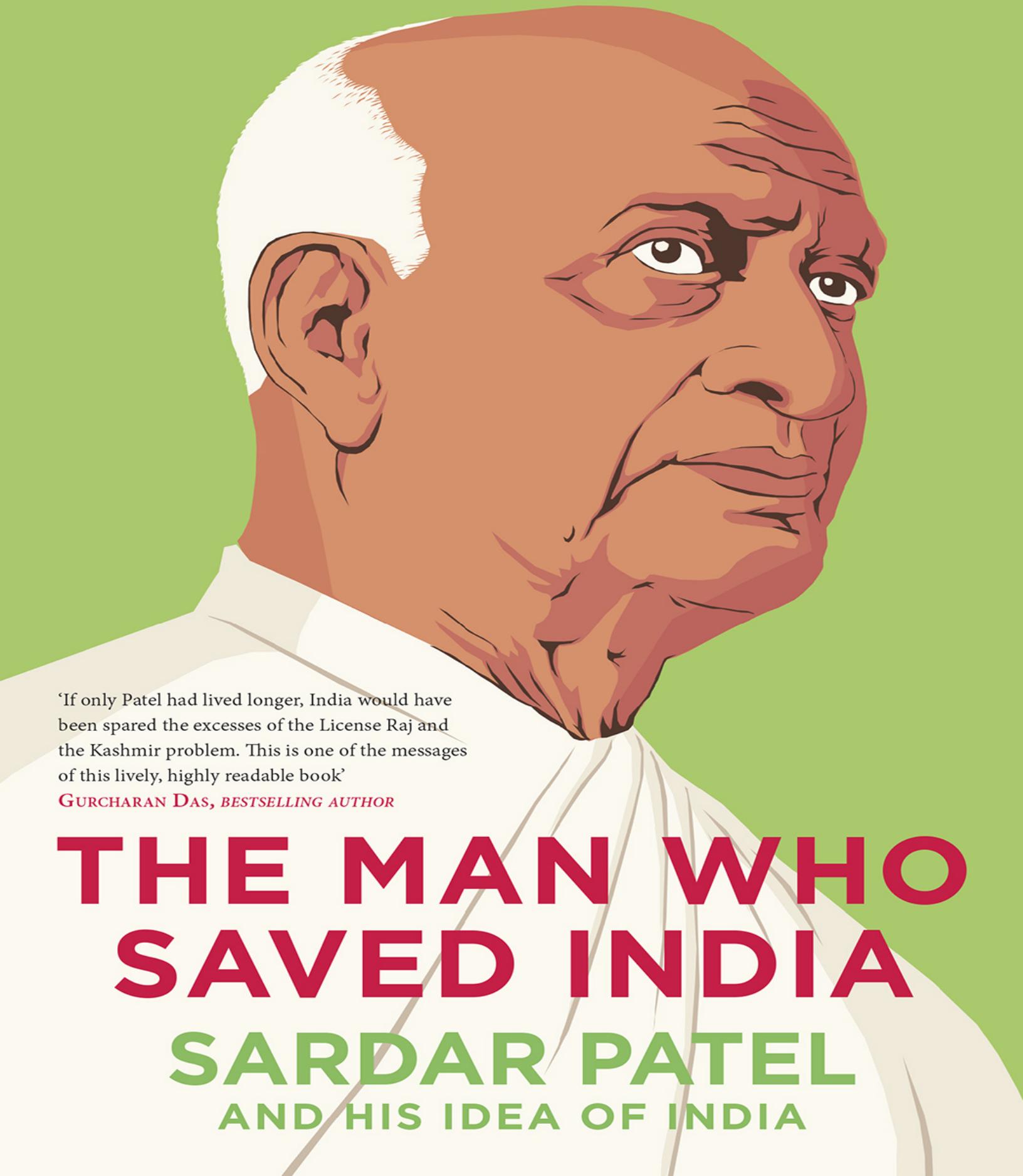


HINDOL SENGUPTA

WINNER OF THE WILBUR AWARD

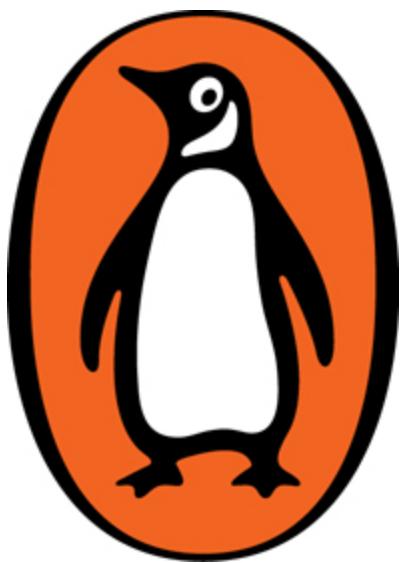


'If only Patel had lived longer, India would have been spared the excesses of the License Raj and the Kashmir problem. This is one of the messages of this lively, highly readable book'

GURCHARAN DAS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE MAN WHO SAVED INDIA

SARDAR PATEL
AND HIS IDEA OF INDIA



HINDOL SENGUPTA

THE MAN WHO SAVED INDIA

Sardar Patel and his Idea of India



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Advance Praise for the Book

‘Sardar Patel was the silent one of the trinity along with Gandhi and Nehru who dedicated his life to the struggle for an independent India. His lasting legacy is a United India rather than the land which throughout history was split in rival warring kingdoms. Hindol Sengupta has given us the story of Sardar’s life for the new generations of India so that they can understand and admire a unique personality. Read this book and discover India’s history in the first half of the last century. And reclaim your legacy’—Lord Meghnad Desai, bestselling author and economist

‘It is dangerous to put dreamers in power. Sardar Patel’s pragmatism was the perfect antidote to Nehru’s idealism in the early years of Independence. If only Patel had lived longer, India would have been spared the excesses of the License Raj and the Kashmir problem. This is one of the messages of this lively, highly readable book’—Gurcharan Das, bestselling author

The Man Who Saved India is the most authoritative and accessible biography of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, lovingly referred to as the “Iron Man of India”. In his impeccable narrative style, Hindol Sengupta rescues the memory of this beloved Indian leader from the vaults of obscurity. The book brings out the true story of independence as well as stability of India following it, which was achieved through the sweat and blood of its leaders like Patel.

The Man Who Saved India reverses one of the historical ironies of modern India by bringing into light many of the unknown facts of Patel’s life, based on the author’s field visits, interviews and extensive research, which is an onerous task in itself considering the fact that Patel neither maintained records of his work nor preserved his documents of communications.

Hindol begins the narration of the larger-than-life tale of Patel by describing his visit to the birth home of Patel in Nadiad, now in dilapidated condition, an image not unlike the less-than-optimal public memory of Patel in modern India.

Hindol discusses the numerous sacrifices Patel made in public life, bowing to the political ambitions of his peers, while never wavering from his duty to India. *The Man who Saved India* clearly charts Patel's leadership skills and statesmanship during the numerous non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements such as the Bardoli and Kheda satyagrahas, and the timely military action in independent India. It was Patel's sheer strength of resolve that helped forge the Bharat that would capture the imagination of the masses of independent India.

The hitherto unknown details of Patel's personal life and his complex relations with his peers and other contemporary national leaders including Gandhi, Nehru and Bose, help understand the grace with which he gave up key political positions more than once. In addition, Hindol also clearly describes the personal sacrifices Patel made at the altar of Mother India, not only of his personal life, but also the lives of his children, even to the chagrin of his family and friends.

The amazing result of Hindol's copious research is the emergence of an exceptionally clear picture of Patel's life and leadership in the three decades leading up to India's independence, in addition to establishing Patel's key role in the formative years of India following Independence, until his death. *The Man Who Saved India* is a timely and much needed historical account of modern India, a must-read for every Indian as well as every person interested in learning the true history of India'—Lavanya Vemsani, professor, Shawnee State University; vice president, Ohio Academy of History; president and cofounder, American Academy of Indic Studies

'Every nation has its own narrative that is built over time. For India, and as Indians, we claim ancient ancestry and are therefore, civilizational. Yet, we are a new democratic republic trying to find our place in the new tumultuous twenty-first century.

There comes a time when we cannot look forward without revisiting our past to see if the narrative of the past was complete, accurate and fair. For decades, the narrative has been that there were essentially two leaders in India—Mahatma Gandhi and his protégé Jawaharlal Nehru—who together led the country to Independence. Their contribution to the cause of independence was monumental and this became the widely accepted truth. Yet there was another truth, long ignored in our national narrative.

Hindol Sengupta's book *The Man Who Saved India* provides the other truth. In a meticulously and extensively researched book, the young author brings to the reader the significant role that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel played not only in our struggle for independence but in the consolidation of the new country. Vallabhbhai Patel was truly a part of the Trinity, along with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal, that led India to freedom. He was the man who ensured that this newfound independence did not collapse in a heap of dust. It was the Sardar who dealt with the reluctant maharajas, nawabs and the obdurate nizam of Hyderabad, when they dreamt of returning to their feudal opulence outside modern India. Patel liquidated the princely states without liquidating the princes. It was his commitment, diplomatic and political skills along with the force of his personality that made unified India a reality.

The book begins with a description of what was once the ancestral home of this great man of India. The decrepit and rather lonely state of the house and its utter neglect is a clear indication that the prevalent narrative preferred to ignore Vallabhbhai Patel's contribution. Gandhi knew the value of God and religion in an India that was subjugated. Nehru knew that if India had to talk about its future then there had to be a grand past of aloofness and elitism. It was Patel who was the hard realist who knew that democracy was not about daily plebiscites but hard decisions cloaked in egalitarianism. Nehru looked at the heavens for inspiration Patel looked at the ground beneath his feet for solutions. While Nehru wrote elegant prose and Gandhi spoke to the masses, it was left to Patel to worry over mundane matters like funds and their distribution. Patel was a man of few words and there is every reason to give him credit today for many of his arguments and

ideas ranging from tackling Kashmir, the future of Pakistan and how socialism without industrialization could be dangerous for the country. His warnings about Kashmir, Tibet and China went unheeded.

The book is thus not only one of the finest biographies in recent times but is also a much-needed redefining of the role played by Sardar Patel during India's freedom movement and as the great unifier. Sengupta argues that Patel was not only a pillar of strength behind some of Gandhi's earlier successes to holding the country together.

Sengupta quotes Patel's speech on 5 July 1947 where he warned, 'Our mutual conflicts and internecine quarrels and jealousies have in the past been the cause of our downfall and our falling victim to foreign domination a number of times. We cannot afford to fall into these errors or traps again.' Sardar Patel was relevant then as he is today. And so is Hindol Sengupta's book—Vikram Sood, bestselling author and the former head of India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing

'*The Man Who Saved India* is an excellent deep dive into the life and struggles of one of the tallest leaders in Indian history. Hindol Sengupta has written a fascinating book full of insights on things that are rarely discussed, such as Patel's economic ideas or his key role as the man who raised critical funds for the Congress Party. This captivating book breaks many myths and throws new light on one of the most important figures in Indian history'—Vijay Govindarajan, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author and Coxe Distinguished Professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College

'A very engaging biography of Sardar Patel, the man and his times, by one of India's best young writers'—Sanjeev Sanyal, bestselling author and principal economic advisor, ministry of finance, Government of India

'The genre of popular history and biography has been experiencing a golden age and Hindol Sengupta's fluent biography of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel joins a list of distinguished titles alongside Michael Axworthy's

Sword of Persia, Nadir Shah and Roger Crowley's Constantinople, The Last Great Siege, 1453. Very welcome indeed that an eminently accessible account of the life and achievements of one of India's true great sons is now available to a new generation of readers'—Gautam Sen, lecturer (retd.), London School of Economics and co-author of *Analysing the Global Political Economy*

'Rich with detail and illuminating insight, Hindol Sengupta's *The Man Who Saved India* brings alive Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's indomitable spirit and tenacity in the face of constant challenges that would crush a weaker man. Few people immediately think of Patel when they think of men responsible for the shape and form of modern India. This is a great injustice, for, as Hindol explains with a wealth of anecdote and context, it was Patel who defined the very contours of the India we know today. This book is a must-read'—Saradindu Mukherji, member, Indian Council of Historical Research

'Hindol writes popular, unpopular history. Another brilliant book, this time presenting the untold story of one of India's greatest political leaders in front of today's readers in a way which makes it accessible and unputdownable. His work of putting together Sardar Patel's life story is strikingly accurate yet stunningly engrossing'—Vikramjit Bannerjee, senior advocate, Supreme Court of India, and advocate general of Nagaland

'This is one of those rare, great books which every Indian should read. After all, it is also about Vallabhbhai Patel, the man who created the modern state of India out of myriad fragments. Drawing upon a well-researched base of facts and writings, Sengupta emerges as a masterful storyteller who has weaved together a very coherent and absorbing story. The complex relationships among the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle are captured in all their subtle shades and colorful complexity. The end result is, for the reader, a more holistic understanding of Indian history, a much-needed filling up of certain gaps in our knowledge of the past, and a refreshingly enriched perspective on the architects of modern India'—N.C. Suresh, UB

Distinguished Professor, School of Management, State University of New York, Buffalo

To my parents and Ishira

INTRODUCTION

THE ADJECTIVE PATELIAN

Outside the entrance to the house I was greeted by a raggedy clothes line with holey clothes swaying listlessly on it and a duster, clenched between the teeth of a half-broken clip, which seemed to have given up the struggle for freedom.

The house looked relatively young, or had been whitewashed to at least appear so. A filigreed veranda gave it an antique touch. Its modernity seemed unsure but determined.

‘Is this Sardar Patel’s house?’ I confirmed with the woman hunched over a mound of soaked clothes in the neighbouring house. I had seen the sign and the photo on the other side of the house next to the barred windows facing the main road. The road was not very broad. It could just about fit a car and maybe a rickshaw, side by side.

The entrance to the house where ‘Sardar’ Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel was born, I was told by a passer-by, was from the ‘backside’.

In the front of the house, where the sign in Gujarati marked it as Patel’s birthplace, there was a photo of his naturally serious, even dour, face. It is a cheery photo, though, in sky blue and white, a bit like an enlarged passport image.

There is a small concrete enclosure right in front of the sign. This houses a cement prop-up statuette of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Mahatma, Patel’s guru and political mentor. The narrow road separates Patel’s house and the Gandhi statuette. When you approach the street where the unremarkable house stands, your eyes fall mainly on the Gandhi effigy. Even today, at his birthplace, Patel seems a bit of an afterthought.

It was about ten-thirty in the morning and there was hardly anyone around, except the usual friendly vagabond—every Indian street has one man ever willing to walk with you to your destination. The one I met was helpful: ‘No one comes here much,’ he said. ‘That’s why it is kept locked.’

To reach Patel’s birthplace, I had left Ahmedabad shortly before breakfast and driven for little more than an hour on the sort of smooth roads that feature in Gujarat Tourism advertisements starring Amitabh Bachchan.

Nadiad is just under 60 kilometres south-east of Ahmedabad. They say at one point it used to be the home of rope dancers,¹ en route from the bustling port of Cambay to Ahmedabad, which sent its textiles all the way to Europe in the Mughal age. There are nine routes to Nadiad, and nine out of it; the city has nine stepwells, nine lakes and nine villages (now towns) located in and around it. It might be a wee bit superstitious about the number nine. It is here that Patel was born, the fourth child, and fourth son,² of the farmer Jhaverbhai and his wife Ladba. They were five brothers and one sister—Vithalbhai, Somabhai, Narsibhai, Vallabhbhai, Kashibhai and Dahiba. They were Patidars, a community that many in India had never even heard of until the violent agitation for greater government largesse led by the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti and its so-called leader Hardik Patel began. The Patidars, sometimes referred to as Patidar-Patels make up around 20 per cent of Gujarat’s population.³ The Patidars originally came from Punjab, and they were often skilled cultivators and good at rearing cattle.⁴ When they settled in the Kheda region of Gujarat, six areas were the most important—Nadiad, Vaso, Karamsad, Bhadran, Dharmaj and Sojitra—and Patidars ‘from these were considered to be superior to the rest’.⁵

When the Patidar agitation broke out in 2015 what surprised most people was that this was widely considered a prosperous clan. That, American historian Howard Spodek has pointed out, was perhaps only partially true. Even at the time when Patel was born, the community was full of:

[Y]eoman farmers, holding small private plots under ryotwari⁶ tenure, with enough land to taste comfort but not enough to enjoy luxury. Frequently, in addition to holding their own lands, they acted as headmen for villages or groups within villages; they were familiar with the significance and local power of government. They were characterized as

extremely hard working and blunt. Their desire for economic well-being linked with a willingness for adventure.⁷

In time, Patel would have the opportunity to understand and explore both these traits.

What was once *muffossil* in the time of Patel is now the eighth largest, if slightly unkempt, city in Gujarat, but a visitor to Nadiad would be hard-pressed to find many apparent signs of the city taking pride in its famous son.

The woman peered at me from her soapy darkness and reluctantly rinsed off the foam from her hands. She heaved up and with what sounded like a sigh emerged from the shadows. There was, I noticed, a key in her hand. To reach out and cross over to the locked gate outside Patel's house, the woman grunted past a broken drain, and an empty cobalt-shade bottle of Kinley Soda. For a moment, her face and oily bun were framed by the dripping white socks on the clothes line outside the main door. Absently, she adjusted the blue chequered boxers hanging to dry before she bent to open the main door.

One needs to bend one's head to enter the tiny two-room house. There are some rooms upstairs but they are not accessible to visitors. There are two rooms, the first opening into the next, so that they form what seems like a dark corridor. There are some relatively modern fittings in the house. A fan old enough to be from the 1980s stands in the first room as one enters and on one side, grazing against each other, are two cupboards—a smaller wooden one and a taller metal almirah with a full-length mirror attached to the right door and pockmarked with rust.

Squeezed in the dusty corner where the cupboards ended their writ was a wobbly cardboard cut-out of Patel wearing his trademark dhoti-kurta, loose-cut sleeveless jacket and neatly folded cotton shawl across his shoulders. He is not smiling. This is not unusual. There are only a few photographs of Patel smiling. One is the photo which goes viral on social media every time his birthday, 31 October, a date which he confessed to having randomly made up, comes around. 'I have to bluff when asked how old I am,'⁸ he said

about his invention of 31 October 1875 as his birthday—one of the few things that constantly amused him. The other is the photograph of Patel being received at the Begumpet Airport in the princely state of Hyderabad in 1948. This is said to be the only time the Nizam, allegedly the richest man in the world at the time, ever stepped out of his palace to receive anyone.

But we are getting ahead of the story.

The uneven stone floors of the house where Patel was born are cool to the naked feet even on a hot summer's day. I tried to switch on the old Bakelite switches to turn on the fan or the light, but neither worked. There are two other images of Patel in the house—a photo of him sitting on a chair dressed in all-white and a painting of him draped in a brown shawl and carrying a red clothbound book.

The overwhelming impression of these two rooms was darkness. The windows let in a sliver of sunlight but the cool inkiness seemed to swallow it. They were cleaner than I had imagined though shabby and derelict with damaged borders and corners.

A broken television set stands in one corner near a wall which has a coral and azure painting of Srinathji—the version of Lord Krishna worshipped by many Gujaratis. On another wall there was a small portrait of a Jain monk. Was it Mahavir, the founder of the Jain faith? It was not clear.

On the shelves hang dusty ornate maps of India, the kind that are peddled to promote a kitschy nationalism, and some framed photos—one of a young couple looking like they decided to get dressed up during their honeymoon and have a photo taken at one of those studios in touristy places which have several printed curtains as backdrops. If you want the mountains, they can photograph you against mountains—or the sea, if you prefer.

