



Sardar Patel's Role in Nagpur Flag Satyagraha

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Abstract.

Sardar Patel is one of the most foremost figures in the annals of the Indian national movement. Due to his versatile personality he made many fold contribution to the national causes during the struggle for freedom. 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 him an idol for subsequent movements and developments in the Indian National struggle.

Flag Satyagraha was held at Nagpur in 1923. It was the peaceful civil disobedience that focused on exercising the right and freedom to hoist the nationalist flag. The role of Sardar Patel in Nagpur Flag Satyagraha is admirable. The present study focuses on the great role of Sardar Patel in Nagpur Flag Satyagraha.

Keywords. Sardar Patel, Nagpur Satyagraha, Jammalal Bajaj, Gandhiji, Vithalbhaji Patel

Origin of Satyagraha

The Nagpur flag Satyagraha had its origin in Jabalpur, not in Nagpur. In August 1922, Hakim Ajmal Khan visited Jabalpur as a member of a committee inquiring into the possibilities of starting civil disobedience in the country. He was given an address of welcome by the Congress members of the Municipality in the Town caused a flutter among the British rulers in India and among the British MPs in London was the rebellious spirit displayed in this connection by the Municipality in rejecting a resolution suggesting that the national flag and the Union Jack be flown together. The incident was looked upon not only as an insult to the Union Jack, but an affront to the British Crown. The minds of British MPs were filled with grim apprehension and indignation. The Secretary of State for India had to assure the MPs that this would not be permitted to happen again.¹

In March 1923, when the Congress Working Committee was to meet at Jabalpur, the Municipality passed a resolution similar to the earlier one to hoist the national flag over the Town Hall. It was disallowed by the District Magistrate. Not only did he prohibit the flying of the national flag, but also the holding of a public meeting in front of the Town Hall. This provoked the launching of an agitation on March 18th. The National flag was hoisted by the Congress members of the Jabalpur Municipality. The District Magistrate ordered the flag to be pulled down. The police exhibited their overzealousness by trampling the national flag under their feet. The insult to the flag sparked off an agitation. All the congress members of the Municipality resigned, and a satyagraha was immediately launched by the Jabalpur District Congress Committee. Defying the prohibitory order, Congress volunteers took out a procession, carrying the national flag in front and aloft. Among the participants were the well-known revolutionary, Pandit Sundarlal, and the Hindi poetess, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. The latter had written a most inspiring poem in Hindi on the heroine of the 1857 war of independence, Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. Both were arrested. Sunderlal was sentenced to six months' imprisonment.²

At this moment the Nagpur District Congress entered the fray to vindicate the honour of the national flag. In true Gandhian style and spirit, the decision was announced publicly, as also the route of the procession to reach Sadar Bazar, where a public meeting was to be held after marching through the Civil Lines, where most of the ruling European class lived. The procession was taken out on April 13th, the anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. It was stopped at the entry of the Civil Lines. Ten volunteers stepped forward holding the national flag to offer satyagraha. They were mercilessly beaten. Some of them were even dragged along the road and flung into the open

drains.’ The satyagrahis, nevertheless, remained peaceful. The Congress decided to fight by shifting the centre of the satyagraha from Jabalpur to the provincial capital at Nagpur, and placing it under a unified command.³

Role of Sardar Patel

The agitation had started in March 1923.⁴ The satyagraha at Nagpur started on May 1st and continued up to August 18th.⁵ The first commander of the satyagraha was Jammalal Bajaj.⁶

The Working Committee of the Congress made this an All-India issue and its appeal brought volunteers from all parts of India.⁷ In June 1923, Vallabhbhai turned his attention to the Central Provinces and the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha. By June, Vallabhbhai was sending batches of Gujarat Congress workers to support the agitation. As he said: ‘This opportunity for showing the pure form of non-cooperation is not worth losing when the existence of non-cooperation has been doubted and non-cooperation has been ridiculed.’⁸ The first batch consisted of seventy-five Kheda Congressmen led by Darbar Gopaldas, Abbas Tyabji and Phulchand Bapuji Shah Gokaldas Talathi led a second Kheda batch of thirty-six. Fervent Gandhians volunteered in small numbers from all over the district.⁹

