously paying him a left handed compliment: “Mahatma Gandhi is an exceedingly good and saintly soul. And whatever advice he gives you, he that it is in your interest. His advice is that you should not pay the assessment; because thereby you would safeguard the interests of the poor...Do you mean to say that the Government does not protect them? Is not the Government solicitous of their welfare?”

When Pratt went on to add that the home rulers would not go to jail, some from the audience shouted: “Sir, if you send us, we will go.” This was an oblique reference to the rumour that Gandhiji would be sent to jail. Lest a misunderstanding got hold of the mind of the audience, and they assumed that Gandhiji would be jailed, Pratt scotched it by categorically stating: “During the passive resistance campaign in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhiji had to go to jail. But under this Government such a thing will not happen...The jail is not a fit place for him. I respect that Mahatma Gandhiji is a most saintly character.”

Thereafter, ingeniously, Pratt attempted to build his own image with the observation:

The fight of the Government is not with the peasants. If children kick their parents, the latter are pained but not angered...I have 28 years of experience of administration of land revenue assessment and of land revenue legislation. Mahatma Gandhiji is my friend. he has passed the greater part of his life in South Africa and has been here for only two or three years. In the domain of knowledge, letters and religion, he is a great authority. His advice on these subjects must be right but in matters of administration and land revenue assessment, his knowledge is limited. I claim better knowledge. I have come here only to give you a final word of advice...If you do not pay the assessment; your lands will be confiscated. Many people say, "This won't happen." But I say that it will...Those who are contumacious will get no lands in future."³⁷

By expressing his willingness to hear people speak out their minds, Pratt disturbed the hornet's nest in the mistaken hope that they would support him. Over a dozen peasants rose, one after another, to express their views in stunningly brutal frankness. By telling a lie about the Ahmadabad millhands calling off their strike, Pratt had provided Patel with a hammer to nail the lie onto him. Mistakenly, he had stated that the vow the peasants had taken had no sanctity, since a similar vow by the millhands had already been broken.

Sardar Patel was at the meeting only as an observer; he was not to speak. This had given Pratt satisfaction and relief. But, unwittingly, he gave him a opportunity to come out from his self-imposed silence when he sought his opinion in regard to what Narsinhbhai from Karamsad had said that their fight was not intended to embarrass the Government. Patel jumped at the opportunity to say, "The speaker does not deny that ours is a fight. He admits it is. What he means to say is that it is not intended to embarrass the authorities."³⁸

Before Patel could proceed further, Pratt, out of nervousness, asked him whether he was going to make a speech. Patel replied that he was going to refer to the question of the millhands' strike only. Whereupon Pratt remarked rather ruefully, "Well, you may go on. But today is our turn."

Patel, however, observed:"There was no breaking of the millhands 'vow...Mr. Pratt himself graced the last meeting of the millhands when the terms of the compromise were declared." There he did not spare Pratt by answering his left-handed compliment to Gandhi with the shrewd observation: Mr. Pratt says he has great regard for Gandhiji. The commissioner interjecting: "Yes, of course." Gandhiji has a great regard for Mr. Pratt, and so have I. But it was Mr. Pratt who said on that occasion that the millhands should always follow Gandhiji advice and, if they do, they would not fail to get justice. I also say likewise that if you follow Gandhiji's advice in this matter, you are sure to get justice at Mr. Pratt's hands. Here also the commissioner may, if he so wishes, get a committee appointed and we would willingly accept its decision as not inconsistent with our vow."³⁹

Patel netted Pratt nicely. Pratt's discomfiture was complete. It was compounded by some persistent question from the peasants.

Pratt's threat clearly indicated that the government was poised for action. To counter that, Gandhi told the peasants, "The commissioner has issued many threats.

He has even said that he will see it that these do not remain empty threats...He seems to regard the relationship between the Government and the people as similar to that between parents and children. If that were so, has anyone seen in the who history of the world an instance of parents having resisted them in a non-violent manner?"

Ever willing for a compromise, Gandhiji asked the commissioner for an interview. He got a most unhelpful reply, "If you give up all your weapons and come to discuss without conditions, my doors are open to you, but my hands are tied by legal and administrative rules." Gandhiji answered, "I an a believer in satyagraha. I would gladly give up my weapons and even my all for the matter of that, but I cannot give up my principles."⁴⁰

The fight went on unabated. It evoked wide response. For the first time women came forward to fight shoulder to shoulder with their men folk, whom they injected with confidence and courage. They, indeed, displayed unusual bravery. Some even declared: "Let the Government take away our cattle and our ornaments, and confiscate our fields. But our men will not depart from their pledge."