Only in this photograph, they are cradling a baby.

The woman who let me in seemed hesitant initially about following me inside. But soon she decided that I didn't deserve time alone there.

Who was this young couple, I asked.

She shrugged and started to kick aside torn pieces of electricity bills littered on the floor.

On one bit of cornice, an orange poster said ‘SVPM’—Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Memorial. But in the photos on the rectangular strip poster, Patel was only one of several people; I could not recognize any of the others. They seemed like recent local ‘leaders’ keen to get a piece of Patel to boost their fortunes. The poster had the usual vague eulogies of Indian politics written in Hindi—that India was great, that Indians were great, and even Patel, naturally, was great. Gujarat, of course and undoubtedly, was the greatest.

When I was leaving, I noticed an old wrought-iron chest. I tried to open it. The rust had hardened the hinges. The woman, who was still trying to make the scraps of paper disappear, shook her head. Through the entire period that I was in the house, the woman said nothing. She never asked me my name or what I was doing there or why I was interested in Patel. She never asked what I really wanted to see. Or if there was something I could see. There was a matter-of-factness about her which irritated me. This is all there is, she seemed to be telling me without uttering a single word. If you want to see it, fine, if not, that’s fine too.

I presumed, though it was never confirmed, that this meant the chest was empty.

Outside in the sunlight, the vagabond was still waiting for me. He had a scrap of paper in his hand which had two phone numbers.

‘This is Pradeep bhai,’ he said, showing me two names on the piece of paper, ‘and this is Sharmishtha ba.’

Who are these people, I asked.

‘Family,’ he said.

As in?

‘Family,’ he repeated. ‘Call, call.’

I called every day without fail but the two phone numbers were always switched off.

Patel was five feet five inches. Mahatma Gandhi was five feet three inches. Subhas Chandra Bose was five feet five inches tall and Jawaharlal Nehru five feet eight inches.

‘Now what does this tell us?’ one of my schoolteachers once asked. ‘It tells us that history belongs to the tall,’ said the teacher, who taught mathematics and was shorter than most of us Class XI boys. ‘Who else was tall?’

Silence.

‘Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Five feet eight inches. Same as Nehru.’

So?—the question hung around the dank Calcutta classroom air for a bit.

‘They both got their own countries. Comes from being tall.’

Even in an arbitrary lesson in history, from a mathematics teacher, Patel, the first home minister of independent India, the man who many believe could have—indeed *should* have—been the prime minister was getting short shrift.

Over the next several years Patel remained in my memory as a short man and not much else. My schoolbooks in Calcutta, where I studied under the elite-ish ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education) system, didn’t say much about Patel. I call the ICSE elite-ish because there were few schools in Calcutta affiliated to this education board—and the ones that were charged the most fees. But perhaps it was not the board or the school which neglected telling me much about Patel. Perhaps it was the history books and my teachers. To be absolutely honest, if I were to really recall the broad trajectory of history—and historical characters—that I remember from school, it would look something like this:

- Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa: old cities with good drainage (something Calcutta didn’t have—and later on, when I left Calcutta, I found out most Indian cities do not have)
- The Mughals: had lots of money, built the Taj Mahal, Akbar created a new religion which disappeared as soon as he died
- The 200-year British rule: gave us the English language, and therefore English-medium schools—important things if a ‘good job’ was to be had
- Mahatma Gandhi: the Father of the Nation, spun the charkha, walked the Dandi March, was assassinated, holidays in his name

- Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: raised an army against the British, and according to many Bengalis probably still alive
- Khudiram Bose: threw bombs at Englishmen, got the wrong guy but was hanged nevertheless even though was merely a child when he died, subject of a particularly haunting song about him saying goodbye to his mother
- Jawaharlal Nehru: first prime minister of India, prolific writer and statesman with a world view, earned the epithet Chacha (it was never quite clear why Chacha and not some other moniker, like Mama), red rose in the achkan buttonhole, affectionate towards children, therefore Children's Day, and other holidays in his name too
- Indira Gandhi: daughter of Jawaharlal, saviour of Bangladesh (which was not too far away from Calcutta and where everyone seemed to have some relatives, and one could buy great quality hilsa), assassinated
- Rajiv Gandhi: Indira's son, also assassinated

That sort of summed up Indian history for us. Everything else was a bit hazy. All the names slightly incoherent, obscure; they may have been mentioned once or twice but they were certainly not emphasized enough to have registered strongly.

It was not until I was well into my twenties that I started to wonder and explore other narratives about my own country. Bengal, my state, had produced a legion of revolutionaries, men and women prepared and willing to fight a violent battle with the British colonial rulers for freedom. But their story had got submerged in the grand narrative of the 'non-violent' victory of India's independence movement. I read contrarian positions which questioned (with validity, I thought) how successful our non-violent movement would have been without the devastating losses Britain suffered in the Second World War. By the time the war ended in 1945, Britain was nearly bankrupt, with nearly a million buildings in London destroyed. Back at home a revolt against imperial colonial rule led by sailors in Bombay in February 1946 spread to Calcutta and Karachi, all the major ports of the Raj—in final count the Royal Naval Mutiny is believed to have involved up to 20,000 sailors on more than seventy ships and offices onshore across the country.

Was it so surprising, then, that the world's greatest—though at that time also greatly weakened—naval power rather rapidly gave up the colony that was the jewel in its crown?

But no matter how much I tried—and in the course of writing this book I tried repeatedly—to remember whether I had been taught anything about the naval revolt, so critical a piece of history, on the eve of Indian independence, I am fairly certain that I was not. Maybe the people who wrote our school history textbooks did not think it was important. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they had better things, and people, to teach us about.

But I was no longer in school, and my search for alternative—actually not alternative, just expanded, widened, broadened—narratives of Indian history grew. In this quest, I kept landing up at the door of a man called Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel.

There is a style of writing history, now considered slightly dated, called the ‘great man theory’ of history where events are considered by-products of the achievements of a series of ‘great men’, and it is through their exploits that the history of mankind is considered. This style is not fashionable today as contemporary historians prefer a more, so to speak, bottom-up approach, a sort of worm’s eye view of history which takes into account popular versions, oral traditions and narratives of the history as ordinary people saw it, and not just the leaders. But when I read, or rather the way I was taught, Indian history the sense of great man-ism was acute. But even there, it not was *all* great men; it seemed to be only about *some* great men. When I thought about my history lessons, I remembered the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari writing about the crushing victory of Rome over Numantia (in modern-day Spain) in his bestselling debut work, *Sapiens*: ‘The victory of Rome over Numantia was so complete that the victors co-opted the very memory of the vanquished’.⁹ It occurred to me that the same could be said of the dominance of one (or more) strains of history in the imagination of the modern Indian nation.

By the time I started working on this book, talk of a Patel statue had begun. There were some statues already of Patel, including one on New Delhi’s Parliament Street, so named because of course it is a road that leads swiftly to the Parliament. The statue, 35 metres (around 115 feet) tall, didn’t seem to be doing too well, though. Even the women assigned to clean the floor upon which it stands ‘don’t really know anything about the person in

the statue’,¹⁰ noted the *Indian Express*. And no one knew when it had last been cleaned.¹¹

So a new statue would be built in Patel’s home state, Gujarat. It was backed by the Gujarat government and the then chief minister (it was announced in 2010), and now prime minister, Narendra Modi. Designed by Ram Vanji Sutar, winner of the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan, and artist of more than fifty giant public sculptures, including iconic ones of Mahatma Gandhi, the new Patel statue would cost more than \$440 million, paid for in part by the state and the rest by public donations.

The Statue of Unity was designed to showcase more than just Patel’s life or achievements—it was also about where India saw itself in the world. The statue would be the world’s tallest—standing higher than both the Spring Temple Buddha in China (153 metres) and the Statue of Liberty in America (93 metres). It would be 182 metres (nearly 600 feet). (As this book was being completed, the government of Maharashtra, Gujarat’s old neighbour and rival, announced an even taller statue of Shivaji, the medieval warrior hero. Why? That story will have to wait for another book.) But not everyone was happy. Some complained that the statue would cost four times as much as India’s famously low-cost Mars Orbiter Mission.¹² Others worried: Could a country which still had malnutrition afford such a statue?

In terms of money, the amount being spent on the statue was less than the annual sports budget of the Government of India. It was also a little less than what the Ministry of External Affairs was planning to spend on buying new real estate for diplomacies and offices around the world. Presumably having the world’s tallest statue—and the global press that it would generate on inauguration—would contribute significantly to what is known as ‘soft power’.

But surely there were other reasons why Patel was deserving of an iconic statue, I thought. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the (modern Indian) Nation, had one in seventy countries around the world, including a latest one at Parliament Square in London, the result of an effort spearheaded by the Indian-born British economist Meghnad Desai. Nehru, who was famously an aesthete, had at least eight around the country, and one in

Mauritius. In fact, Sutar, the sculptor of the Statue of Unity, was initially spotted by Nehru. Later, he was commissioned to build the first major Nehru statue by the prime minister's daughter Indira. That 12-foot bronze lookalike of Nehru now stands in Jaipur. Sutar also made another 18-foot statue of Nehru at the request of the Indian government in 1995, at the Bhakra-Nangal dam in Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh in memory of the statesman who declared dams the 'temples of modern India'.

But the contours, literally and figuratively, of independent India would have never been what Nehru finally presided over—or what we understand them to be today—had it not been for Patel. Arguably (it is certainly my argument) the modern Indian nation state owes as much to Patel for its existence as it does Gandhi or Nehru.

To give Patel credit is not to diminish the unifying power of Gandhi's message or even some of the modernist visions of Nehru. It is to fill a knowledge gap in what ought to be a natural trinity. While most Indians know far more about Gandhi and Nehru and their contributions in making the nation that they call home, few would immediately, in the same breath, give equal recognition to Patel. Such acknowledgement is eminently due, and it is a shame that it has never been adequately given, if for nothing else than those 'four hectic years, 1947 to 1951'¹³ when through endless 'toils and anxieties . . . the edifice of a consolidated India'¹⁴ was built with Sardar Patel as the 'light and inspiration'.¹⁵ In his biography of Patel, Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, quoted the first president of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, as saying, 'That there is today an India to think and talk about is very largely due to Sardar Patel's statesmanship and firm administration. Yet, we are apt to ignore him.'¹⁶ Rajmohan Gandhi himself adds:

The establishment of independent India derived legitimacy and power, broadly speaking, from the exertions of three men, Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. But while its acknowledgements are fulsome in the case of Nehru and dutiful in the case of Gandhi, they are niggardly in the case of Patel.¹⁷

(When I read this sentence, I did a small experiment and checked how many times the two men had been referred to in two most popular recent books about modern Indian history: Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* and Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi*. It was natural, I knew, that Nehru's number would be greater since he had been the first prime minister with a seventeen-year-long rule but I wanted to see by how much. What would be the difference? In Khilnani's book Patel receives eight mentions and Nehru sixty-five, eight times that of Patel.¹⁸ In *India After Gandhi*, Patel has forty-eight references and Nehru is mentioned 185 times—nearly four times more. Gandhi is mentioned twenty-nine times in Khilnani's book and more than 130 times in Guha's. I understand that this has no more than anecdotal value, and this is not meant as a criticism of these two writers, but it still, I feel, gives a tiny glimpse of how peripheral the Patel story has become in the national imagination of our freedom movement—despite previously noted efforts by the Bharatiya Janata Party to appropriate and propel his name—and how, to use Rajmohan Gandhi's term, 'niggardly' the credit that has been given to him.)

Why are these three men the holy trinity of the making of modern India? The easiest answer would be their complementary skills. Gandhi knew how to give the bark of a contemporary struggle for nationhood its real mass bite by connecting it to an old, never-ending conversation about God and being good; he knew that true politics is religious in its fervour and therefore all successful political ideologies are cults. Nehru understood that one of the best ways to talk about the future in a country obsessed with the past was to couch it in the language of aristocracy, in the idiom of aloofness—elitism, he instinctively realized, was a useful tool for enforcing new, difficult ideas, ironically even of egalitarianism. It could be said that he was borrowing almost from the old rajas—many of them great futurists—who knew that the masses had to be pulled, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the future, and that required a slight disdain for the intellectual prowess of the masses, it helped a ruler feel more affectionately towards them, but at the same time not fall into the democratic canard of taking too much advice from the electorate. And Patel? He understood better than anyone else that

democracy isn't so much an everyday plebiscite but a daily judgement—the interplay of incessant retribution and reward that keeps the citizen at bay. It is only by cloaking ruthless jurisprudence in the rhetoric of egalitarianism that real decisions, which keep a country safe and help it grow prosperous, can be made. The politician, Patel may well have said, is first and foremost a benevolent juror. While Gandhi and Nehru governed with coaxing words, Patel ruled with fearsome magisterial silences. Gandhi and Nehru preferred to write history—and indeed they did. Patel, as his daughter and sometime-secretary-and-housekeeper Maniben remembered, used to say: 'Why not create history rather than waste time writing it?'¹⁹

It is my contention that not only is Patel deserving of being counted as one of the three strongest pillars of the movement that won India freedom from British rule, but that he was also perhaps the most grounded, literally and figuratively, of the three, and that his contribution from before Independence till his death in 1950, in many ways, surpassed Nehru's.

There is no doubt that Nehru had many fine ideas as prime minister but he would have done well to heed Patel's pragmatic, cautious, earthy wisdom in problematic issues like Pakistan, Hindu–Muslim disputes, and India's relationship with China. That is not to suggest that the Nehru–Patel relationship was overwhelmingly acrimonious, or that the Gandhi–Patel relationship was merely exploitative—to do so would be untrue and unjust; there was undoubtedly a great deal of affection and brotherhood between the three men. They genuinely felt part of a cause that was greater than their own lives and felt compelled to devote all that they had to it. But to any neutral observer it would be clear that it was Patel who threw away personal motivations and ambitions far more than the other two men—indeed he seemed to be able to carry a lighter, nimbler sense of self. A small but powerful example of this is that among the three he was the only one who did not bother to leave behind voluminous writings that explain his point of view on India's epochal journey to freedom. If history is writings by the victors, Patel clearly was on the vanquished side. Patel bequeathed no history that gives his side of the story, that talks about how he saw things, that would explain to future generations his role and importance. Mostly

what remained was what he really focused on—his work—and therefore he is represented in this story largely through his correspondences, unlike both the Mahatma and Nehru who wrote elaborately crafted world views and expansive and detailed memoirs. Naturally, then, of the three, the least amount of writing, both in terms of biographies or monographs, have been published on Patel. It is almost as if, his work done, Patel wanted to erase every bit of his memory from the momentous history of India's independence.

As his daughter Maniben recalled:

The Sardar was a man of few words. He wrote very little; he hardly kept any record of his public or party work. He destroyed letters addressed to him after reading them and replied by hand, not keeping copies. Once, when K. Gopalswami, political commentator of the Times of India, visited him in his flat on Marine Drive, Bombay, the Sardar called for a letter he had received from C. Rajagopalachari, forgetting that he had torn it up and thrown it in the wastepaper basket. Fortunately, I had collected the pieces. It took me some time to paste them together before passing it on to him.²⁰

Therefore, it is even more critical that credit, though ever so belatedly, is given to him for his arguments, his ideas and his labours.

It was Patel who saw clearly—and it would be fair to say that perhaps Nehru never entirely reconciled to this—that in Kashmir, ‘it is better to have an open fight than to have disguised warfare such as has been going on’.²¹

It was Patel who recognized without fuss—and it would be fair to say that perhaps Gandhi never entirely reconciled to this—that ‘if we had not accepted partition, India would have fallen into bits. Now that we have been able to salvage a major part of India and have been able to build it up into an extensive single unit, let us make it powerful’.²²

It was Patel who had the foresight in 1948 to say to Pakistan, ‘Pakistan authorities say that their enemies are conspiring to destroy Pakistan. I would say to them that the enemies of Pakistan are not outside Pakistan but inside.’²³

Little wonder then that Sir Roy Bucher, the last Englishman to hold the position of the commander-in-chief of the Indian Army said of Patel:

‘Sardar always reminded me of the pictures of Roman Emperors in history books. There was something rock-like in his appearance and demeanour, which bred confidence in him to an extraordinary degree.’²⁴

Patel, though, would have most likely rejected such a forceful and grand description of himself. On 5 January 1948, the deputy prime minister of India wrote a letter to journalist Ian Stephens at the *Statesman* expressing his astonishment, and perhaps even a little exasperation, at the publication of a photograph which showed him raising a clenched fist during a public speech.

In addressing public meetings, I never use a fist at all. At the most it is a move of the hand or a flourish of the index finger. I am, therefore, at a loss to understand how the photograph appeared as it did. I hope your investigations would yield some results. I would be glad to know the outcome [. . .] You can ask your photographer in Delhi to get in touch with my Private Secretary who will give him a suitable time for a photograph.²⁵

This photograph it seems was coupled with some quotes from him about Pakistan which Patel, in his letter, denies ever having made.

The words put in my mouth were never uttered by me at the public meeting [. . .] I have no doubt whoever has done so has done with a mischievous intention. It is particularly unfortunate, as I am sure, you will see from the speech, that my references to Pakistan were as cordial and friendly as could be possible in prevailing circumstances.²⁶

It is unclear how the deputy prime minister defined ‘friendly’, for the *Hindustan Times* report of this speech in Calcutta had him declaring:

But how can any plebiscite be held when fighting is going on? If we have ultimately to save Kashmir by the sword, where is the scope for plebiscite? I should like to make one thing clear that we shall not surrender an inch of the Kashmir territory to anybody.²⁷

Well, I suppose this was, as Patel tells Stephens, him being as friendly as possible ‘in prevailing circumstances’. But the fact that even the Iron Man of India was careful about his public image is the sort of humanizing anecdote that, to me, seems missing from the way Sardar Patel is envisaged in the popular imagination today.

Think about it: Gandhi has his non-violent, charkha-spinning heart-warming image which even today produces tender Bollywood blockbusters like *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* and words like ‘Gandhibiri’ which is the opposite of the ‘*goondagardi*’ of lumpens and hoodlums; Nehru emerges as a red rose—bedecked chacha playing with children and telling stories (and writing mellifluous letters to his daughter from jail) with the whiff of a heady romance (with another man’s wife—Lady Edwina Mountbatten, no less) constantly giving him a dandy edge. But what about Patel? There is barely any public-relations halo around him, no love affairs (his wife died early and almost nothing is known about her, and there is no mention of any other woman in his life), not many tender letters to his children. This is a man who spoke (or wrote) little about himself or his needs.

Therefore, it is even more important to try and understand what seems to have replaced many of these sentiments in his life—the uncompromising desire for a powerful India. But power, as we will see through the course of this book, and the search for strength are convoluted things. These are often indefinable and the men who seek them—especially if they don’t even seek these for themselves—are often hard to understand. Such men are easily rendered monochromatic by the sepia tint of history.

Even if we cannot find many details about Patel’s private life, it is important today to understand in detail his public contribution and what that means for us today; for independent India, in scope and size, would not be what it is today had it not been for the astute resolve of Patel. This man, more than any other, constructed almost piece by excruciating piece, India as we know it today—and it is my researched contention that without the stern nerve of Patel there would be no India, but most probably a nasty warring Balkanized mess of fragmented states. We like to talk today about the idea of India. But there isn’t one idea of India. India has a multitude—and then some more—of ideas. It is not my intention to describe one as greater or more valuable than another but it is certainly my belief that without India itself, its outline from coast to coast, from the mountains to the seas, there would not be much use of any of its ideas, such as they are;

for geography is not merely measurements on land, it is philosophy, culture, it is the amalgamated wisdom of a people.