Jammalal Bajaj, who had been leading the movement with great ability and at considerable sacrifice, was arrested and sent to jail. The All-India Congress Committee requested Vallabhbhai to take charge of the satyagraha.¹⁰ Sardar Patel readily agreed to do so. He was, however, appalled at the total lack of organisation when he studied the situation. Unity and discipline were not much in evidence.¹¹ The situation was critical. The Swaraj Party was not in favour of the satyagraha. There was no unity among the local people, and Vallabhbhai felt that he was called upon to conduct an orchestra in which every member played whatever tune he liked. While the Government was clear in mind and firm in purpose, the people were divided. There were many among the local people who were either opposed to the satyagraha or indifferent to it. However, Vallabhbhai took up the challenge in real earnest and went to Nagpur on June 22nd.¹²

Sardar Patels’s first act was to organise his ‘forces’, which he did by asking the provinces to specify ‘the number of volunteers they must send the dates on which they must arrive. Volunteers should continue coming every day so that at least fifty

would be available for arrest at the railway station.’¹³

Volunteers thus started pouring into Nagpur from all parts of the country, and they comprised all communities and classes-educated and uneducated, practising High Court lawyers, school teachers, college students, as also *zamindars* and businessmen. He proceeded on the assumption that the Government would prolong the struggle in order to see that it tapered off for want of adequate supply of volunteers. He even planned to enlist women into the movement in the belief that ‘that cannot fail to arouse the country’; and he sent word to Kasturba, Gandhi’s wife, to be ready to go to jail.’¹⁴ The movement continued unabated. Volunteers daily offered satyagraha and filled the Nagpur jail. The railway authorities tried to restrict, though without success, the issue of tickets for Nagpur.¹⁵

Vitthalbhai Patel came to Nagpur.¹⁶ *Vitthalbhai* was no believer in non-violence as a weapon for achieving independence. But he was always game for any action that would embarrass and harass the Government. He had good contacts at Nagpur. Sir Frank Sly, Governor of the Central Provinces, was his co-student at the Inns of Court in London and a measure of intimacy had grown between them. Sir Moropant Joshi, the Home Member of the Governor’s Council, was also known to him his tact and skill in diplomacy would be very helpful to Vallabhbhai, who believed in following Gandhiji’s technique of first appealing to the authorities to redress the grievances. Vitthalbhai joined him at Nagpur, but worked behind the scenes in the local legislature and with the Governor and the Home Minister.¹⁷

Vallabhbhai appealed for volunteers and they poured in from all parts of India. The satyagraha was maintained with such fervour that soon Nagpur jail was filled to overflowing and prisoners had to be sent to Akola jail. Vallabhbhai won over the support of the local people. He poured ridicule on the Europeans of Nagpur who could not see the writing on the wall. The national flag haunted then day and night and in it they saw the beginning of the end. They made jail life as hard as possible but still the Governor was convinced had gathered such momentum that the Governor was convinced that Vallabhbhai and his forces would never yield.¹⁸ The Home Member, therefore, arranged a meeting between the Governor and Patel, at which Vitthalbhai was also present.¹⁹

The prohibitory order was to expire on 17 August.²⁰ Before it could be renewed, Patel took the Government by surprise by issuing a statement on the 16th, which clarified some of the misconceptions concerning the satyagraha Government propaganda had attempted to spread. Lest his objective was further misconceived either by the Government or by his political opponents and the public, Patel announced that on the 17th, 'instead of a batch of three volunteers as usual, a procession of five volunteers will start from Sadar Bazar through the Civil Lines...If they are prevented by the authorities, the struggle will assure a new phase.' This squarely fixed the Government on the honours of a dilemma, it being both a warning and an olive branch.

Patel said, "We (non-co-operators) have been accused by no less a person than His Excellency the Governor of the Central provinces that we claim an absolutely unrestricted right, unheard of in any civilised country, to use public thoroughfares for processions...that is not the case. I desire to make it clear that the Nagpur satyagraha struggle has been started in order to vindicate our elementary right against arbitrary and unjustifiable interference and abuse of law...the organisers of the processions never intend to cause annoyance to any section of the public...The Working Committee has also instructed me to repudiate most emphatically the suggestion contained in the speech of the Home Member of the central Provinces Government that the national flag processions were being organised to offer an insult to the Union Jack."²¹