Gandhiji had to proceed to New Delhi on an urgent call from the viceroy. Patel assumed command of the satyagraha for the second time. Through his speeches and pamphlets, he kept alive the spark Gandhi had lit. He told the peasants:

A fierce dharma-yudh(righteous war) has been going on between the people and blind authority...notice of confiscation have been enforced in the case of some leading men's houses. Fines imposed. Standing crops taken possession of. Even threats of arrests held out. But people have remained undaunted, while officers have betrayed their helplessness over their failure. It was then that the Commissioner stepped in, and addressed the peasants at Nadiad. He gave them serious threats; even read out the Governor's letter to impress upon them his authority to act. But the peasants showed rare courage in answering his threats. He was surprised to see such fearlessness for the first time in his 28 years of administrative career. And, no wonder, he left the meeting in sheer desperation.⁴¹

Patel went on to observe:

The peasants took all this cheerfully. The Government recovered no money at all...So the Government grave up confiscations and restarted auctions of movable properties...They took charge of millk-giving buffaloes, kept them in the sun, and even separted them from their calves. This reduced the price of the buffalo by half. Even so, the peasants adhered to their pledge patiently and bore whatever hardships they were called upon to bear.

Patel's advice to them was:

The longer the fight lasts, the stiffer is the test which the people will have to pass. But without such hardships, they cannot have this unique experience...If the Government oversteps the limits, is itself angered and harasses us, we, on our part, should not act unreasonably, never be impolite or lose our temper...always be peaceful. Even the hardest of hearts can be conquered by love. The more the opponent is stiff, the more should our affection go out to him. Only then shall we be able to win. That is the significance of satyagraha.

Yet Patel could not surrender his peasant's sturdy independence on some marginal issues. He accepted Gandhiji operational strategy and the principles governing the satyagraha. But he could not subscribe to Gandhiji's advice to the peasants to willingly accept suffering by voluntarily surrendering their cattle to the authorities. Although he believed in non-violent protest, his practical nature urged him to get the most out of every situation. He therefore preferred that they should save their cattle from attachment by not letting them remain near their houses.⁴²

The struggle continued through April, May, and part of June. Men and women stood firmly behind Gandhiji and Patel, willingly suffering any punishment the government imposed on them. Not only were their cattle and standing crops seized but also their womenfolk's ornaments and household utensils. All the 600 villages showed rare determination and a remarkable solidarity, which surprised many a visitor. The Mumbai newspapers paid glowing tributes to the peasants for their courage and sacrifice.

In the end, the government seemed to have recognised its failure. On 3 June 1918, when Gandhiji and Sardar Patel reached Uttersanda, a village near Nadiad, they were informed by the *mamlatdar* of the government's decision to suspend assessment till the next year. Upon this, Gandhiji and Patel announced termination of the satyagraha from 6 June.⁴³

The success sent a wave of jubilation throughout Kheda. Village after village celebrated the victory with gusto. An eyewitness confirmed that the "rejoicings, characterised everywhere by a spirit of moderation and always free from anything like frantic mirth, have unmistakably proved the wonderful hold the Mahatma has secured over the people of Kheda, their deep sense of gratefulness for what has been achieved, as also their appreciation of the moral significance of the campaign. For, everywhere people flocked in their tumultuous rejoicings, and every village that followed tried to vie with the one that proceeded in the measure of its reception and in the volume of its gratefulness." At the farewell meeting at Nadiad, Gandhiji paid glowing tributes to Patel for the role he had played as his deputy commander:⁴⁴ "A leader's skill is judged by his competence in selecting his assistants for the execution of his plans. 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 Vallabhbai. I must admit when i met him 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 realised 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."⁴⁵

Sardar Patel also said, "It is the extreme generosity of Gandhiji that he has given all credit to me. It was Gandhiji who inspired me to take up the challenge. And above all, the victory was made possible by people who stood firm and braved all the difficulties. It is you farmers who really deserve the credit for the success."⁴⁶

Conclusion

Sardar Vallabhbai Patel led Kheda agitation (satyagraha) and made it a success. The farmers of Gujarat got some relief when due to resistance revolt

supported by Patel, the British Government relented in its tough attitude. Success in this agitation helped win the farmers economic and civil rights, and made India's people stronger for future struggles.⁴⁷ The result of this agitation was that the tax for that year and the next was suspended, and the increase in rate was reduced. All confiscated property was returned. The people of Kheda also worked together to return the confiscated lands to their rightful owners. The ones who had bought the lands seized were influenced to return them, even though the British had officially said it would stand by the buyers.⁴⁸

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel played a major role in the emergence of Gandhi as an all-India leader in the Kheda Satyagraha. Sardar Patel was the hero of the Kheda Satyagraha.

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