According to veteran Congress leader Dwarka Prasad Mishra, Patel, born to a farmer, had the practical temperament and manner of ‘an Indian peasant’. ‘The simple wisdom of the ages is all his knowledge,’ Mishra said about the England-trained barrister who was also a proficient bridge player.

In 1921, the historian Radha Kumud Mukherjee explained how India’s sense of patriotism comes straight from its Sanskrit literature.

For instance, in the Vedic literature we have a most remarkable passage in the Atharvaveda [sic] called the Prithivi Sukta, which is a string of about sixty-three thousand impassioned hymns to the motherland. Praises are sung of the mother-country as the land girt by the seas and fertilised by the rivers that pour down their bounty in streams of plenty, the land of hills and snowy mountains and forests giving protection to her sons unharassed, unsmitten, and unwounded; the land bearing in many places people of different speech, diverse customs according to their homes, yet yielding a thousand streams of property like a steady, unresisting milch cow.²⁸

But this diversity, explained Mukherjee, was never divisive; for even in the ancient times, the seers who wrote the Prithvi Sukta, knew that all the differences coexisted in harmony because they stood upon a foundational unity.

The last passage is indeed highly significant for the unique note it strikes—remarkable for the age—showing a seer’s grasp of the fundamental conditions of nation-building in this land of many peoples of different speech and diverse customs. And yet this very diversity is recognised in a supremely patriotic spirit as a source of national strength, of that richer and fuller unity in which all diversities lose themselves with their several contributions towards the development of a common life, even as a thousand streams merge themselves in the sea.²⁹

Patel understood, in the words of Aurobindo, that ‘we shall not perish as a nation, but live as a nation’.³⁰

He expresses all this sentiment in his unique pragmatic way—by reminding the rulers of the princely states of India what happens, indeed happened in the past, when the lesson of unity in diversity was forgotten. Here is Patel on 5 July 1947:

It was owing to the country's politically fragmented condition and our inability to take a united stand that India succumbed to successive waves of invaders. Our mutual conflicts and internecine quarrels and jealousies have in the past been the cause of our downfall and our falling victim to foreign domination a number of times. We cannot afford to fall into these errors or traps again.³¹

Geography was not just a romantic, or a merely spiritual, concept for Patel. He understood that our culture is intrinsically, irretrievably tied to our sense of the land. There is an Ayodhya, a Kashi, a Kurukshetra, a Vrindavan—but are they exactly located where the myths say they are? Perhaps not. However, what matters is the continuing memory of a civilization. What matters is that we remember, that we know where to go. Our cosmography and geography is intertwined.

For over 3000 years believers have dipped their heads under water, then cupped river water in their palms and raised it three times as salutation to the sun, chanting:

O Ganga, O Yamuna, O Godavari,
Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu (Indus), Kaveri,
Manifest as it pleases you in these waters!

It is not just about the rivers, of course. It is about the recollection of a unified topography in whole.

And without Sardar Patel, there would be none. This statement sounds hagiographic but is far from that. If at all, it is probably an understatement. Between 1947 and 1950 (Patel died on 15 December 1950), through a 'bloodless revolution',³²—his own words—he effected a transformation in the lives of millions of Indians: to be precise, 28 per cent of the population spread over 48 per cent of the geographical area of pre-Independence India.³³ Impressed by this feat of the Sardar, the Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin exclaimed: 'You Indians are a remarkable people. How did you manage to liquidate the princely states [of India] without liquidating the princes?'³⁴ Bulganin considered the feat bigger than Bismarck's unification of Germany. The writer H.V. Hodson quoted Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, as saying, 'I am glad to say that Nehru has not been put in charge of the new States Department which would have wrecked

everything. Patel, who is essentially a realist, is very sensible in going to take it over.’³⁵

These were people living in the princely states of India or in kingdoms ruled by princes—all neatly, and rigidly, divided into a hierarchy, often in terms of ‘gun salutes’.

After the blood-soaked crushing of the 1857 revolt against the British East India Company, the control of Indian territories shifted from the Company to the Crown. At the Allahabad durbar on 1 November 1858, then governor general of India Lord Canning proclaimed that Queen Victoria would now rule over India, and promised that not only would the Crown honour all contracts made by Indian princes with the East India Company, it would also not seek to usurp the territory that belonged to the princely states.

This naturally meant that from that day onwards, step by step,

the colonial state began to annex states and provinces as subsidiaries of the British Empire [. . .] It was not simply an idea of conquest but as much an idea of hegemonic administrative control under the mask of governability and accountability that the colonial state emphasized and carried forward in its everyday formal-legal bureaucratic-governmentalised spheres of life.³⁶

Simply put, the princes were allowed toys and pageantry while the real power—for instance to appoint key ministers, determine who succeeded to the throne and keep milking large sums ostensibly for providing administrative and military help.

For instance, the gun-salute list was delicately poised and rigidly followed. It was a borrowed tribute originally given to the ruler on the ships of the British Royal Navy, and then later also on land. The Indian princely states had been categorized from grandiose twenty-one-gun-salute states (which meant that their ruler would be greeted with the guns firing twenty-one times) to measly nine-gun-salute kingdoms.

The princely states of Jammu and Kashmir and Hyderabad (both larger at that time than Britain), Baroda, Mysore and Gwalior were all twenty-one-gun salutes. Among the nineteen-gun-salute states (twenty-one was

followed by nineteen, there were no twenty-gun salutes) were historical dynasties like Udaipur, Indore, Bhopal, Travancore and Kolhapur. This was followed by the seventeen-gun-salute states which had most of the Rajput states like Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner and, in the Punjab, Patiala. Among the smallest were nine-gun salutes for the Raja of Maihar (in today's Madhya Pradesh), or the Rajadhiraj of Shahpura (Gujarat).

There were more than 500 princely states, each with hereditary rulers with powers of life and death over their subjects; many with their own currency and railways and stamps. And even though they were all completely dependent on British India for trade and security, many of the rulers had enough men and materials to put up a fight—or at least create enough chaos to delay the process of accession significantly.

Some of the states claimed an unchallengeable heritage. The Kachwaha Rajputs, who ruled Jaipur until Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II acceded to India in 1947, claimed an ancestry tracing back to the Sun God, and styled themselves as Suryavanshis. Down south, in Mysore, the Wodeyars were said to belong to the lunar line going right up to the clan of Lord Krishna in the Mahabharata. Where Sawai Man Singh II was swashbuckling enough to bring home the polo World Cup in 1933, Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar was such an aesthete that he was the chief patron of the London Philharmonic Orchestra for a time and had bankrolled the hiring of a young Herbert von Karajan as conductor.³⁷

These rulers en masse gave up their powers in exchange for a privy purse (a yearly government grant for their expenses in lieu of surrendering the right to tax their lands) and the right to retain their title—all without a single drop of blood being shed. (There was bloodshed though, in Kashmir and Hyderabad, and we shall come to that in a bit.)

Suffice to say that the Sardar's India was greater in size (even after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan) than that of Samudragupta (4th century AD), Asoka (around 250 BC), and Akbar (16th century) and the writ of the Centre wielded an authority and respect never dreamt of by these greatest of Indian rulers.³⁸

As veteran Congress leader S. Nijalingappa noted in his diary, ‘A thousand Nehrus could not have achieved it.’³⁹ That sounds sharper than it perhaps is. It certainly sounds less acerbic when you consider the number of times Patel gave up, without a protest, the position of the president of the Indian National Congress led by Mahatma Gandhi, including in 1947 when not a single state unit of the Congress nominated Jawaharlal Nehru for the position of president because that would mean having him as the country’s first prime minister. Each time that Gandhi indicated his choice was Nehru, in many ways an adopted son, each time Patel quietly stood aside, without a single complaint. In 1929, 1936 and 1946, when Patel was a natural claimant to the position of Congress president. Each time many Congressmen would have liked to see Patel take the chair. Each time Gandhi, in a sense, vetoed his name, often in favour of Nehru.

In total, before and after Patel’s death, Nehru became president of the Indian National Congress Party six times. Patel only once, in 1931, though even other leaders like Maulana Azad and Madan Mohan Malaviya rose to the president’s chair twice or more times.

In 1928, after Patel’s success in organizing peasants in Bardoli, about 35 kilometres from Surat, in a satyagraha against paying taxes to the British, eminent barrister and former Congress president Motilal Nehru himself wrote to Gandhi admitting that Patel deserved the president’s position:

I am quite clear that the hero of the hour is Vallabhbhai, and the least we can do is offer him the crown. Failing which, I think that under all the circumstances Jawahar would be the best choice.⁴⁰

Instead, and even though Patel had for all practical purposes reinvigorated Gandhi’s satyagraha movement which the Mahatma had called off after the murder of numerous policemen at Chauri Chaura in Uttar Province (present-day Uttar Pradesh) in 1922, it was Motilal Nehru who was anointed president of the Congress by Gandhi in 1928.

There are many reasons cited for the lapses against Patel—he was older than Nehru (by fourteen years), he was not as popular among the youth, and even that the Kashmiri Pandit aristocrat was ‘young, light-skinned and of

handsome appearance' compared to the Gujarati peasant's 'quiet healthy appearance, a grey-black moustache [which he seems to have shaved off later in life], a small supply of grey-black hair on the head, a slight redness in the eye, a little hardness in the moustache and the face as a whole'.⁴¹

Nehru and Patel had studied law at the same time in London, though there is no record of them ever having met. Nehru was at Inner Temple and Patel studied at Middle Temple but, in a pattern that would be replicated time and again over the next forty years, 'Jawaharlal came to his Inn [Inns of Court] by way of Harrow and Cambridge, not via Petlad, Nadiad and Borsad'.⁴² Nehru spent seven years in England, with short trips back home in between, while Patel could barely get through three years and returned as soon as his final examination was over in 1912 and 'considered it a waste of time to stay on till January 1913 for the Call Night'⁴³—not even bothering about the solemn grandeur of the occasion which filled many a would-be great man with a sense of pride'.⁴⁴

Even today, fifty-three years after his death, Nehru maintains a bit of a reputation as a dandy, fond as he was of sharply cut achkans, a risqué red rose often in his buttonhole. In contrast, Patel, who had developed a liking for Western clothing when in London—'He was so fastidious that finding no good laundry in Ahmedabad he got his stiff collars washed in Bombay'⁴⁵—was motivated by Gandhi's swadeshi movement and its call to burn foreign clothes and switched entirely to donning simple Indian wear.

This difference in taste and temperament always remained between the two men. It came from a fundamental class difference. Patel was one of six children (and five sons) of Jhaverbhai, a farmer; Nehru, the only child of India's most powerful lawyer, Motilal Nehru, who owned a mansion so grand that when the Prince of Wales came to India in 1921 the British authorities demanded that the son of King George be invited to stay at Motilal's manor, Anand Bhawan, in Allahabad. Motilal, who was influential enough for the British to have tried to change their club rules⁴⁶ to bypass the 'No Dogs or Indians Allowed' rule, refused.

The fathers are important in another way. Jhaverbhai was a devout Hindu and a follower of the Swaminarayan sect, and even at the age of eighty-five,

he would often walk 30 kilometres to go to the nearest Swaminarayan temple. In sharp contrast, Motilal Nehru was a fierce rationalist and atheist. While Patel never embraced every aspect of the religiosity of his father, he never shunned his religious identity either, while, in comparison, ‘initially, Jawahar had scorned his father’s strict rationalism as unimaginative. But ultimately, as with the temper [which the two Nehrus shared], he could not help but emulate it’⁴⁷. A young Nehru had decided that religion was something women did, and while his view changed significantly, some of the distaste remained. These differing approaches to religiosity, especially to Hinduism, would remain a fractious ground between the two men till the end.

As is almost always true, where they came from determined where they went, and how far they were willing to go. It determined what they felt entitled to, and indeed the manner in which they were prepared to acquire what they felt was rightfully theirs.

Patel, for all his expertise in playing bridge, remained in essence a peasant—with a farmer’s obstinate quietude, dour reserve and generosity of spirit. He lacked Nehru’s panache and the younger man’s flights of fantasy. If Nehru looked to the skies for inspiration and relief, Patel’s gaze fell to the ground and observed the minutiae of the ground beneath his feet. Lord Mountbatten said as much: ‘[Patel] had his feet on the ground while Nehru had his in the clouds.’⁴⁸

A popular contrarian thought experiment on Indian history likes to imagine how the country would have fared had Patel taken over as the first prime minister. This experiment, on either side of the argument, is usually not fair.

The Nehru camp likes to paint their man as a world leader and Patel as a provincial, at best a muffossil, strongman who had the ability to arm-twist and deliver political victories but possessed not even an iota of Nehru’s soaring, picturesque imagination. They see listlessness in his reserve and small-mindedness in his pragmatism.

The Patel supporters consider Nehru as a well-dressed but feeble leader, at best. They claim he was not only weak but also an escape artist and a

smooth-talker with no real ability to handle tough political situations. His oratory is considered largely gaseous and full of romantic but not very useful ideals that have little real impact on the lives of millions of impoverished Indians after Independence.

Both these extreme positions of course are not very useful. They also oversimplify what is really a most complex question. Nehru and Patel did have complementary skills and while there is little doubt that Patel would have been a good prime minister, indeed a great one, he would most certainly have taken a path in many ways quite different from the one Nehru took.

As Rajmohan Gandhi has also accepted:

An imagined Patel 10 or 20 years younger than he was in 1947 may well have made a wonderful PM, and possibly a better PM than Nehru. But the actual Patel of 1947, who was 14 years older than Nehru, was too unwell to be PM.⁴⁹

This much is fact. Patel was ill in those years. His daughter Maniben notes:

In 1941, he [Patel] was afflicted with severe intestinal trouble. He woke around 3:30 every morning because of the pain in the bowels. He spent an hour in the toilet before setting out on his morning walk [. . .] After his illness in March 1948 his medical advisers stopped morning walks completely and restricted his interviews.⁵⁰

And as a pragmatic man, Patel would have seen that a newly independent nation needs, above all, relentless energy.

The question also is: which of the two paths would have been better for India? The answer, however, will forever elude us because Patel as prime minister is obviously a purely hypothetical situation.

I am concerned with a more urgent question. Why are Patel's achievements so little known and not widely understood in India? Apart from my Gujarati friends, no one I know remembers much of what they were taught about Patel in school. Everyone knows Gandhi and Nehru, they even have their own holidays in the school calendar, but Patel had no real dedicated celebration until recently when his 31 October birthdate began to receive a bit more publicity.

There are very few papers or even books written about Patel; few seminars dedicated to him. On JSTOR, one of the world's largest aggregators of academic papers, there are but a handful that delve into Patel, his ideas and his actions. For instance, in Kashmir, which Patel rescued from being splintered away by tribal gunmen sent by Pakistan, there is little talk about what his formula for a peaceful settlement would have been. This, at a time, when perhaps deliberating on what Patel would think or do is of utmost relevance as justifications for the further partition of India crop up in the public discourse all around us from shows in TV studios to florid literary fiction.

'Gandhian', 'Nehruvian' and even 'Ambedkarite' have become adjectives but has anyone ever heard of 'Patelian'?

Why not?

As this book will argue, from being the pillar of strength behind some of Gandhi's earliest successes to holding the country together after the partition of India and Pakistan when there was every chance of more fractures, Patel's influence is deeply felt at every level in India. Yet it is almost as if his contributions and his memory have been systematically allowed to fade so that future generations can never know his ideas.

Are Patel's ideas so dangerous? Could it be that the tough love that Patel brought to the table is unpalatable to us today? Patel's patriotism is never maudlin or trite. Its sentimentality is firmly rooted in real achievement and it cannot be blackmailed, emotionally or otherwise, into negotiation or barter.

While we of course cannot make an outright comparison between what Patel would have done and what India did do after Independence, what we can speculate about is the choices Patel would perhaps have made based on the reading of choices made during a long public life. With Patel we would not have had the overbearing focus on socialism. Nehru was a committed socialist. Patel was not. He made this quite clear on several occasions including in a speech in January 1948 at a lunch organized for him by Badridas Goenka, chairman of the Imperial Bank of India from 1933 to

1955 and, later, the first chairman of the State Bank of India when it was formed in 1955.

In the speech Patel argued that before any ideas of nationalization could be considered, a vibrant environment of private industry needed to be created. He alluded to widespread disappointment and panic among industrialists about the taxation policies of the government on business and the lack of incentives for enterprise. We shall see later in this book how Patel strove to save Indian industry from ruin, including pushing in his preference for finance minister, but for now it is important to note one small bit of Patel's speech to the industrialists:

We must remember that socialism in England came after England had advanced considerably on the road to industrialization [...] You should realize that industry is to be established before it can be nationalized.⁵¹

Nehru was more inclined towards a more government-led model of development than Patel but here it must be noted that at least some major businessmen had actively sought government intervention and control on the economy in 1944 in a document that later came to be known as the Bombay Plan. The question of control of course is entirely dependent on the extent to which control is leveraged and there is little doubt that Nehru was naturally inclined to a greater degree of control than Patel. In fact, it is prescient that Patel talks about nationalization in his 1948 speech because not only was Nehru himself keen to ensure government ownership of large companies—indeed the Indian government did start businesses in everything, from infrastructure to hotels and watch-manufacturing under him—his daughter, Indira, during her time as prime minister, nationalized the banks and started a spiral of economic collapse that almost bankrupted India by 1990 when, faced with the prospect of having to sell gold reserves, the government reluctantly started to open the economy.

Patel also would have been horrified at the moniker India's stuttering economic growth, restrained by state control under Nehru and chocked after him, received: the Hindu rate of growth.⁵²

Patel, the son of a peasant, would most likely have focused more on building India's agrarian economy and primary education and healthcare, building the country from the grassroots while Nehru, who had a global footprint in mind from the very beginning, aimed at big dams, big factories, a space programme and institutions of higher learning like the famed Indian Institutes of Technology. Undoubtedly, there is some benefit to be seen in both approaches, and which one would have been better in the long run is a matter of speculation. While some have argued that Nehru's priorities were all wrong⁵³ and the meagre resources of the newly independent country would have been better spent on primary education, who can deny that pioneering institutions like the IITs or the Indian Space Research Organisation, propelled into existence by him, are not a matter of great pride for India today?

Nehru was a visionary prime minister in many ways. And like many politicians who reach the very zenith of their ambition, he was also susceptible to vanity. Some would argue that he was delusional about many of his beliefs, especially those relating to certain aspects of foreign policy.

Patel was perceptive about the reasons for the creation of Pakistan, and, once created, what the intentions of its founders were. Where Nehru saw only minor hindrances, Patel perceived imminent dangers. He wanted to use India's bargaining powers more effectively to resolve disputes with Pakistan. But Nehru, and indeed Gandhi, seemed convinced that peace, and at least the facade of friendship, must be maintained even at the risk of irretrievably damaging India's interests. There was no doubt some element of the difference between the utopian and the realist in these arguments but, as we shall see in this book, Patel's instincts proved correct more often than not. India's first deputy prime minister and home minister had a clear, uncompromising vision of the troublesome geopolitics of the subcontinent. His warnings on Pakistan, Tibet, China and India's dealings with the United Nations were prescient. It was his determined effort that stopped an annexation of Kashmir by Pakistan.