It was a shrewd, masterly move, which put the Government in a quandary. What was it to do with the order that was expiring on the 18th? If renewed, the Government ran the risk of facing Patel's threat of the struggle assuming a new phase of intensified activity; if it wasn't it would amount to accepting a defeat without a settlement that would make the Government lose face. The Home Member met Patel on the 16th evening itself and sought a settlement, offering to allow the procession to pass through the Civil Lines on the 18th provided the Congress thereafter called off the satyagraha. That was acceptable to Patel, who asked for unconditional release of prisoners. The Home member agreed to this, and, on securing the Governor's consent, confirmed the settlement in writing.²² No fresh order was issued on the seventeenth.²³ But the British Superintendent of Police prohibited the taking out of a procession through the Civil Lines under the Police Act, unless

his permission was obtained. Patel felt intrigued. Did it mean a volt face on the part of the Government? He, however, went ahead with his plans. Instead of seeking permission, he merely wrote to the Superintendent of Police of his intention to take out a procession on the 18th through the Civil Lines, indicating both the hour and the route. At midday one hundred volunteers set out with the national flag. The Superintendent of Police accompanied the mounted police. The processionists halted near the railway bridge which had earned the appellation the Flag Bridge, and also at the National Flag square. Lord slogans ret the air along at the entire route, which was lined up with policemen. Complete silence was, however,, observed in front of the church in the Civil Lines. This was an indication of Patel's conciliatory attitude towards the European community. The procession reached its destination without being stopped by the police. Patel declared, "The honour of the national flag stands vindicated. Our right to take out processions on public roads in a peaceful and orderly manner has been restored. I regard this as a triumph of truth, non-violence and suffering. By the grace of God, I am now in a position to announce that the Nagpur satyagraha campaign successfully closes on this auspicious Gandhi Day in a manner entirely in consonance with the spirit of the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi."²⁴

In announcing the termination of the satyagraha, Patel had kept his word. Now it was the Home Member's turn to fulfil his promise: the release of prisoners. Over this a storm of protest was raised by the local European ICS officers, especially the Commissioner of Nagpur Division and the Deputy Commissioners of the districts, who, as members of the Indian Civil Service, could directly approach the Secretary of State, even over the head of the Viceroy. The Government of India was approached to resolve the dispute between them and the Provincial Government. In such a situation, the Governor and the Home member, signatories to a written agreement with Patel, looked for an opportunity to repudiate it. Vithalbhai Patel, mistakenly, provided it by hailing it as a victory for the Congress. The police contradicted the claim that the procession was allowed to go through with their permission; therefore, there could be no question of victory. The Governor considered this a violation of the agreement. Patel saved the situation by disowning his brother, by saying that Vithalbhai had no connection with the satyagraha, and that his visit to Nagpur was in his capacity as a Swarajist leader. He, therefore, demanded of the Provincial

Government to honour the agreement reached with him.²⁵

Patel's resoluteness surprised both the Governor and the Home Member. Since they had already committed themselves in writing, they seemed to be badly caught. Therefore, they pressed the Government of India for authority to release the prisoners. The Civil Servants, ignoring the Governor's involvement, carried their case against the Provincial Government to London by representing their side of the case to the Secretary of State. With every day that passed, Patel's position became more difficult in the eyes of the public. Some anti-Congress newspapers carried a virulent campaign of character assassination. Patel was accused of lowering the Congress' prestige by compromising with the Provincial Government, especially in his seeking an interview with the Governor, as also approaching the Superintendent of Police for permission to take out the procession. In actual fact, Patel hadn't sought permission; he had merely informed him.²⁶

Patel was full of anguish. But he maintained his silence, which was necessary in the sort of situation both he and the Provincial Government were in. He wrote to Mahadev Desai: 'I am in a fix...I have sealed my lips. The government is opposed to any pronouncement being made... I feel Vithalbhai had been indiscreet. What he said had caused a terrible commotion in the Civil Service..Had Vithalbhai not been indiscreet in Bombay, I might well have left here on the 22nd along with the released prisoners' Patel had to change his strategy. He disclosed to Desai, "I have got the Commissioner in a tight corner. Many Civil Service officers are of his way of thinking. They feel that the settlement means complete defeat of the Government, and so they do not release the prisoners, the local Government's prestige and honour will be damaged; and if they are released, the civilians will be enraged...the Correspondent of The Times of India has suggested that I had applied to the Superintendent of Police for permission. He has been caught out I have been able to bring to light his secret conspiracy. It was he who had instigated The Pioneer to write against prisoners. The Government for the moment is completely baffled. It must, however, come to some decision in the next few days."²⁷

Patel got hold of 'a curious piece of evidence', a highly damaging nature. The Commissioner of Nagpur himself had been writing highly malicious stories in The Statesman and The Times of India.