It also might be safe to suggest that if Patel had become prime minister, it is unlikely that he would have allowed the newly independent country,

indeed his own government, to award him, the prime minister, the head of the government, the Bharat Ratna—India's highest civilian honour in 1955, barely some years after India won independence. The first president of India, Rajendra Prasad, whose accession Nehru tried his best to prevent and Patel pushed strongly, took full responsibility for recommending Nehru's name:

In doing so, for once, I may be said to be acting unconstitutionally, as I am taking this step on my own initiative and without any recommendation or advice from my Prime Minister; but I know that my action will be endorsed most enthusiastically.⁵⁴

Let us assume that Prasad was being truthful and not trying to win Nehru's favour. But some facts still remain worthy of questioning. What we do know is that Nehru had favoured C. Rajagopalachari, governor general of India, popularly known as Rajaji, for the chair of the first president of independent India. Patel disagreed and ensured that it was Prasad who got the position. Later, when Patel was able to outmanoeuvre Nehru and ensure that Purushottam Das Tandon won the election for Congress Party president, he described it as, 'At the time of Rajen Babu's [Rajendra Prasad's] elections, he got a slap in the face. This is the second.'⁵⁵ What we also know is that Prasad remains the only president in the seventy-year history of independent India to have served two terms in office. In 1957 when the second presidential elections came, Nehru preferred Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to Prasad but allowed himself to be convinced by Maulana Azad not to make himself a hurdle, especially since the party favoured Prasad. We also know that Nehru's daughter, Indira, during her term as prime minister, decided to accept the Bharat Ratna from her own government. Other prime ministers like Lal Bahadur Shastri and Atal Bihari Vajpayee have been awarded the Bharat Ratna but never while they were serving prime ministers. Shastri received his posthumously in 1966 and Vajpayee in 2015. Patel was awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously in 1991.

Gandhi had seen in Patel and Nehru the perfect balance that India needed, but he would have also realized that such balancing acts are rarely

ever equitable. Lack of equality seemed like a price all three men were willing to pay—even Patel, at his own expense. It is, then, unsurprising that right after his great victory in the Bardoli satyagraha Patel gave a speech on his mentor and guru, Gandhi, where he refused to take any credit for the success of the campaign.

On 9 July 1928, in Ahmedabad, Patel said:

I do not deserve the honour which you are bestowing on me because of Bardoli. The condition of the peasants in India is akin to that of a bed-ridden patient suffering from an incurable disease, waiting only, as it were, to depart from this world and then suddenly restored to life by taking some miracle medicine given to him by a sanyasi. I am merely the instrument through whose hands the sanyasi administered the medicine to the patient. [...] If we have such men of whom the whole of Gujarat is so justly proud, the credit again goes only to Gandhiji.⁵⁶

So what had been his role? Patel explained:

You have all heard of the Bhil disciple of Dronacharya in the Mahabharata. He never had the good fortune of learning directly under Dronacharya, but he used to worship an earthen figure of his guru. It was through his devotion that he acquired all that Dronacharya had to teach. Indeed he learnt more than what Dronacharya's other disciples ever learnt. In my case, I have access to the guru whose disciple you say I am. So far from being his chief disciple, I doubt if I am fit even to rank among one of his many disciples.⁵⁷

What is Patel talking about? Rather, who is he talking about?

Eklavya.

Dronacharya was the greatest teacher of the art of war. He taught boys to become warriors. But he only taught princes, not commoners.

Eklavya, a tribal boy, wanted desperately to learn archery. Though he had natural talent he knew Dronacharya would never accept him.

So, hidden in the forest, he watched the guru teach the princes from time to time. Then he made a mud idol of Dronacharya and began practising before it as if he was receiving instruction from the guru himself.

One day when Dronacharya was teaching his pupils they came across a dog in the forest whose mouth was full of arrows so that the animal could

not bark. But not one arrow had hurt the dog—such was the precision with which they had been fired.

Dronacharya saw this and realized that only the greatest archer in the world could have done this—but he had promised his favourite pupil, the prince Arjun, that he would make him the world's greatest archer. And yet, here was a clear sign that someone else was far more talented than the prince.

Dronacharya inquired about this archer and found Eklavya.

Where did you learn archery, the guru asked the boy.

From you, replied Eklavya and showed him the mud idol.

Dronacharya was deeply moved but he felt honour-bound to fulfil his promise to Arjun. So he asked Eklavya for his guru dakshina, a pupil's tribute to the guru.

What can I offer, asked the boy.

Your right thumb, said Dronacharya, knowing that without his thumb to pull back the arrow and the string of the bow, Eklavya's talent as an archer would be doomed.

Aware of the consequences, without another question, Eklavya took out a knife and sliced off the thumb of the hand he used to pull back the string of his bow.

The injustice of this story has echoed through the thousands of years since the Mahabharata was written and is still one of the most repeated and remembered tales from the great epic. Some retellings add that the story of Eklavya did not end there and that he still went on to become a great archer.

It seems prophetic that even at the very beginning of his political career, Patel saw himself as the Eklavya to Gandhi's Dronacharya. We may never know the exact reasons why he believed this but as the tale unfolds we might be able to gather how his prophecy about himself, in a sense, came true, and who might Arjun be in this story.



ONE

‘WE DON’T WANT TO LISTEN TO YOUR GANDHI!’

2010 was a big year for the Gujarat Club in Ahmedabad. It was 122 years old and in desperate need of some repairs. It boasted 1100 members but not many had bothered to get any spring cleaning done for years. But now a budget of Rs 75 lakh had been sanctioned and, among other things, two billiards tables were being imported from England.¹ This club, after all, was where Geet Sethi, who won the World Billiards Championship three times as an amateur and six times as a professional and had two world records, had cut his teeth.

The last time the club got some repairs and spring cleaning done was twenty-five years ago when film-maker Ketan Mehta wanted to shoot some scenes on the premises. Mehta wanted to portray the club as it would have been in June 1916, barely twenty-eight years after its creation. The scene had barristers playing bridge under *punkha* who pulled giant fans to keep the place cool, and one of them getting progressively more irritated because of the disturbance caused by a political activist.

One of the card players, a barrister, was in winning form and in high spirits when the boy brought in tea. At that moment someone dashed into the room to invite the players to meet a Mr. Gandhi and hear the lecture he was giving that evening. No one paid any

attention. The players went on drinking tea, eating English-made biscuits and discussing their next rubber.²

The barrister was Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. We find him returned from England now, having finished his legal education and learnt to ‘buy some well-cut clothes’.³ He was now determined to be the star of a wealthy fraternity which he thought was ‘pompous, status conscious’⁴ but where he swiftly made a mark ‘with his domineering personality’.⁵ He now towered over the men who had intimidated him once upon a time when he was but a pleader.⁶ He was not only their equal as a barrister, often a more successful one at that, but he was also a better bridge player!

While he was a pleader, Patel’s family was in a financial crisis, which is apparent from a letter he wrote in 1904 to his brother Narsibhai.

I have written to return the money with interest and so you need not worry in the matter [. . .] you have written about the mortgage of sister’s ornaments that does not behove you [. . .] You have written that you are in debt. But I understand that your debt is my debt. So you write to me the names of creditors, so I will relieve you as quickly as possible from the debt so that you heave a sigh of relief.⁷

By 1916, he was on far firmer ground.

One aspect of his personality as a barrister seems to have been ‘a firm and pensive expression, almost as if one looked down upon the world with a sort of superiority complex’.⁸ But attitude alone could not have brought Patel the success he saw as a barrister in Ahmedabad. He was also willing to take perilous chances, going so far as to chastising a judge for being prejudiced against people from his home region of Kheda. The astounded judge granted his client the bail that Patel wanted.⁹

Barrister Patel, then, with his sturdy pragmatism had no time for soft-spoken, barely clad political activists, even if they were fellow barristers of considerable renown in South Africa. ‘I have been told he comes from South Africa,’ Patel said when asked if he had met Gandhi. ‘Honestly, I think he’s a crank and, as you know, I have no use for such people.’ On yet another day when Gandhi’s arrival was announced at the club, Patel is said to have shouted out: ‘Go away! We don’t want to listen to your Gandhi!’¹⁰

But the astute lawyer had noticed something: this frail man spoke more like a sadhu than a politician. Why was a man who wanted to talk about greater freedom for India speaking of ‘the power of Truth which is the same as Divine Love’?¹¹ What did divine love have to do with fighting colonial injustice?

He had also realized something else: Gandhi was gathering some clever people around him, people who had Patel’s admiration—D.B. Kalelkar, Narhari Parikh, Mahadev Desai, (Swami) Anand and K.G. Mashruwala.¹² Of these men, Parikh and Desai were competent lawyers whose work Patel respected. What was it, he wondered, that was drawing men like these to this Gandhi?

Patel was forty-two years old when he met Gandhi, who by then was forty-eight. The age difference between the men was barely six years. Compared to this, Nehru was twenty years younger than Gandhi—it is easy to see how the Gandhi–Nehru relationship would be paternal. It is also easy to see how the relationship between Patel and Nehru could have transitioned (or even veered) from familial to rival, for aren’t siblings ever so often rivals?

Three key relationships had an abiding impact on the founding of modern India, those between Gandhi and Patel, Gandhi and Nehru, and Nehru and Patel. Of these the most layered and subtle was the relationship between Gandhi and Patel.

Patel, like everybody else, called Gandhi ‘Bapu’ but the relationship was more intricate than a simple familial tie. Patel had been brought up to respect his elders—especially his elder brothers. Even though when he had first saved up money with great difficulty and prepared his papers to go and study law in England, his elder brother Vithalbhai had cheated him out of the chance. The papers came in the name of V.J. Patel, which were the initials of both brothers, and

[E]xercising an elder’s prerogative [...] Vithalbhai took it to be his opportunity first—not the younger brother’s, no matter if the latter had sweated to save money for this visit [...] Not only did he surrender his travel documents to Vithalbhai, but also willingly agreed to bear his entire expenses.¹³

Patel refers to his relationship with Vithalbhai in a speech in March 1921:

He [Vithalbhai] told me: ‘I am your elder brother and I should go first. You may get an opportunity after I return, but if you go first, I would never have any chance of going abroad.’ I went to England after the return of my brother three years later. After I had returned, we two brothers decided that if we wanted independence, we would have to turn into ascetics and serve the country without any thought of self. My brother then left his roaring practice and engaged himself in the service of the country. The looking after of the family fell on my shoulders. The good work was for him and the inferior enterprise was for me.¹⁴

This anecdote about Patel is not one of the more popular ones. In fact, it is not even the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Patel, the ‘Iron Man of India’. But I believe it is indicative of a pattern in Patel’s life, of an occasionally misguided sense of duty that haunts critical points of his public life and journey as a leader. As we shall see, this relationship with Vithalbhai would also guide one of his biggest battles within the Congress Party—with Netaji.

It certainly could be, as we will see in this book, a metaphor for a part of his intricate relationship with Gandhi. What did Patel expect of Gandhi, and indeed what did Gandhi expect of Patel? As one of Gandhi’s earliest and most formidable lieutenants, Patel was, in a sense, the bad cop to the good cop played first by Gandhi and then by Nehru in the Indian freedom movement. Some writers have painted Patel as the villain in the dispute between Netaji and the Indian National Congress, and finally Bose’s breakaway from the Congress, claiming that

So fond of Bose had Vithalbhai become that he willed a portion of his fortune to him to be spent for the ‘political uplift of India and for publicity work on behalf of India’s cause in other countries’. But the will was challenged by Vithalbhai’s sibling, Vallabhbhai Patel as a consequence of which Bose didn’t receive a penny.¹⁵

We shall look at the Patel–Bose relationship, and their quarrel, in greater detail later but for now suffice it to say that their relationship was perhaps the most acrimonious in the Congress, even more so than Patel’s equation with Jinnah. In both cases, Patel started by defending something extremely precious, not only to him but also to Gandhi—the control and guidance of

the Congress, and therefore the national freedom movement and the unity of India. Indeed in the quarrel with Bose, Patel was defending Gandhi's very position and importance in the Congress and at the helm of the national movement, which Bose felt was negotiable. Sarat Bose, Bose's elder brother, wrote to Gandhi in 1939:

What I saw and heard at Tripuri [near Jabalpur in present-day Madhya Pradesh] during the seven days I was there, was an eye opener to me. The exhibition of truth and non-violence that I saw in persons whom the public look upon as your disciples [targeting Nehru, Patel, Azad and company] and representatives has to use your own words, 'stunk in my nostrils'. The election of Subhas was not a defeat for yourself, but of the high command of which Sardar Patel is the shining light.¹⁶

In his outrage, Sarat Bose directly targeted Sardar Patel, and interestingly not Gandhi (even though in a sense it was Gandhi's will that Patel was trying to uphold and protect). This is one of the many times that Patel faced the wrath and shielded Gandhi. Bose wrote:

The propaganda that was carried on by them against the Rashtrapati [Subhas Bose who was president of the Congress in 1938 and was re-elected in 1939 against the explicit wishes of Gandhi] and those who happen to share his political views was thoroughly mean, malicious and indicative and utterly devoid of even the semblance of truth and non-violence.¹⁷

Never one to take what he felt were unjust and malicious attacks on him, Patel growled back: 'The lion becomes a king by birth, not by an election in the jungle.'

Why was Patel willing, again and again, to take the hit for Gandhi? Was it because having played the elder in his family, and covering up for the shortcomings of even his older brothers, Patel sought an older, familial mentor figure? Was it because he saw in him the best chance for India to attain freedom? Was it because he had witnessed Gandhi's ability to transform Bal Gangadhar Tilak's reverberating declaration—'Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it'—and 'translate that mantra into action, to turn it into a reality by carrying it to India's teeming millions in her villages'?¹⁸

The truth probably lies in a combination of all these. But what is undisputed is *where* it all started, at the point when Patel took his plunge into politics independent of Gandhi, and then his definitive transformation after having seen, spellbound, Gandhi's rousing of the revolt at Champaran.

The Ahmedabad municipality was the first site of Patel's own kind of swaraj or self-rule. Municipalities were some of the rare institutions where Indians those days enjoyed some sort of self-government. But in 1914, a change in the District Municipal Act allowed the appointment of an officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS)—naturally, British—at the head of municipalities. This was done very slyly.

The Government camouflaged its real intentions through a devious device; by first making ad hoc appointments of non-ICS Indian officers for short spells. Most of them served only for six to seven months. M.A. Dixit was there for 17 days, while Bhaishankar Nanubhai Bhatt just for one day! Finally came the appointment of J.A. Shillidy, ICS, in November 1915.¹⁹

The eminent members of the Gujarat Club were incensed. Its members served as municipal president and the head of the managing committee detested the 'arrogant, high-handed and ruthless officer who became a terror for the citizens of Ahmedabad. The educated classes and the intelligentsia were greatly upset and wanted to teach him a lesson'.²⁰

Enter Vallabhbhai Patel. In 1917, Patel was convinced by his friends at the Gujarat Club to fight a bypoll to the municipality. He joined the board of the municipality and became chairman of its sanitary committee.

Before we go further, it is pertinent to understand how novel the whole business of participating in municipality elections really was—indeed how relatively new municipalities themselves were. Municipalities only appeared in India around 1845. Twenty years later, a few paid councillors started to run them. Schools and other bodies came under municipal purview with the introduction of a special act of 1870 and it was under another act in 1882 that proper local self-government at least to a degree was introduced. This was when non-government members began to be elected to municipal bodies in larger numbers than government members—

and the posts of president and vice president became elected posts. ‘However, the government was to keep its control from the outside through commissioners and other mechanisms’²¹—Ahmedabad got its first elected municipality president in 1915. Patel’s time at, and indeed his quarrels in, the Ahmedabad municipality, especially against a series of British officers, also advances our understanding of how cities that grew under colonialism transformed. The scholar Siddhartha Raychaudhuri has pointed out that

processes of transformation in cities in the non-western world during the colonial period have often been described as one-way processes through which European colonial regimes restructured the physical and social environments of the cities and established their domination there.²²

The restructuring of Ahmedabad in the first half of the twentieth century, says Raychaudhuri,

was not a one-way process of the establishment of domination by the colonial government but was instead one where a section of the Indian elites contested the restructuring that the government was carrying out in the city and appropriated it to bring about their own reorganization of the urban centre. In carrying out the reorganization, the elites also established their political and social hegemony in the urban centre.²³

The hub of this reordering was the Ahmedabad municipality. And even among the local elites vying to control it, there was one significant difference.

Whereas the previously dominant group had chosen to ally themselves closely with the colonial government, a distinguishing characteristic of the new elite leaders was their stand against the government.²⁴

The leader of this new group was Patel.

The elite group led by Vallabhbhai Patel had strategically used the grievances generated among the city’s populace, as a result of the various schemes for restructuring carried out by the government, to establish themselves politically in the urban centre. Consequently the government lost control over the process and the new Indian urban leadership took it over, marking a decisive shift in the balance of local political power.²⁵

What convinced Patel to take the plunge into politics? And what made him the natural choice for people who wanted to fight the likes of the British agent Shillidy?

One of the main reasons was clearly his reputation as a pugilist—even as a schoolboy Patel had taken on indolent teachers and had even engineered the defeat of a wealthy boaster who was fighting municipal elections against one of his favourite teachers,²⁶ and his acerbic victories in court had added to his fame. Therefore, many felt that Vallabhbhai was a match for any number of arrogant and overbearing British officers who were in the municipality. But when he entered the Ahmedabad municipality, ‘nobody could think that in the not too distant future, Vallabhbhai was to be a comrade-in-arms and trusted lieutenant to Gandhiji’.²⁷

Upon his arrival, Patel soon clashed with the Englishman on the issue of white residents of the cantonment area receiving clean water regularly, while supply to the rest of Ahmedabad where Indians lived stuttered. Patel’s took on Shillidy and henchmen like municipal engineer V.M. Macassey and demanded their removal for incompetence and prejudice. One British officer had to resign when Patel demanded a medical certificate, as per regulations, after a long medical leave of absence. He also charged Shillidy with ‘deliberate insubordination’ when the Englishman tried to sneakily prevent the municipality from taking control of a lake and the adjacent land because it was being used by one of Shillidy’s friends.

The facts of the case being overwhelmingly against Shillidy, the Government was left with no alternative but to bow to the wishes of the Councillors. And for the first time in India, perhaps, such an action was taken against a British ICS official.²⁸

Here we must pause to admire the forcefulness of the tone used by Patel against Shillidy in his letter.

The Board is sorry to note that the Municipal Commissioner did not consider it his duty to protect the proprietary rights of the Municipality [...] By doing this, he is guilty of putting his personal interest above those of the people [...] His impudent reply, his baseless charges [...] he has tried to create discontent and dissensions [...] the least that can be said about it is that his conduct was extremely objectionable.²⁹

In 1917, barely six years after the grand imperial durbar in Delhi where George V and his wife Mary were declared Emperor and Empress of India, this letter from an Indian against a British ICS officer in His Majesty's Service, as it were, is startling fare.

Patel was one of the many future leaders of the national movement who cut his teeth in municipal politics. He became president of the Ahmedabad municipality as did Nehru in Allahabad, C.R. Das in Calcutta and Prasad at Patna. Prasad even refers to this in his autobiography:

As the Congress, though it had expressed itself against Council entry, had not prohibited Congressmen from contesting local bodies' elections, the Patna Congress Committee, following the precedents of Ahmedabad and Allahabad, where Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru had become the Presidents of the Municipal Councils, decided to participate in the municipal elections which were held in 1927.³⁰

It must be mentioned here that Patel had decided, in consultation with his older brother Vithalbhai, to leave politics to Vithalbhai and focus instead on the practice of law. With his entry in the Ahmedabad municipality that agreement ended. Patel was involved with the workings of the Ahmedabad municipality in various capacities, including as president, for eleven years from 1917 to 1928 'with a short break, from 1922 to 1924, when the Municipality was suspended by the Government'.³¹

Both Vallabhbhai and Vithalbhai presided over the Municipalities of Ahmedabad and Bombay almost at the same time [...] Their work and activities in the Municipalities also bear a very close resemblance. Both worked hard, started building of hospitals, arranged for a civic address to Gandhiji, and conducted their work in Gujarati.³²

Gandhi even supported a part of Patel's struggle against the English ICS officer Shillidy at a public meeting in January 1918.

During his time at the Ahmedabad municipality,

Patel, along with volunteers, cleaned the streets of Ahmedabad with brooms and dustcart, beginning with Harijan Basti [Dalit quarters]. As the Plague broke out in Ahmedabad in 1917, he worked almost round the clock with his volunteers to help the victims and their families. He worked at great personal risk of infection as Bal Gangadhar 'Lokmanya' Tilak had done during the Pune Plague, 1896. The strain broke Patel's robust health, but sealed his reputation as a mass leader.³³

Perhaps some of his steadfastness in taking on the plague came from his earlier experience with the epidemic in 1901 in Godhra; in a letter from that year written to his brother Narsibhai, Patel says:

The plague is spreading here virulently. Everyday there are about ten cases and rats are dying in large numbers. It is possible that the epidemic will continue for some time [. .] I am not losing courage.³⁴

In a sense, Patel was unafraid of the epidemic because he was a plague survivor.

In November 1917, at the first Gujarat Political Conference, Patel heard Gandhi say: ‘In the running of local government lies the key to Swarajya [. . .] Unless we improve the condition of our cities, Swarajya will have no meaning for us.’³⁵ He certainly seems to have taken this idea to heart—during his time in the municipality, Patel would do his best to improve Ahmedabad, even at great personal risk.

Patel’s contemporary, Congress leader G.V. Mavalankar, adds to the story of his recklessness during the plague:

As Chairman of the Municipal Sanitary Committee, he stuck to his residence in the city of Ahmedabad when plague was raging and refused to move out for personal safety. His was a familiar figure moving in the streets of Ahmedabad, getting the sewers cleaned and the plague-stricken areas disinfected. When his friends argued, he simply looked at them, and his silence was more eloquent than his words. It appeared as if he wished to say, ‘I have undertaken the duty as Chairman of the Sanitary Committee, and how can I ask safety for myself?’³⁶

As his secretary Moolshankar Bhatt remembered:

Immediately after getting the news in the night that plague had broken out in the city, he came out of his house and started helping out people till early in the morning. Municipal workers who came in the morning were astonished to see Patel volunteering for the affected people.³⁷

His work involved everything from town planning and water supplies to sewage line construction, building schools and lighting works. Having become involved with the municipality at a time when Gandhi was just starting to make Ahmedabad ‘the nerve centre of national politics’,³⁸ Patel

ensured that the city's municipality also remained at the forefront of its own kind of political activity.

His dealings with the British officers [...] and their quick removal from the Municipality marked, as it were, a weeding out process which he was determined to follow before he took up other constructive activities of welfare [...] The period was marked by a new approach of not only fighting the Municipal elections but of creating and forging a band of people who were to be the nucleus round which party building was to take place. These moderates were soon to discover that a new group of non-cooperationists had entered the Municipality under the leadership of Vallabhbhai.³⁹

Patel tasted blood in the early years of municipality politics. Here finally was evidence that the British could be defeated—using their own bureaucratic systems and processes. Here finally was a clear path for enforcing the role of Indians on Indian institutions. Patel was what we would today call an instinctive nationalist. His sense of politics did not come merely from the absorption of ideals, theories and values learnt in England. His sense of self and freedom needed no theories by what we call Dead White Males,⁴⁰ erudite as they no doubt were. Patel's patriotism was far earthier (where Nehru's was lofty and he knew a lot of Dead White Male Theory by heart): It came straight from a connection with the soil, from the earth that he had seen his father till, from the village that had always been his home. In many ways, the difference between the village and the city, urban and rural, urbane and rustic, is the distinction between Patel and Nehru. Even with their common educational background in law, Patel was first and foremost a son of the soil, his attachment and pre-occupations rooted to a sense of home. Unlike Nehru, he did not need to travel across the country to discover it. In his book *The Hidden Ways*, Alistair Moffat writes of his beloved Scotland:

Anyone who wants to understand something of the elemental nature of our history should try to walk through it, should listen for the natural sounds our ancestors heard, smell the hedgerow honeysuckle and the pungent, grassy, milky stink of cowshit, look up and know something of shifts in the weather [...] This is not nonsense, but a necessity for anyone who seriously wishes to understand the feel of the millions of lives lived on the land of Scotland [...] To walk in the footsteps of our ancestors is to sense some of that everyday experience come alive under our feet.⁴¹

As a village boy, Patel already knew the hidden ways; he did not have to write about his discoveries—they were ingrained in his hands.

Nehru, in comparison, was the consummate internationalist. Nehru in 2018 would have been at ease in calling himself a ‘global citizen’, whereas Patel would probably argue that there is no such thing, really, and people who claim to belong everywhere, perhaps in reality land up belonging nowhere.

While I was writing this book, I read Nehru’s *Discovery of India* twice, from cover to cover. It is, as many have pointed out, sweeping, bracing fare. I had last read the book as a school student. Now, when I read it again, I found myself wondering why Nehru had written so voluminously about trying to comprehend his own country and why Patel had never bothered. There is, no doubt, a certain sincerity of intent in Nehru’s writing, a sense of query and incredulousness that seamlessly go together which is perhaps the charm of his work. He is conversational and questioning, both natural states of man.

In the book, Nehru writes that he had been asked by an American publisher to pen an essay about the philosophy of his life. And though he was initially keen,

[T]he more I thought over it, the more reluctant I grew [. . .] What was my philosophy of life? I did not know. Some years earlier I would not have been so hesitant. There was a definiteness about my thinking and objectives then which has faded away since. The events of the past few years in India, China, Europe, and all over the world have been confusing, upsetting and distressing, and the future has become vague and shadowy and has lost the clearness of outline which it once possessed in my mind.⁴²

Patel of course gives us a sense that at every point he was far more concerned about the immediate task at hand—saving those afflicted by the plague in his municipality, getting people clean drinking water, organizing peasants for a satyagraha—and was not disoriented, usually, by the state of the world.

As his daughter Maniben wrote about Patel’s philosophy of life: ‘Action appealed to him as nothing else. He believed that a man of words and not of deeds is a garden full of weeds.’⁴³

But what kind of deeds would these be? A clutch of indigo farmers led by one rickety man would transform Patel's ideas on the subject.



TWO

‘GANDHI IS A MAHATMA. I AM NOT.’

It had been two years since the frail-looking civil-rights lawyer from South Africa arrived in Bombay. The success of his methods of non-violent protest against apartheid in South Africa had prompted Indian leaders to ask him to return to India. He returned after staying away for twenty-one years. But what would he do now?

Gandhi had been invited back to India to give greater momentum to the national movement against the British rule. What did this movement really want to achieve?

He had returned home partly on the request of his friend Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a leader in the Indian National Congress. The Congress had been started by the bird-loving ICS officer Allan Octavian Hume, one of the fathers, if not *the* father, of modern Indian ornithology. Hume started a journal called *Stray Feathers* and upon his death the British Museum received forty-seven deodar wood cases from which more 75,000 preserved specimens of birds were placed at the museum.

Gokhale was a social reformer, an educationist enamoured by the ideas of thinkers like John Stuart Mill and Edmund Burke, a leader who wanted greater freedom for India but also sought the constructive impact of colonial rule on Indian societal reform. When he was making his name as a forceful

young speaker in politics, Gokhale had spoken at the 1890 session of the Congress in Calcutta on ‘the inequities of the salt tax’.¹ Gandhi would one day use the anger against this tax to stir the entire country. But when Gandhi first landed in Bombay, the Gokhale who went from Poona (now Pune) to greet him represented only one part of a divided Congress, and the mild-mannered, debating society-esque part at that. The more radical Congressmen (Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo) had had a falling out with the moderates led by Gokhale. While Tilak, released in 1914 after a six-year sentence on charges of sedition, attended one of the welcome meetings for Gandhi, strong differences persisted between the groups, and also between the Congress and the Muslim League. The League was led by Jinnah, like Gandhi a London-trained Gujarati barrister, but unlike the non-smoker Gandhi, a fifty–Craven “A”–cigarettes–a–day² man. Gandhi had promised Gokhale that he would mostly listen and watch but barely six weeks after his arrival in India, Gokhale was dead. Gandhi was free from his role as a mere observer but equally regretful that ‘this influential figure who believed in him and had offered a political and financial umbrella was no more’.³ But in time, Gandhi would find other backers, among them wealthy industrialists like Ambalal Sarabhai and Ghanshyam Das Birla, and along with them a man who was adept at raising funds from Indian business barons: Vallabhbhai Patel.

Patel had heard both Jinnah and Gandhi at the October 1916 Gujarat Sabha–organized Bombay Provincial Conference held in Ahmedabad. One of the main roles of the Gujarat Sabha was to bring moderates and radicals in the national movement on the same platform and try and bridge their ideological gaps. Jinnah had led the Ahmedabad session on Gandhi’s recommendation. This seems to have been one of the places where Patel’s opinion about Gandhi softened and he considered with greater care the older man’s words.

Both Patel’s and Gandhi’s lives were about to change due to the work of a German chemist called Adolf von Baeyer. Till the very end of the nineteenth century, Europe was importing around eight million tonnes of India-made indigo, the finest in the world at the time, finer certainly than

Germany's blue woad dye. In his well-documented book on India that came out in Leipzig in 1880 Emil Schlagintweit wrote 'that the best indigo came from Bihar'.⁴ Indian indigo gave better, more intense hues and could colour fabrics from cotton to flax, while the German dye only worked on wool. So irritated were German producers with the near monopoly of Indian indigo in the market that they called it 'devil's colour'.

This state of affairs continued until the late 1800s when Baeyer discovered a new chemical formulation to prepare an indigo dye which was much better than what was being produced using plant extract in India. In 1881 the Royal Society of London awarded the Davy Medal to the German chemist for his work on indigo, and in 1905, Baeyer won the Nobel Prize for his contribution to chemistry.

But in faraway Bihar, Baeyer's invention, combined with the First World War, was wreaking havoc.

Regardless of the fame of Indian indigo, the farmers who produced the crop and the dye had always had a miserable living, crushed under the brutal land tenancy laws of the British and exploitative Indian zamindars. The indigo workers' violent uprising in Bengal in 1859 inspired the Bengali writer Dinabandhu Mitra to write his play *Neel Darpan*⁵ that was translated into English by the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta and published by Reverend James Long, the Anglo-Irish priest, translator and essayist. The play caused such a stir, shocking audiences in Calcutta and England, that Long was fined and even briefly jailed for publishing it. *Neel Darpan* was the first play to be staged commercially at the National Theatre in Calcutta.⁶

As Baeyer's German dye became popular, several indigo farmers in Bihar managed to break free of their abusive tenancy clauses. But when the First World War broke out, supplies from Germany thinned and once again the farmers faced immense pressure to resume growing indigo.

This was when Rajkumar Shukla entered Gandhi's life. Shukla was from the Champaran region of Bihar, a hub of indigo cultivation. By local standards, Shukla was not too poor.

He held about five hectares of land, owned two houses, and lent money [...] He had been involved for years in organising resistance for the planters, had served three weeks in jail

in 1914, had submitted petitions to various officials including the viceroy, and was a member of the Bihar delegation to the Lucknow Congress, at which he spoke. Champaran [like much of India] had not yet got an active Congress organisation, but it was not innocent of political activity.⁷

Soon after he arrived at Champaran, Gandhi's presence naturally clashed with the interests of the planters.

Energised by Gandhi's presence, the peasants acclaimed him as their guide. The planter's objected and declared [in line with South African precedents] that Gandhi was 'An Unwelcome Visitor'. But Gandhi claimed the right to study the peasants' grievances, and the duty, thereafter, to advise the government.⁸

Within days Gandhi received government orders 'to leave Champaran by the first available train'.⁹ Instead, Gandhi toured the region and spoke to every peasant he could find, sometimes travelling on elephant back.¹⁰

Later, in a courtroom in Motihari, the district headquarters of Champaran, he said: 'I have disregarded the order served upon me, not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being —the voice of conscience.' Over 2000 people had gathered at the court that day to hear Gandhi proclaim that he would plead guilty and violate the order.¹¹

Gandhi's words soon reverberated across India. 'The Indian press was ecstatic.'¹² So were members of the Gujarat Club like Rao Saheb Harilalbhai and G.V. Mavalankar. Champaran may even have inspired Patel in his tussle against Shillidy. When Gandhi accepted the offer to become the president of the Gujarat Sabha, the two men, the bespoke barrister who was used to having his collars laundered by Bombay's best laundry¹³ and travelling second class in trains, 'a luxury for Indians in those days',¹⁴ and the fakir-like man clad in the barest hand-spun white cotton started to develop a bond that would last till their death.

As drawn as Patel was beginning to feel towards Gandhi and his ideas, he was still not ready to surrender every aspect of the life, including his fondness for good food, which he had so painstakingly built for himself. Even though he started to follow Gandhi, Patel refused the offer to stay at

the Mahatma's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, 'frankly telling Gandhiji that he could not accede to his wishes [of staying at the ashram] as he was not in agreement with conditions prescribed by Gandhiji for living at the Ashram.'¹⁵

Gandhi insisted on eleven pledges or vows from the residents in his ashram. He expected them to renounce untouchability or caste discrimination, respect all religions, eat only what one laboured for, remain chaste, never steal, follow the path of non-violence, not form attachments to possessions, be fearless, be completely committed to the truth, 'control the palate' and adopt swadeshi or use only India-made things. It is unclear which of these vows Patel found most difficult to accept but he certainly refused to stay at the ashram.

However, what he did instead was far more valuable. After Champaran, Gandhi's public profile had been transformed. One day he was trying to teach farmers about everything from health and sanitation to basic schooling, the next he was responding to attacks on him for being partial to the idea of cow protection as a Hindu by arguing that 'the Christians and Muslims living in India, including the British, have one day to give up beef', and the Hindus would have to realize 'the folly, the stupidity and the inhumanity of the crime of killing a fellow human being for the sake of saving a fellow animal.'

¹⁶

When Annie Besant, who had started the Home Rule League with Tilak demanding self-government along the lines of the Irish Home Rule movement, was arrested and confined in a hill station, Gandhi wrote fervently against her confinement and worked on building a public petition to set Besant free. One of the people who worked to spread the petition was Patel.¹⁷ Besant was freed in the autumn of 1917.

Meanwhile a project that would engage Gandhi and Patel's new partnership had already mushroomed: in Kheda, Gujarat.

The Kheda satyagraha, like the Champaran movement, is really the story of how Gandhi paved the way for the national movement for freedom to reach even the smallest alcoves of the country, right down to its villages. Gandhi and Patel travelled to ask the question: How does one spread a

revolution? What must one do? Stop people on the streets and tell them about it? Write letters? Rage over megaphones? How does one take the dreams of the great debating shops of Delhi and Bombay and Ahmedabad and make villagers take full ownership of these ideas?

In a sense these two London-trained barristers were venturing out to rediscover their own country, to change it. But before they could do so, a lot about them had to change as well. In Gandhi, Patel saw an example of how, when faced with injustice, a man could alter his very self. Everything from Gandhi's clothing to his mode of transport had altered beyond recognition from his early days as a barrister. His journey to self-realization had been triggered after being thrown out of a first-class train compartment meant only for Whites at Pietermaritzburg in South Africa. In South Africa, he was adamant that if he had a first-class ticket, he would travel first class; in India, he turned travelling in third-class compartments into a philosophy, even writing an essay on it titled 'Third Class in Indian Railways'. He wrote:

Having resorted to third class travelling, among other reasons, for the purpose of studying the conditions under which this class of passenger travels, I have naturally made as critical observations as I could. But I think that the time has come when I should invite the press and the public to join in a crusade against a grievance which has too long remained unredressed, though much of it is capable of redress without great difficulty.¹⁸

He further observed:

The compartment itself was evil looking. Dirt was lying thick upon the wood and I do not know that it had ever seen soap or water . . . At the Imperial Capital [one assumes Gandhi means Delhi] a certain third-class booking office is a Black-Hole fit only to be destroyed. Is it any wonder that plague has become endemic in India?¹⁹

Sardar Patel stuck largely to second class, as his daughter Maniben has informed us:

The Sardar travelled second-class by railway before he became a Minister. I would spread his bedding at night and retire to a third-class compartment. But from 1934, when there was much correspondence to attend to even on train journeys and people came to see him at stations, I kept company with him in his second-class compartment.²⁰

Although he maintained his train travel preferences, Patel's clothing had completely altered.

When Gandhiji started the swadeshi movement and burning of foreign clothes, the Sardar burnt all his European clothes, socks and hats. He never wore any type of headgear, even a khadi cap, after he cast aside his black Banglori cap. From then, he always wore dhoti and kurta and a chaddar on his shoulder, adding only a warm jacket in winter.²¹

The khadi cap, worn at a slightly jaunty angle, was of course a particular favourite of Nehru's.

Patel, when he started to follow Gandhi, and in a sense till the very end, tried his best to retain a sense of independent thought and inquiry even as one of Gandhi's most loyal—if not, the most loyal—supporters.

For Patel, Gandhi embodied the same sort of transitions, to and fro, that he himself was struggling with. From small-town Porbandar, Gandhi had managed to sound the clarion call of justice in distant South Africa, and now he was challenging himself: could he give voice to millions of his countrymen in far-flung villages with little apparent understanding of ideas like 'a nation' in their struggle for independence? What did independence mean in an Indian village? What could it?

Patel understood the village only too well, but his journey had been to escape that identity and carve for himself a new persona. He would have to revisit all that he had ostensibly left behind.

When rains flooded Kheda district in 1917, it gave both men an opportunity to test their determination. The issue was straightforward: the floods had destroyed the kharif crop and the rabi crop had been ruined by a pestilential attack of rats and other miscreants. The government rules were clear:

If the crop is considered to be less than 37½ per cent but more than 25 per cent, the cultivators are allowed to pay half their land revenues assessment a year later; if the out-turn (crop assessment) is estimated at less than 25 per cent, the collection of the entire assessment is postponed. If the crops fail in the following year, the portion of the land revenue, postponed in the previous year, is remitted altogether.²²

When word reached Gandhi, he urged that the revenue collection be postponed (not waived off) and gathered signatures from 18,000 peasants²³ to petition the government in November 1917.

But the government refused to relent. This was a matter of land revenue, and for the British administration, as it had been for the Mughals before them, land revenue was everything.

Obsessed by notions of prestige, they felt that whatever they decided in the matter of land revenue must be accepted as final. In a sense, therefore, the point in dispute was, who were the real well-wishers of the agriculturists? The contention of the Government officers was that agriculturists were complaining only because they had been instigated and their emotions worked upon by agitators. So if the Government accepted the demands of the agriculturists 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.²⁴

But it was a matter of prestige not only for Gandhi but also the man who would be instrumental in ensuring the success of the protest: Vallabhbhai Patel.

Why?