The former on August 21st carried his message under the headlines: 'Satyagraha to cease: leaders to Submit to Authority', while the latter on August 20th published a verbatim copy of the same 'from its Nagpur correspondent of The Times of India is the commissioner of Nagpur, or the Commissioner of Nagpur is the correspondent of The Times of India. It is possible that the inadvertence of the statesman, unlike its Bombay contemporary, in publishing it as a message from the Commissioner of Nagpur, instead of 'from its own correspondent' has exposed him."²⁸

Patel also disclosed, "The commissioner of Nagpur was not authorised to issue the statement that has been wired by him to The Statesman." Further, "The Government of the Central Provinces are unable to control the journalistic activities of the Commissioner. On a former occasion also he had brought the Government into trouble by his activities in this direction in connection with this very movement, in spite of orders not to meddle with the affairs of the Government." Patel shrewdly avoided alienating the Governor and the Home member by openly acknowledging 'the genuine desire of the Government for an honourable end of the struggle'; but the 'Government for an honourable end of the struggle'; but the 'Government cannot escape responsibility for his (Commissioner's) action in the end.'

Sardar Patel had the trump card in his hand. He decided to break his silence. He delivered the last blow by warning the provincial Government that,²⁹. If the prisoners were not released within twenty-four hours,³⁰ he would have no choice left but to publish his restart the satyagraha. This would have been damaging to the prestige of the governor and the Home Member. Finding no alternative, they conveyed to the Secretary of State their intention to resign if he did not agree to the release of the prisoners prior to the expiry of the stipulated period. A cable came back immediately from London accepting the release of prisoners. While this took place within the period stipulated by Patel, it also coincided with the Commissioner being packed off on leave preparatory to retirement.³¹ At long last, saintly triumphed. All the political prisoners were released on September 3.³² As a final to the satyagraha, they took out a victory march through the Civil Lines with the national flag flying high right in front.³³ Vallabhbai Patel paid a handsome tribute to the Government of the Central Provinces for making a amicable settlement of a vexed issue possible.³⁴ He stated at a public

meeting the same evening, "I must place on record my conviction that the Government has been most desirous of bringing this struggle to an honourable conclusion...I can truthfully say that I am not in the least elated over our victory. All honour goes to those who went to jail and suffered all manner of hardships...All honour goes to the Congress Committee of Nagpur which showed an amazing organising capacity and was tireless in its efforts. They all will always look back with pride upon this struggle which was fought with weapons of purity and fearlessness. It will fill the people with faith in the superiority of the weapons of truth, no-violence and self-sacrifice."³⁵

In a post-satyagraha speech at Ahmadabad, Patel explained, "As long as the Government order remained, the fight continued. When the District magistrate withdrew it, and the Superintendent of Police began acting under his normal powers, I informed him of the manner in which I proposed to fight him...In advising the volunteers to maintain silence while passing in front of the Christian church, as also the houses of Europeans, I was asking them only to act in a manner which was courteous and in keeping with our dignity. I wanted the British to appreciate that it was not our intention to hurt their feelings in any way. We were opposing only what we considered to be an improper step of the Government."³⁶

The Nagpur Flag satyagraha was a victory which Patel did not claim as his, but Gandhi's. He admitted that he had put into action at Nagpur his earlier apprenticeship under Gandhi in the Kaira satyagraha. In the hands of Patel, Gandhi's satyagraha triumphed against the might of the British over a sensitive, prestigious issue-the flag. It was another shining feather in Patel's cap. With the vindication of the national flag's honour, his prestige soared high. He was well-placed in the higher hierarchy of national leaders.³⁷

Conclusion.

Vallabhbhai Patel had maintained the prestige of the Congress at a critical stage when the satyagraha was at its lowest ebb. The local people had been indifferent and the Government was determined at first to smash the movement. He proved himself to be a consummate organiser who could recruit volunteers, discipline them and keep up their enthusiasm. In his negotiations with the Government he remained firm and dignified and

succeeded in asserting an elementary right of the people.³⁸

This victory gave a much required boost to the moral of the countrymen. It was another jolt to the Government. Patel had worked for this success without respite. He had toiled hour after hour, day after day and week after week, travelling, speaking and canvassing. How sweet the hard earned victory tasted!³⁹

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