Before we answer that question, it is important to put the Kheda satyagraha in context. As we have noted early in this book, Patel was a Patidar, that is, he belonged to the same community that came together for this protest.

In fact, he understood much better than Gandhi the terrain where the protest was to unfold. What had been happening in these lands?

During the Great Famine of 1899-1900 and the years of plague and drought which immediately followed, the population of Gujarat endured its greatest test since the advent of British rule. In the eighteenth century there had been a severe famine roughly every seventeen years on average, and that extending over 1812 and 1813 was severe enough to have lingered in public memory . . . but after 1836 there had hardly been a single year of scarcity until the ‘Chappan’ [according to the Hindu calendar 1856 or 1899 AD] famine sixty years later.²⁵

The 1899 famine brought down Kheda district’s population from around 10 lakh to 7 lakh by 1901.²⁶

It had taken the area till about 1917 to really recover, and writing in that year an assistant settlement officer in Kheda observed:

Having met and talked to many persons who went through the famine of 1900, and having myself seen the scarcity years of 1911-12 and 1915-16, I am greatly impressed with the progressive ability of the people to cope with famine conditions [...] they have made a wonderful recovery.²⁷

The floods came just as Kheda got back on its feet.

By December 1917, Patel and Gokuldas Parekh were touring the flood-affected region to understand the extent of the crisis. Patel arrived in Kheda several weeks before Gandhi with the Mahatma merely advising from Champaran that ‘the workers observe the greatest restraint, to use courteous language in their discussions and speeches and, above all, to adhere strictly to facts’.²⁸

But all initial attempts at a negotiated settlement failed—including Gandhi’s suggestion that an independent inquiry commission be set up. By February 1918, Gandhi and his trusted lieutenant Patel were in Kheda making a detailed location-by-location assessment of the damage due to the floods. The Mahatma even made an offer of final compromise to the government: ‘If you are able to postpone the land revenue recovery work until my inquiry is completed, it will help a great deal in reducing the discontent that has now spread among the people.’²⁹

This too was rejected.

Gandhi was determined to conduct his inquiry but he had a demand of the Gujarat Sabha—someone from the Sabha would have to devote himself full-time to this project.

Patel stood up. There was no doubt about his criticality to the mission. He was a native. He knew the landscape and the people. He spoke their language. These were not negligible factors, especially since research on the Kheda satyagraha has shown that a complex, indeed bewildering, set of factors led to the protest. It wasn’t that the farmers were absolutely impoverished—in fact, as has been mentioned previously, the floods came at a time when the region was back on its feet. Also,

[A]s soon as the no-rent campaign was called off in June 1918, the Patidars, helped by a successful Rabi crop, had no difficulty at all in paying their dues [...] Why did the rising Koli cultivators, who were worse hit by the great famine and the bad seasons which sporadically followed, not also refuse to pay government revenue demands? The cohesiveness and militancy shown by the Patidars at such times suggests that much more lay behind rural protest than could ever be explained by straightforward ‘economism’.³⁰

It needed a strongman from the Patidars’ own caste to trigger and then hold together a revolt led by them against the British. It needed someone inspirational like Patel who not only brought the whiff of power with him from the big city but also knew how to speak the language of the village:

Remember that a potter puts about a maund³¹ of things on his donkey. If it is able to carry it, he increases the load to two maunds. Similarly as you carry the load, the government goes on adding to it. Throw away the load which you have been carrying so far and do not be afraid.³²

It was only Patel, because he was one of them, who could express his explicit annoyance when he found farmers from his own village vacillating about joining the satyagraha.

When I see the condition of this village today, I am taken back to 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 and I see you frightened of 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?³³

Patel also had a reputation for standing up to the British from his work in the Ahmedabad municipality. In fact, he had even confronted the prime antagonist from the British side in the Kheda struggle, Commissioner Frederick Greville Pratt, at the municipality.

Without Gandhi, Kheda would not be a satyagraha, but without Patel, there may not have been a resistance movement at all. Gandhi himself later acknowledged, ‘The more I came to know him, the more I realized that I must secure his help.’³⁴ It was the perfect partnership with the moral imperative provided by Gandhi and action on the ground coordinated and

delivered successfully by Patel. This blueprint of coordinated action would last the lifetimes of both men.

After the assessment, Gandhi, Patel and the farmers sent in a petition: the poorest farmers (those paying less than Rs 30 as revenue) should be relieved from paying, and for the rest the collection of land revenue should be postponed by one year. The government relented just a little and exempted the collection of Rs 1.75 lakh out of a total of Rs 23 lakh; the collection for the remaining amount continued relentlessly using *talatis* or village revenue officers.

A Muslim farmer reported that [. . .] two days the people had been unable even to eat their food. The talati used language of the foulest kind, and the presence of women did not deter him from using grossly abusive terms. He asked them to pay up their assessment, even if in order to do so, they had to sell their homes, their jewels, their land, their cattle and even their wives and children.³⁵

The satyagraha began on 22 March 2018. ‘The people are fighting for a principle, while the officials are fighting for their prestige.’³⁶

On 27 March 2018, Patel told the farmers of the region not to pay taxes.

I have neither given wrong advice nor have I incited anybody in an unjustified way [. . .] I have given them only reasonable and right advice. I estimate the crop in my village to be a 25 per cent crop and, therefore, even in accordance with the normal rules, the people of my village are within their rights in not paying land revenue. I do not think that in doing so I am breaking any law or encouraging bad behaviour in any way. Nevertheless, if there is any breach of law, I am prepared to undergo the requisite punishment.³⁷

Then, in the sort of line that captures the essence of his dry and stoic wit, Patel said:

Nevertheless, since you have invited me to attend, I have come, and I am grateful to you. Whether you will make me still more grateful by sending me to jail is for you to decide.³⁸

The government tried to confiscate cattle, usually enough to scare farmers. When that failed they tried to capture land outright. That too failed. In response, Patel was seen telling people: ‘This fight will act as a spark which will set the whole country afire.’³⁹

Then, they sent in Pratt.

Pratt started by threatening to declare the Gujarat Sabha illegal⁴⁰ and then when that threat didn't seem to have the desired effect, he displayed the slyness that had allowed a few thousand Englishmen to rule a nation of millions of people. He asked Gandhi to facilitate his going and talking to the farmers. This, too, was coordinated by Patel.

Once in front of the protesters, Pratt threw in an emotional fig leaf by calling Gandhi by his Indian epithet 'Mahatma'. The crowd cheered.⁴¹ But Pratt's tone soon hardened.

The power to fix assessment is in the hands of the government [. . .] We are the final arbiters [. . .] It is not in the hands of Mr. Gandhi or Mr. Vallabhbhai. You may bear fully in mind that any amount of your effort in this matter is bound to be futile.⁴²

Throughout his speech, Pratt, who spoke fluent Gujarati, constantly veered between effusively praising Gandhi and clearly stating that the struggle of the farmers was futile.

Mr. Gandhi is a very good man, a very holy man and he gives you advice because he genuinely believes that it is in your interest. He thinks that by not paying up the land revenue assessment, you will be protecting the poor [. . .] But isn't the Government the protector of the poor? If you continue this fight against the Government it will be you who will have to bear the consequences and not these gentlemen [. . .] They will not suffer in any way. They are not the people who will go to jail. When a movement of this kind was started in Africa, Mahatma Gandhi went to jail. In this country he will not go to jail. Jail is not a fit place for him.⁴³

Pratt's speech is an underappreciated specimen of the duplicity that lay at the very core of the British Raj—the cloying display of affection that cloaked the steel of the exploitation, simultaneously embracing and rejecting the Indian opinion. In it, Pratt even dismisses Gandhi's experience and understanding of his place of birth.

I have 28 years of experience of land revenue law. Mahatma Gandhi is my friend. He came to this country from Africa only two or three years ago; he has spent the greater part of his life in Africa. He is well-versed in religion [. . .] but in political matters, in matters concerning land and land revenue assessment, he knows very little. I know far more about these matters [. . .] and I have only this to say that it is the duty of the agriculturists to pay

up their land revenue dues [. . .] If you will not pay your assessment, your land will be confiscated⁴⁴

This is where Pratt, who by now was convinced that he was swaying the crowd and destroying the foundations of resistance that had been laid and nurtured by Gandhi and Patel, made a mistake.

He took on Patel.

You will recollect what happened in Ahmedabad. There was a struggle recently between mill owners and the mill hands. The latter had taken oath that they would not go back to work until they got an increase of 35 per cent in their wages. But what happened in the end? When they realized that their pledge is not reasonable they could not adhere to it, they broke it and accepted an increase of 27½ per cent and resumed work. In the same way, I tell you that when you took this pledge, you made a mistake.⁴⁵

This gave Patel just the opening he needed.

But before we continue with the action between Patel and Pratt, let us take a small aside to understand the beginnings of the formation of Patel's economic mind. For this we are moving from Kheda to Ahmedabad, the second most important (Bombay being the largest) textile centre in India, where, in 1917, on the heels of a debilitating plague epidemic, tremendous friction is brewing between the textile mill owners and their workers.

Textiles, at that time, had become one of the most, if not the most, important business activities in the city. The first textile mill in Ahmedabad opened in 1861 and by 1900 the city had twenty-seven mills, the number of which rose to fifty-two by 1910.⁴⁶ It had not been easy to get this industry going. In fact, the first businessman who tried to start a textile mill in Ahmedabad had to wait for twelve long years to gather investment from the rich in the city. Ranchhodlal Chottalal had tried to set up a textile unit in 1847 with the help of some British technology which he would have imported from England had he managed to raise the money. But there was no one to give him money in Ahmedabad. In the meantime, three mills came up in neighbouring Bombay. Finally five moneybags ponied up the cash; among them was Hutesing Kesarisingh who also built Ahmedabad's exquisite Jain temple for a million dollars to provide jobs and

employment in the mid-nineteenth century during a terrible drought.⁴⁷ This local financing was an important distinction between the mills of Bombay and Ahmedabad: while the former mostly had mills where Indian owners inevitably had British partners, the latter's mill owners were entirely homegrown, and were 'financed by local capital and managed exclusively by Indians'.⁴⁸ It gave the city a novel industrial texture and climate quite different from Bombay's and would one day endow upon it the sobriquet the 'Manchester of India'.

Along with the mills, the number of people working for them in Ahmedabad also grew rapidly—in the first half of the twentieth century the number of mill workers grew from 16,000 to 1.3 lakh.⁴⁹ This didn't necessarily make the city any better. 'In 1916 the mortality rate of the city population was still 39.22 per thousand or double that of Surat. To the existing mud were now added smoke and soot.'⁵⁰ The city's fortunes changed with the end of the First World War: 'before the war, Ahmedabad was an unknown, parochial place lightly ruled by the British [but after the war it became] a financial and political base for the Indian National Congress and a leader and prototype of New India'.⁵¹ The First World War also transformed the face of the textile businesses of Ahmedabad. 'The war converted the mills and their agents into powerful industrialists. Still, in keeping with traditional policy [of saving rather than over-capitalisation], this success was achieved so quietly that even competent observers failed to notice that Ahmedabad was destined to play a very important role in the near future'.⁵² One man, however, caught on early: Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi could do no better than settle in a modern place that had preserved some ancient structure, so that from there he would travel and study what he later came to call the 'four sins [economic, political, social and cultural] of an Indian identity'.⁵³

When the plague came in the monsoon of 1917, mill owners offered workers bonuses of up to 70–80 per cent of their salary to stay on in Ahmedabad—instead of running away as any sensible person confronted with plague would do. When the disease receded, the bonus was withdrawn. But for mill workers earning a bare minimum salary taking money away

was unacceptable. The workers demanded a minimum of 50 per cent raise in their salary but were offered a 20 per cent raise instead. The threat of a lockout grew.⁵⁴

As 1918 rolled in, the dispute reached a flashpoint. By February, Gandhi was asked to intervene. There were two reasons for asking Gandhi to come in and his subsequent success in resolving the dispute:

[A]part from the great pressure he could bring through his prestige [. . .] Ahmedabad's business leaders seem never to have forgotten that Gandhi was by caste a bania [trader caste] like themselves. During negotiations with Gandhi who was representing the labour union, the president of the Millowners Association remarked that he and Gandhi could find a compromise since both were banias.⁵⁵

This conflict led to Gandhi declaring that he would fast—neither eating food nor using a car—until the mill owners and workers came to a negotiated settlement.⁵⁶ The talks settled at around a 35 per cent pay hike. The mill owners told Gandhi that they would do whatever it took to break his fast but Gandhi was resolute: it had to be a genuine compromise which worked for both sides. He said, ‘You must not give anything for my sake; do so out of the respect for the pledge of the labourers, and in order to do justice.’⁵⁷ By this time popular opinion was also starting to swing towards Gandhi who had emerged as a national leader.⁵⁸

Finally, an arbitrator was appointed and the mill workers agreed to accept a 27.5 per cent rise in wages and await the arbitrator’s decision on a higher final settlement. This movement also paved the way, partly due to sympathies among many mill owners for Gandhi’s cause of ‘maintaining harmony between capital and labour’,⁵⁹ for the creation of the Textile Labour Association or Majoor Mahajan Sangh in 1920. This was also one of the starting points of Gandhi and Patel’s relationship with capitalists and labour, and their being the interface between the two. As we will see later in this book, both Gandhi and Patel had a far more accommodating and tolerant attitude towards Indian businesses and businessmen compared to other prominent leaders like Bose or Nehru. (Nehru also subscribed to the Marxist idea that capitalism is in a sense a stepping stone towards fascism,

and considered business as inherently exploitative and reactionary; it certainly didn't help matters that the British had entered India through what became one of the world's first multinational corporations, the East India Company). Gandhi's Theory of Trusteeship where he imagined evolved business leaders holding their wealth 'in trust' for the benefit of society and not consuming more than their needs was considered utopian and a cop out by many Congress socialists. But Indian industrialists had supported the Congress with funds and in kind for years, and the mass growth of the Congress had come with the financial assistance of the homegrown business community.

While Gandhi couched his support for indigenous businesses and industrialists in lofty rhetoric, Patel was far more direct and clear that having taken consistent assistance from industrialists through the freedom struggle, it was the job of the Congress to ensure that the Indian business community thrived after Independence, which he believed would naturally bring the added and much-needed benefits of jobs and wealth creation in an impoverished country. G.D. Birla, one of the industrialists both Patel and Gandhi had close association with, said about Patel:

Sardar Patel was not a revolutionary. He was essentially a man of constructive ideas. Many a time he utilized my help and money. I would get a telegram, sometimes just two words—'Come immediately'—and when I arrived he would tell me what I had to do. Inevitably the question of collection [of money] would come up. Once I told Patel what Gandhi said to me, 'I do not like the Sardar collecting money from businessmen.' His reply was characteristic: 'This is not his concern. Gandhi is a Mahatma, I am not. I have to do the job.'⁶⁰

It was Sardar Patel who perhaps first realized, long before Sarojini Naidu would joke about it, that it cost a fortune to keep Gandhi in poverty.⁶¹ As Patel's biographer D.V. Tahmankar wrote, 'It is claimed, not without reason, that Mahatma Gandhi's triumph over the British Raj was due very largely to Patel's extraordinary powers of organization'⁶²—powers that included the ability to raise vast sums of money needed for the freedom movement.

Lest it seem that this relationship between the Birlas and Gandhi was always friendly, it must be pointed out here that although Gandhi was staying in Birla's mansion in Delhi when he was assassinated in 1948, and Nehru requested the Birla family to donate the property to the government for a memorial to Gandhi, it was not until 1971 after many rounds of protracted financial negotiation, according to Gandhi's great-grandson Tushar, that the Indian government was able to buy the property off the Birla family. K.K. Birla, the Birla scion, Tushar Gandhi has written, sold the house for Rs 5.4 million and 7 acres of prime real estate within Delhi, 'while deciding the sale price of the family mansion, he even calculated the value of the fruit bearing trees and all the saplings that had been planted'.⁶³ In 2002, Tushar Gandhi himself tried to sell the rights to use an image of Gandhi to an American credit card company but withdrew after public uproar.⁶⁴

As early as 1923, the Majoor Mahajan Sangh failed to prevent a crippling conflict and keep mill owners from stopping the yearly bonus. 'After 1923, the TLA [Mahajan] concentrated on social welfare activities for the workers. While the workers supported the nationalist movement, the industrialists [at least sometimes] wavered.'⁶⁵

In our story, we now return to Kheda district where Patel has been given the opportunity he had been looking for. Even though Pratt had not referred to his old adversary at all through his speech, the barrister now jumped into the fray. Patel said:

I was one of those who intervened in that dispute. It is not correct to say that the mill-workers were forced to break their pledge. On the first day of resumption of work the workers received an increase of 35 per cent; thereafter they accepted an increase of 27½ per cent on the understanding that when the arbitrators declared their award, whatever adjustment was necessary to be made in their wages to make it accord with the award will be made in due course. When this settlement was reached, our Commissioner [Pratt] was also present. He has great regard for Gandhiji and Gandhiji too has great regard for him; so have I. In that meeting the Commissioner told the workers: 'Gandhiji will give you right advice. If you follow it, you will do well and get justice.' I am telling you the same that if in this matter too you follow the advice of Gandhiji, you will receive justice at the hands of this very Commissioner.⁶⁶

Note that ‘so have I’. It is a classic, fine Patel touch. It rubs in with delicacy and firmness the point that he wants to emphasize but without any acerbity.

His words had the desired effect. Villager after villager now started asking what can only be described as teasing questions to Pratt. One farmer even compared the honesty of his tribe to Raja Harishchandra, the king renowned for his exemplary truthfulness in Hindu mythology!⁶⁷

All this pushed Pratt to the brink. ‘I have finished,’ he declared sternly. ‘The final decision rests with you. To a sanyasi the loss of property may not matter at all. But you are not sanyasis!’⁶⁸

The dig was at Gandhi and his frugality. And the Mahatma was quite capable of responding in kind. He retorted:

He [Pratt] seems to regard the relationship between the Government and the people as similar to that between parents and children. If so, has anyone seen in the whole history of the world an instance of parents having turned their children out of their homes for having resisted them in a non-violent manner?⁶⁹

The dispute went on.

It had become clear to Patel that this struggle had reverberated far beyond Kheda, for a few days later he told farmers: ‘I would request you that whatever happens, you must stick to your decision. If you do it, the name of Kheda district would find an honourable mention in the history of India. The whole country is looking towards you.’⁷⁰

The government started to toughen its stance. Land was seized, as were animals, including milch cattle, and the ornaments of women. People, among them trusted lieutenants of Gandhi and Patel, were arrested. Entire villages turned up in court to see them being sentenced. Each time Gandhi travelled outside Gujarat, Patel took charge of the overall movement, and even when Gandhi was in Gujarat, it was Patel who led the organization of the movement on the ground from village to village and tehsil⁷¹ to tehsil. He told the farmers that this was ‘a bitter war [...] between the public and the blind administration’.⁷²

By June, the government had agreed to Gandhi’s terms: those who could pay would, but for everyone else, collection and confiscation would be

postponed. ‘Until today it was a matter of honour not to pay up the land revenue; now it will be a matter of honour to pay it up,’⁷³ said the statement issued by Gandhi and Patel.

Patel was enthused by the success of the satyagraha. Could it be that here at last was the tool for mass mobilization that he needed at that point?

For hundreds of years India has been suffering from a mortal disease. She had not so far been lucky to find a good doctor. The doctors who looked after her believed in prescribing sweet medicines. Now a sweet medicine cannot cure an incurable disease. Some people might find it strange that a person who has been fighting the government can give such advice. But let me remind you that the doctor who has arisen to cure your illness has nothing but the spirit of service of the people in his whole being. If you think that his medicine is the right one accept it.⁷⁴

The fight had come to an end but perhaps as a foretaste of things to come, it was a not a peaceable conclusion.

It was strange that neither the public nor the workers were informed of these orders. Indeed, for a whole month after this order was issued, the work of confiscation went on with full vigour. Gandhi and Patel said: ‘The fight has come to an end but we have to say regretfully that there is no grace in the manner of its conclusion. Postponement has been agreed upon, but not in a generous frame of mind [. . .] By their courage the agriculturists of Kheda have drawn towards them the attention of the whole country. For the past six months they have shown great loyalty to truth, fearlessness, unity, firmness and self-sacrifice. We hope that they will develop these great qualities still further and bring credit to their motherland. The public of Kheda have rendered great service to themselves, to the struggle for independence.’⁷⁵

From their words it will be apparent that both Gandhi and Patel understood that Kheda, for all the British intransigence, had changed something. Coming as it did right after Champaran, it had proved to the people, in cities, and more crucially in villages, that the movement for freedom against British rule was not an aberration. There could, actually, be a process, a system through which the real injustices of the British Raj could be countered, resisted and forced to change.

Any resistance is primarily a leap of the imagination, and no one understood this better than Gandhi. If people can be taught to imagine freedom, they can acquire it. But for people to acquire this imagination of

liberty there must be a sense of inherent, unquestioning trust. At Kheda, Patel was able to inject, indeed extract, some of this trust from the villagers. ‘Kheda saw Gandhi as a saint and Vallabhbhai, the son of the soil, as a hero.’⁷⁶ When someone went to prison during the struggle, and then was released, Gandhi and Patel would walk miles to go and receive them outside the prison.⁷⁷

Why had Patel chosen to follow Gandhi? Some have argued that it was because he sought a guru ‘in the Hindu tradition’.⁷⁸ Be that as it may, what is undeniable is that in Gandhi, Patel found someone who could reach out to the masses in a way that most people keen on fighting the British at that time could not. Although, spurred on by his deeply pronounced sense of justice and his inability to tolerate injustice, Patel had already started the fight against the exploitations of the British Raj, it was Champaran that showed him what Gandhi was capable of, and the way forward. There is little doubt that he was personally moved by Gandhi’s piety, consistently pitching the older man as a bit of an ascetic with a higher sense of moral and ethical values.

Gandhi too had a clear-sighted opinion of Patel’s use. When it was all over, Gandhi said of Patel:

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 Vallabhbhai. I must admit that when I met Vallabhbhai 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 not for his assistance, I must admit that this campaign would not have been carried through so successfully.⁷⁹

But the site of their first great success also gave the two men their first failure. Gandhi had promised the British government that he would recruit Indian soldiers from among the peasants for the First World War effort. Some believed this was an inherent contradiction to the principle of non-violence or ahimsa that Gandhi so powerfully propagated. To which the Mahatma responded that non-violence was not cowardice and only a warrior (Kheda’s peasants prided themselves in having warrior ancestry) can attain the true state of ahimsa.

During this process of trying to recruit villagers, Gandhi was asked again and again: How could the messiah of non-violence ask people to join the military? Pushed, Gandhi even published a leaflet where he argued:

[A]mong the many wrongs that the British Government has done to India, the blackest is the law by which the whole population was disarmed. If you want to have this law repealed and want to learn the use of arms, this is a golden opportunity. If at a time when the Empire is in difficulty the educated and the middle class assist the Government voluntarily, the Government will naturally lose its distrust of them and it may be possible in future for anyone who wishes to bear arms to do so.⁸⁰

Gandhian non-violence is today oversimplified into a cliché—sometimes it becomes an excuse for lethargy and cowardice. Gandhi himself had a nuanced, even contradictory, journey in understanding and preaching the lesson of non-violence, and it was, as we shall see; perhaps Patel who most effectively comprehended the idea of Gandhian non-violence: only the well-armed and the brave can truly apply the lesson of ahimsa.

Patel was never entirely convinced about unqualified non-violence. He was more enthused by Gandhi's idea that this was an opportunity for the peasants to get some military training—and if a time came when they needed to use that training at home, these trained men would fight the British in India. Jinnah refused to join in the recruitment campaign.

But the Kheda villagers weren't buying all that. They hated the Raj, and they had seen an even uglier face of the British in the struggle to reduce and defer taxes after the floods. It didn't matter that a saint and a Patidar were pitching military service to them—they didn't want it.

In the end, the duo was able to gather together barely 100 recruits, but there was no training centre in Gujarat. The government suggested that the men be sent to a different training centre in another province but Gandhi was insistent that a new centre had to be set up in Gujarat so that 'if the public saw prominent men of the Province learning drill, marching, shooting etc., they would be encouraged to join, and by the time the first platoon was trained and ready to leave many more people would join'.⁸¹ While these deliberations were going on, Gandhi fell seriously ill, and was

bedridden for nearly two months during which the First World War came to an end.

It must be recalled here that Gandhi had created the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps in South Africa to serve in the Second Boer War. His logic had been, as it was in India, that if Indians wanted parity in respect and treatment from the British, they would have to do their fair share of service. Using funds of the Indian community in South Africa, Gandhi had raised a force of 300 ‘free’ Indians and around 800 indentured labourers for his Corps that ferried the injured in the Battle of Spion Kop in 1900. ‘The Indians served without pay, and would march up to twenty-five miles every day, bearing the British Empire’s wounded on stretchers back to their camps.’ For his labours, Gandhi won not only the Queen’s South Africa Medal but also, in 1915, the year he landed in India, the Kaiser-i-Hind (Emperor of India) medal which was pinned on to him by Rabindranath Tagore who had been knighted, which meant he was now Sir Tagore, the same year. Both would return their respective honours within the next five years.

Gandhi may have thought that raising forces for the British in the war would grant him the leeway to demand the freedom that he desired. But his countrymen, impoverished peasants many of them, had other ideas. They had, it seemed, a more independent mind than their leaders, even Gandhi, sometimes imagined.

It was a lesson that Patel learnt more intrinsically than even Gandhi—the art of listening to what the people really wanted, above idealism, above piety, and above politics. Never again would he get carried away by mere rhetoric. Not even Gandhi’s.



THREE

‘IS THERE LESS RISK IN DOING NOTHING?’

It was barely thirty years old but, by the end of 1918, there was already a rift within the Congress. This was nothing new. Even as early as 1907, the party had split into two quarrelling camps—the moderates and the extremists.

The issue was the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms. Designed to grant more autonomy to India, these reforms were drafted by Edwin Montagu, a former secretary of state for India, and Lord Chelmsford. They were not a dull pair. Montagu, who was later suspected to be homosexual, was mentor to John Maynard Keynes, the sometimes gay, sometimes not, rising star of an economist (who kept detailed notes of his own sexual encounters). Frederic Thesiger, the first Viscount Chelmsford, was a Freemason. The series of self-rule governance reforms proposed by Montagu and Chelmsford formed, in 1919, the Government of India Act.

Within the Congress, the moderates led by Tej Bahadur Sapru, V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and M.R. Jayakar were in favour of accepting the recommendations, but a much larger group, the nationalists, argued that the reforms didn’t go quite far enough. The most vocal among them was the reputed Bengali lawyer Chittaranjan Das, popularly known as Deshbandhu (‘Friend of the Nation’) C.R. Das.

Barrister Das in a sense outdid Motilal Nehru in grandeur. He was known to send his clothes to Paris for washing and maintained a regular laundry in that city. Both men gave up their luxuries when they joined the freedom movement, though Motilal kept up one treat—a nightcap of excellent whisky. Das was joined in the criticism of the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms by the fierce Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

As various factions of the Congress quarrelled, the opportunity for Gandhian satyagraha emerged again with the Rowlatt Act, 1919. The bills, aimed at punishing sedition, find echo even today in the sedition laws of modern India. The laws proposed in 1919 recommended ‘arrests without trial or trials without appeal and proposed a two-year sentence in prison for offences like carrying a seditious leaflet in one’s pocket’.¹

Gandhi spotted an opportunity, but his torturous asceticism was already taking a toll. He had been bedridden, operated upon for nasty boils, and severe dysentery had broken his body. ‘I was reduced to a skeleton,’² he wrote. He was only fifty years old but had led a torturous life of physical deprivation and austerity combined with incessant travel. Not least to find volunteers for the British war effort throughout Gujarat. Now the government he had been showing loyalty to was returning the favour—by strengthening sedition laws. This could not be tolerated.

So Gandhi called the one man he trusted—Vallabhbhai Patel. Shaking with rage at the Rowlatt bills, he told Patel that his satyagraha would never happen without Patel’s aid. Still unable to leave his bed, the Mahatma swore civil disobedience, and the first person to commit to his programme was Patel. Even if a handful of people would swear allegiance to the path of resistance, Gandhi told Patel, there would be disobedience, there would be satyagraha. Among the others who signed the pledge were Sarojini Naidu, the feisty poetess whose daughter Padmaja would become Nehru’s lover after the death of his wife, Kamala; two prominent wealthy merchants, one Hindu, Shankerlal Bunker, and one Muslim, Umar Sobani; and the Irish editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, B.G. Horniman (the man who would later tell the world about the horrific mass murder at Jallianwala Bagh and whose name is now on Mumbai’s Horniman Circle). Gandhi had entrusted Patel

with ensuring that the right kind of people gathered to take the vow of civil disobedience—and Patel delivered. Together they vowed, ‘[W]e shall refuse civilly to obey these laws and such other laws as a committee to be hereafter appointed may think fit and we further affirm that in this struggle we will faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence to life, person and property.’³

This was a turning point in India’s struggle for freedom. It was an open declaration—without any caveat of overarching loyalty or a demand for justice within the framework of the British Raj. Gandhi described the pledge as ‘the most momentous in the history of India’.⁴ ‘I give my assurance that it has not been hastily taken. Personally I have passed many a sleepless night over it,’ wrote Gandhi.⁵

It could have been the year when British concession and the frailty of Gandhi (and indeed, the Congress’s accommodative stance) could have brought a conciliatory mood to the national movement and a gradual process of freedom. Instead, a bedridden Gandhi transformed the tone and tenor of the independence movement—the protest would no longer be about local injustices or topical prejudice but against the sheer presence of the Raj itself. No longer would the flames be contained locally—from this point on every voice of dissent would, in a sense, echo across the land.

What followed transformed not just the freedom fighters but also the British attitude towards the freedom struggle—no longer was it just an overactive debating club with some success in local confrontation. It was recognized as something far more potent, and with the potential of not just non-violent agitation but real violence.

The Governor of Bombay, Sir Llyod George, said to a British journalist: ‘Just a thin spindley shrimp of a fellow he was, but he swayed 320 million people and held them at his beck and call. He did not care for material things, and preached nothing but the ideals and morals of India. You can’t govern a country with ideals. Still, that was where he got his grip upon the people. He was their God. India must always have its God [. . .] He gave us a scare. His programmes filled our gaols. You can’t go on arresting people for ever, you know, not when there are 320 million of them.’⁶

The British got it wrong partly because they thought they had been here before—and knew how to play this game. Before an earlier set of so-called governance reforms, the Minto–Morley Reforms of 1909 which allowed the election of Indians to legislative councils, ‘the Government passed with indecent haste the Seditious Meetings Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act [the first in less than four hours!] which enabled the authorities to send hundreds of political workers to prison, and to curtail severely freedom of speech’.⁷ This was when Tilak had been sent to jail, in near solitary confinement, in Burma for six years, and ‘when the new India Act was introduced in 1910 there were 1,900 political workers in prison’.⁸

But 1919 was different. The dour and conservative viceroy of India Lord Chelmsford could not grasp the power of Gandhi’s message. He also failed to comprehend that the First World War had shattered the myth of British superiority and invincibility. ‘It changed the entire pattern of political agitation and focused [the] attention of the civilized world on what was happening in India’,⁹ and the pledge that a small bunch of people signed at Sabarmati Ashram echoed from hamlet to hamlet and town to town. Years of groundwork by powerful activists like Tilak and Besant had prepared the soil for a mass movement. Tilak’s slogan ‘Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it!’ had captured the imagination of the people.

Far from 1919 being the year in which India’s freedom movement was quelled by the gentle concessions of the British Parliament, it marked the start of serious agitation. The outspoken tactics of Gandhi appealed to an entirely fresh audience, and the Congress was now transformed from the club of India’s civilized elite into a populist political organization. It gained the financial backing of Marwari and Gujarati bania merchants and industrialists, and Gandhi set up an efficient central organization to run it.¹⁰

There was only one man who could set up this command and control centre for Gandhi, and then run it effectively: Vallabhbhai Patel. One by one, many others joined hands with Gandhi but there is little doubt that not only was Patel the first, he was also in many ways the hub that held all the disparate spokes together.

By March, Patel was telling the traders of Ahmedabad to rise against the Rowlatt bills. Patel pitched the bills—coming as they did right after the

First World War when millions of rupees had been raised in India for the war effort—as a betrayal. What India had hoped for, Patel told his audience, was a more empathetic consideration of its demands but what it got instead infuriated and hurt the country—this was no just return for services rendered. ‘Such laws as the Rowlatt Act are not found in any other country.’¹¹

On 6 April 1919, many across the country fasted with Gandhi. A couple of days later, while he criss-crossed the country by train, Gandhi was arrested. Patel was immediately wired. As word spread, protests and demonstrations turned into riots.¹²

In Ahmedabad, crowds burnt police stations, government offices and even the collector’s office; among those who died was an English sergeant. In Amritsar, after two local leaders, Satya Pal and Saifuddin Kitchlew, were arrested, mobs killed at least five Englishmen.

Patel was once again on the front lines in his city. And as he had done when plague swept through the town, he and some of his aides went from one part of Ahmedabad to another trying to calm the crowds.

When Gandhi finally arrived at his own ashram, he was too weak to address the more than 2000 people gathered there. It fell upon Patel to deliver Gandhi’s words:

Brothers, I am ashamed of the events of the last few days. Those responsible have disgraced me. In the name of Satyagraha, we burnt down buildings, forcibly captured weapons, extorted money, stopped trains, cut off telegraph wires, killed innocent people, and plundered shops and homes [...] If a redress of grievances is only possible by means of ill-will for, and slaughter of, Englishmen, I for one would do without Swaraj and without redress.¹³

Gandhi and Patel struggled to douse the flames they had ignited but the explosion was about to happen somewhere else.

It was Baisakhi Day. On this day in 1699, the tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, had created the Khalsa, the warrior tribe of the Sikhs, merging the martial history of the people with religion to create a new identity.

In 1919, in the town of Amritsar, people gathered for festivities at a small square called Jallianwala Bagh. Most of them had no idea there was a

curfew in the city, and many had come from the outskirts to join in the celebrations, and for a peaceful demonstration. The ban on assembly had been communicated intermittently at best, and sometimes in English.

But none of this stopped General Reginald Dyer, who had arrived to take control and calm Amritsar down, from ordering his troops to fire on an unarmed crowd without warning and preventing people from fleeing from the square by blocking the only exit. The hundred rifles fired for about ten minutes; the men were instructed to aim low so that not one bullet would miss its target in the 5000-strong crowd. Official estimates said that 379 had died, and 1200, at the very least, were injured.

As soon as the news reached Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore returned his knighthood. Another ‘Sir’, Sankaran Nair, resigned from the viceroy’s executive council, and ‘Gandhi’s meteoric rise to unrivalled leadership received a powerful impetus’.¹⁴

It also propelled Patel to the position of Gandhi’s most important deputy, and brought another man to Amritsar, and closer to his father’s politics than ever: Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru travelled to Amritsar to make extensive notes for his father on the situation and happened to share a railway coach with Dyer and his men who were returning after deposing before the Hunter Commission, which had been set up to investigate the massacre.¹⁵

[Dyer] pointed out how he had the whole town at his mercy and he had felt like reducing the rebellious city to a heap of ashes, but he took pity on it and refrained. He descended at Delhi station in pyjamas with bright pink stripes, and a dressing gown.¹⁶

More than 100 people died and more than 7000 were imprisoned in the protests against the Rowlatt Act which, as it so happens, was never implemented. But the protests also brought two men who would change the destiny of India face-to-face within the Congress: Patel and Nehru.

That year, at the Congress session, the shamiana was placed very close to Jallianwala Bagh, so that the delegates could not, even if they wanted to, forget the shots that had been fired on innocent men, women and children,

or that, as Patel would later write, the grounds nearby had ‘only a little earlier been drenched with blood’.¹⁷

At Gandhi’s insistence, the Amritsar session of the Congress would adopt a moderate stance. This meant that the Congress resolution not only attacked Dyer’s butchery but also criticized the agitated crowds. This criticism of the crowds was sternly opposed by many Congress stalwarts, including Pal and Das. But that was not to be the end of the story. As the Gujarati littérateur, lawyer and activist K.M. Munshi, one of those protesting the coupling of Dyer with angered Indian crowds, wrote:

We went home happy but the next morning it came to be talked about that Gandhiji had spent a sleepless night because the latter part of the resolution was lost. Some of the great leaders grew sarcastic over the reported vigil. They had an uneasy feeling. I had no doubt that this saint, with his fasts and vigils, was scarcely safe company.¹⁸

In 1919 at Amritsar, Gandhi ‘spoke as if his whole life depended upon the question. For the best part of an hour, he kept us spell-bound. The magic influence of his words and his presence swept us off our feet. When he stopped, we were at his feet’.¹⁹

Gandhi had won the day. The resolution was passed as he had wanted. Every word as he had willed. He was now the ‘unquestioned master’²⁰ of the Congress.

Thus began the split in the Congress that would lead to the exit of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Munshi and others, the emergence of a new leadership under the undisputed control of Gandhi and the end of a united Hindu–Muslim front against the British. Ironically, the final split would come through the idea of a mass movement to protect Muslim rights—not in India but in Turkey.

In the First World War, Turkey had fought on the side of Germany. When the war ended, a British plan to end the control of the Turkish Ottoman sultan over Islam’s holiest sites Mecca and Medina emerged. Indian Muslims had participated on the side of the British in the war under the assumption—fuelled by a statement by British Prime Minister Lloyd George—that the control of the Khalifa, or the sultan, as the supreme ruler

of the holy sites would not be challenged. But after the war a new state, Saudi Arabia—with a king favourably disposed towards the British, Faisal—became the owner of Mecca and Medina.

For many Indian Muslims in 1920 this was sacrilege.²¹

Gandhi entered these troubled waters on the side of the Muslims, supporting the demand for the Caliphate to be in control of the holy sites. He said he considered the decision of the British government to be a ‘betrayal’.²²

As this issue threatened to boil over, the Hunter Commission’s report came out. It concluded that Dyer had been, at best, guilty of ‘an error of judgement’²³. In London, the House of Lords cheered the decision. A British campaign to assist Dyer raised 20,000 pounds and gave him a sword of honour.

The time for non-cooperation was nigh.

As always before Gandhi made the grand announcement, Patel was busy drumming up support. On 11 July 1920, the executive council of the Gujarat Political Conference met at Nadiad and, urged by Patel, passed a resolution supporting non-cooperation.²⁴

On 1 August 1920, Gandhi cut his umbilical cord with the empire—returning his Kaiser-i-Hind medal, the Zulu War medal and the Boer War medal. With this, he had returned every honour he had received for cooperating with the British Empire and fighting to become a loyal subject. From then on, it would be an antagonistic relationship.

By the end of the month, Patel was back in Gujarat, speaking in Ahmedabad about the importance of non-cooperation. It is important to note that even in August, when the movement had just been announced, Patel hinted that this was a breaking point within the Congress and called it ‘directly opposed to the policy which has been followed hitherto’.²⁵

Reading this speech today is to listen to one of Patel’s great defences of Gandhi at a time when he, and indeed Gandhi himself, would have known that they would face serious opposition within the Congress. It is also one of the early distinct examples of the pains Patel took to explain, defend and win people over to Gandhi’s point of view.

In 1914 when the First World War began, it was said that England had been forced to enter the war for the preservation of the independence of smaller states and also in the name of truth and justice. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers went from India to fight in the battlefields of Europe, Africa and Asia [. . .] But what did we get in return for this when the war was over? We were given the Rowlatt Act which deprived us of freedom of action. When the people protested against such a tyrannical piece of legislation, the government decided upon a policy of suppressing all resistance by force.²⁶

He provided a spirited explanation of the mass violence that had occurred.

Smacking under a sense of injustice, a section of our people in a fit of temporary insanity committed atrocities. We cannot defend these mad acts of our people. When innocent people are murdered, when government buildings are burnt, when women are attacked, it is only to be expected that the government would react strongly and act without moderation in taking effective and deterrent action. But government officers exceeded all bounds of reasonableness, and the government passed a law to exonerate those officers [. . .] finally, it appointed a committee ostensibly to investigate the happenings in Jallianwala Bagh and Lahore, but actually, as has turned out, to hush up everything.²⁷

Patel went on to fire a few barbs at those who he said had always had complete and unwavering belief in the British government and its justice system:

There are people in this country who have greater faith in British justice than even in the existence of God. But these discussions in the British Parliament have opened the eyes of even such people. [. . .] Our condition today is what it is because of the blind faith we have had in British justice [. . .] Can we easily forget this attempt to dishonour India? The coming generation have a claim on us, who are their trustees; if we leave them only a heritage of insults and dishonour, of what use would all the wealth and all the comforts be that we may leave to them?²⁸

Patel knew there would be those sceptical of non-cooperation even among his Gujarati audience. So he reminded them that Tagore had given up his knighthood and ‘the person whom you regard as a prophet, worthy of the greatest respect, has surrendered his medals’.²⁹

He then took on any potential criticism of non-cooperation head-on.

Is there less risk in doing nothing? Has anyone ever for fear of possible risks given up great experiments which might, if successful, greatly benefit the people? If the British, empire builders that they are, had been afraid of the risks they ran, could they have survived for so long? When we see our people suffering injustices, what help do we

render if all we do is to emphasise the obstacles in the way and refrain from adopting any course of action, designed to save them from such injustices?³⁰

But for all of Patel's criticism of those who had blind faith in the British justice system, of course he would have known that his own guru, Gandhi, had been one of its greatest believers. That is perhaps why Patel returned to this theme at the end of his speech, directly targeting those who wanted to continue to work within the British system.

What difference will it make, if we merely replace some foreign officers by Indians? How are we likely to benefit by the appointment of an Indian as a Governor, instead of a Briton? There must be a radical change of outlook in the administration. The Government of India must be run for the people of India. What indeed do we stand to gain by entering the trap of the reforms, so long as the government is run in the interests of the foreigners, and only such concessions are granted to us as are acceptable to the British?³¹

Who are the people Patel was so vehemently referring to?

This became apparent on 2 October 1920 in a session presided over by Gandhi in Bombay. It is here that, under Gandhi's urging and wishes, the demand transformed from 'Swaraj means responsible government within the Empire' to simply 'Swaraj'.³² Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the man who had brought the word 'Swaraj' into national consciousness, was dead (in August 1920), and, in a sense, the ownership of that word in the freedom movement went to Gandhi, who had been thinking about it since 1909.

Jinnah moved an amendment to retain the spirit of Swaraj within the British Empire, but it was defeated, as was a similar petition by Munshi, and then a third, again by Jinnah. 'Jinnah then pointed out that, according to the rules, the constitution could not be changed except by three-fourths majority and without a proper notice being given. But Gandhiji, as president, overruled Jinnah's objection, whereupon we left the meeting,' writes Munshi.³³

That December, the Congress met in Nagpur. Munshi says he saw a majority support Gandhi, and even Das, who was determined to oppose the Mahatma, buckled under. Soon, Jinnah along with twenty other leaders left the Congress.

When Gandhiji forced Jinnah and his followers out [. . .] we all felt, with Jinnah, that a movement of an unconstitutional nature, sponsored by Gandhiji with tremendous influence he had acquired over the masses, would inevitably result in widespread violence, barring the progressive development of self-governing institutions based on a partnership between educated Hindus and Muslims. To generate coercive power in the masses would only provoke mass conflict between the two communities, as in fact it did. With his keen sense of realities Jinnah firmly set his face against any dialogue with Gandhiji on this point.³⁴

It is Munshi's final observations on this episode that grabs our attention. His is a rare and ruthlessly candid assessment of Gandhi—of the Mahatma's tremendous abilities and the fallout of those powers.

Through my intimate contact with Gandhiji I was to discover later that if he was a statesman he was also a practical mystic; an apostle of the moral order; a prophet who gave us a vision of a non-violent world. When a personality of such stature descends on a people, he becomes an avalanche overwhelming every resistance. The only way to escape was to run away, and that we did.³⁵

But one man was doing exactly the opposite of running away. In fact, from this point on, Patel's antagonism with Jinnah would be relentless and legendary. The two Gujarati barristers had chosen their sides. They would go on to literally carve out the land that they wanted from the Indian subcontinent. Though, at the time, Jinnah had no thought about Pakistan.

Within the party, it was not the Congress that was subsuming and moulding Gandhi but Gandhi who was transforming the party from within. And perhaps his greatest instrument for applying this change, for effecting this transformation, was Vallabhbhai Patel.



FOUR

‘I AM NOT A LEADER; I AM A SOLDIER.’

So what had the Congress declared in Nagpur?

That India wanted to leave the British Empire—nothing more, nothing less. But such an aim would require rebuilding the organization from the ground up, signing up thousands of new members to make a mass movement and, most importantly, raising lakhs of rupees to fund the movement.

To achieve this, Gandhi got the Congress to open its doors to anyone who would pay an annual membership fee of 4 annas and pledged to support its causes. New targets were set: a Tilak Swaraj Fund would gather Rs 1 crore; 1 crore new 4-anna paying members would be enrolled into the Congress; and 20 lakh khadi-spinning wheels would be set up in homes around the country.

And who would take charge of delivering this target? Patel, of course. Ideally, Gujarat’s quota should have been to raise around Rs 3 lakh, but Patel led the campaign from village to village collecting Rs 15 lakh. His fundraising skills would only improve in the years to come, and it would be fair to say that Patel became one of the main, if not the main, fundraisers for the Congress through most of the freedom movement.

One letter written from Yerwada jail gives a sense of the kind of urgency to raise money that constantly plagued Patel, which we don't really see in the notes and letters of Gandhi or Nehru. Written in July 1933, in one short letter there are four separate mentions of monetary worries. 'Is the money of flood relief fund trust well preserved? [...] Please write to me two lines about it so that even an iota of anxiety will be removed,' wrote Patel.

Is there any trace of drought relief fund for our Gujarat Sabha? Were you able to collect anything from Achubhai's building, or is everything lost? If we need that fund now it can be used for drought relief. Influenza fund must have been increased by now. Can it be used for some work in Vadilal Hospital? Arrangement for the memorial needs to be done and the fund may be used. It is useless to keep it there.¹

His letter contains a line which is, in essence, the monetary promise he maintained for the Congress Party till his death (and after he died, his daughter went to Jawaharlal Nehru to submit a bagful of cash donations that had come in and was pending for deposit into the party funds, but more on this later).

When we require money for such work we will get it. Think about it. It is worthwhile to arrange for attachment of medical school or college with Vadilal Hospital. In Ahmedabad, there is B.J. Medical School. Three hundred students applied for admission and only fifty were admitted, other two hundred and fifty were stranded. It would be better if we can arrange for it. It is worthwhile to prepare a definite plan and estimate. There is education fund in Kasturbhai's² father's name. If he wishes that can be utilized in this project. If you like this suggestion you can talk to him when you meet him.³

As the spirit of non-cooperation spread, with lawyers giving up their positions and students their classrooms, with mass burnings of foreign goods and with spinning wheels being set up everywhere, Besant 'said that Gandhi was sowing anarchy'⁴ and Tagore warned that freedom for India would also have to mean freedom from 'indolence and ignorance' and not just British rule.

Patel in his own pragmatic way understood this well. He was, as he would often admit, not a romantic. He said that independence for India would have to mean freedom from starvation—after all, British rule in India had seen some of the worst famines in the history of the world—that

administration is no longer carried out from only one location and in a foreign language, that military expenditure would not be too heavy, that the difference in salary between the highest- and lowest-paid government employees would not be too vast and that justice would not be too difficult or expensive to obtain. This is especially ironic considering the state of present-day India. The concern for food security would remain till the end. Here is Patel in February 1949:

In this country, the greatest need of the hour is food. We import millions of tons of food and pay crores of rupees as freight charges. We have no ships to import the food that we want. We have no mercantile marine. We have a long coast with deep seas on the three sides of India [...] Look at our railways. It is like an old decrepit widow.⁵

India did face food shortages, and ignored the potential of its long coastline for a long time, and struggled to upgrade its railway—all as Patel had worried.

In a moment of great and effervescent uproar, Patel was level-headed enough to acknowledge the challenges that India faced and would continue to face even when the British left. Many of these challenges remain viciously alive in India even after seventy years of independence, especially Patel's prescient warning of a slavish imitation of the West:

Some are propagandists of the Western way of life; they see in the spinning-wheel a sign that the country is going back a hundred and fifty years. But they fail to realise that Western advancement is really the cause of the unsettled state of the world today.⁶

In 1921, though, excitement about the English way of life, and their royal customs, would hit a feverish high in India. On 17 November, the Prince of Wales arrived in Bombay on the *HMS Renown* with a man whose destiny would be intertwined with that of Patel, Nehru and Gandhi—Louis 'Dickie' Mountbatten, who would, in time, become the last viceroy of India. (On 22 November, in Surat, Patel said that 'they [presumably the nationalist leaders] bore no ill-will to the prince and if they resolved on observing complete hartal on the day of his arrival in India, it was mainly because they protested against the way in which the visit was sought to be

exploited'.⁷ In this he was echoing Gandhi who had asked in September in Calcutta, 'If the Prince of Wales is not coming for political reasons what is the purpose of his visit? And whose money is he spending on his visit?')⁸

When the prince emerged through the 'half-finished roseate arches of the Gateway of India [...] The Times of India estimated that 200,000 people lined the route between Apollo Bunder and Sandhurst Road'.⁹

The prince had arrived in his kingdom even as the flames of non-cooperation were spreading, and soon after his arrival in Bombay, a police station in the city was attacked and three constables murdered. In spite of Gandhi's fervent appeal to quell the violence, it would take at least thirty-six lives, and cause the Prince of Wales to hurriedly depart to safer climes—in the princely states of Rajputana for a royal welcome.

As the Prince of Wales toured India with Dickie Mountbatten, who was later joined by Edwina Ashley, being entertained by herds of canopied elephants and pig-sticking shikars in the princely states, there were widespread boycotts in British India, including in Allahabad where both Nehru and his father, Motilal, had been arrested. So successful was the boycott of the prince in British-ruled India, and the Civil Disobedience Movement, that the government had to arrest, by conservative estimates, around 30,000 people. In the many bonfires of foreign goods was also one in which Patel cast away his 'barrister's robes, about a dozen suits, 250 collars, neckties and pairs of shoes'.¹⁰ He would never again wear anything but hand-spun khadi made by his daughter Maniben. By 1922, he was comparing wearing English clothes to slavery:

A parrot which is kept in a cage for years does not like to come out even if the cage is kept open. Slaves even if they find out a way to free themselves from the bondage they hesitate to go that way. Long-time slavery generates a fascination for a state of slavery. Our condition is the same [...] Mahatma Gandhi showed us the way: 'Swaraj by spinning, wear khadi and have your Swaraj' [...] But we who had lost their identity, being fascinated by the lure of slavery could not give up our dress material and style of wearing cloth [...]¹¹

There is a bit of local business push in this speech too.

Today in Gujarat, production of khadi is very high, but khadi produced in Gujarat is not consumed in Gujarat, which is proof of our weakness [...] Women are not fully swadeshi-minded. It is said that in marriage season khadi cannot be used. So our condition is like a parrot in the cage. We found out the way to freedom, but we have not freed ourselves from the lure of slavery, till then we shall have to rot in slavery.¹²

Soon after Christmas in 1921, Edward VIII, or David as Mountbatten called him, inaugurated the Victoria Memorial and reminded the cream of Calcutta society that his great-grandmother had promised in 1858 that ‘in their [Indian] prosperity will be our strength; in their contentment our security; and in their gratitude our best reward’.¹³

Contentment was not to be easily found in British-ruled India though. In February 1922 more than twenty policemen were murdered by protesters who set ablaze their chowki at Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur.

This, in the middle of the princely visit, could have given the Civil Disobedience Movement a devastating edge. But a horrified Gandhi stopped the movement and fasted to the astonishment of his closest followers, including Patel and the Nehrus.

Bose, the charismatic rising leader from Bengal, wrote: ‘The dictator’s decree was obeyed at the time, but there was a regular revolt in the Congress camp. No one could understand why [the] Mahatma should have used the isolated incident at Chauri Chaura for strangling the movement all over the country.’¹⁴ Maulana Azad, the Muslim leader in the Congress said later, ‘This caused a severe political reaction in political circles and demoralized the country.’¹⁵

Even Nehru could not help exclaiming:

For it seemed to us to be impossible to guarantee against the occurrence of some such untoward incident. Must we train the three hundred odd millions of India in the theory and practice of non-violent action before we could go forward? If that was the sole condition of its function, then the non-violent method would always fail.¹⁶

At least one prominent historian, the formidable R.C. Majumdar, has suggested that the repressed frustration of Gandhi calling off the mass movement for the Chauri Chaura incident finally led to a rift, and violence,

between Hindus and Muslims in India in the freedom movement. Majumdar wrote:

This frustration was the main cause of the ensuing political inertia of the masses, and as it always happens, the pent-up energy of the masses found an outlet in Hindu–Moslem riots [...] it is difficult to acquit Gandhi of [this] serious blunder which retarded the progress of the national movement to a very considerable extent.¹⁷

But to Gandhi the Chauri Chaura violence was a ‘sin against God’ and even though he had been preparing, with Patel’s assistance, a mass satyagraha and refusal to pay taxes in Bardoli in the Surat region of Gujarat, which would have potentially brought his movement even closer to the dream of Swaraj within one year, he declared he would rather be called a coward than deny his oath against violence.

The British government was stunned. It had been preparing to jail Gandhi, and the reverberations of his sudden stalling of the Civil Disobedience Movement reached right up to the House of Commons. In India, almost every top Congress leader disagreed with Gandhi, but he was adamant: ‘The drastic reversal of practically the whole of the aggressive programme may be politically unsound and unwise but there is no doubt that it is religiously sound.’¹⁸

He had started mobilizing forces in Bardoli but now he was abandoning the entire plan. Patel, though astonished, did not join in the chorus against Gandhi’s decision. He seems to have stoically accepted that non-violence was for Gandhi ‘the first article of my faith’ and ‘the last article of my creed’.¹⁹

Later, in November 1923, the British Governor of Bombay would say of Gandhi’s decision to call off the Civil Disobedience Movement after Chauri Chaura:

[I]f they had taken his next step and refused to pay taxes, God knows where we should have been! Gandhi’s was the most colossal experiment in the world’s history, and it came within an inch of succeeding. But he couldn’t control men’s passions. They became violent and he called off his programme.²⁰

In March 1922 Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to prison. The dream of Swaraj within one year seemed to recede into the distant horizon. Tagore despaired that Gandhi was choosing to fight merely for India and not the whole of mankind. C. Rajagopalachari, also in prison, worried that the wretched poverty of India would keep its people from coming together as one. The anglicized Nehrus, especially Jawaharlal, were appalled at the religious overtones of Gandhi's message—was he making the struggle for freedom some sort of holy war? Bose too thought this was foolishness—why give up clear gains for one mishap?

In Turkey, the army officer Mustafa Kemal Ataturk kicked out the supposedly revered sultan and established not an Islamic but, ironically, a secular state.

What on earth had Gandhi been fighting for? And who would be able to resurrect, on the ground, his struggle?

In jail, Gandhi read books—Edward Gibbons, Jules Verne and the story of the apostle Paul, among others—while outside, a few determined men refused to let his work stop, even in the face of a disunited and disillusioned—some would even say hopelessly divided—Congress. Patel, who had opposed Gandhi in November 1921²¹ when the Mahatma had first spoken about calling off the Civil Disobedience Movement after instances of violence in Bombay, was far more stoic after Chauri Chaura.

Since the Congress pledged non-cooperation in its Nagpur session in 1920, Patel had been stoking the fires of disenchantment in his old hunting grounds, the municipality of Ahmedabad.

The Municipality had no objection to cooperating with the Government in the matter of lighting, sanitation, water supply etc. Nothing of national significance was endangered, for example, by the Government lighting the streets. To let the Government, however, have complete freedom to develop the minds of our children, as it chose, was something intolerable.²²

By 1921, Patel was urging the municipality to throw off government control of primary education and refuse funding—and then refuse inspection or the conduction of final examinations by British authorities. These triggered

months of intense battle between the schools, their teachers and the education authorities, ending in a sort of truce. While Patel could not entirely eradicate government control, he at least ‘could be assured that Government control over schools would be nominal’.²³

It was Patel who had recommended Bardoli to Gandhi to spread civil disobedience and to refuse to pay taxes. The toss-up seems to have been between the site of his earlier success in Gujarat—Kheda—and Bardoli.

His view was that while the people of Kheda District were clever and keen, they were somewhat excitable and might under provocation lose control over themselves and resort to violence. On the other hand, the people of Bardoli were more placid and peaceful by temperament.²⁴

These peaceable people had been primed for action—government bodies were totally boycotted and everybody bought a spinning wheel and started to make their own cloth, and the preparation for the people to stop paying land taxes was complete when Chauri Chaura happened.

More than any other leader, perhaps, it was Patel whose immediate and elaborate plans were aborted at Bardoli. The day after Gandhi was arrested, Patel said, ‘Many sacrifices have been offered by India to the British Lion, but never before had it been its good fortune to receive so sacred a prey.’²⁵

But the absence of the Mahatma almost immediately meant the widening of fissures in his flock. Gandhi and Patel had opposed the Congress contesting elections to the local legislatures, because how could the demand for complete self-rule and participation in polls within the scope of British-ruled India go hand in hand?

But there were other powerful leaders in the Congress—among them Das and Motilal Nehru—who believed that showing the strength of the Congress by winning seats in the legislature would take the party closer to their dream of independence. Some like Motilal Nehru had been power centres within the Congress even before Gandhi arrived on the scene. They were backed by other strong voices like Hakim Ajmal Khan, the renowned physician and educationist, and one of the founders of the Jamia Millia Islamia university. Patel’s own brother Vithalbhai supported those who

wanted to participate in legislative polls, arguing that with many members within the elected bodies the Congress could, if the need arose, bring work in these bodies to a standstill, protesting colonial atrocities.

In December 1922, the Congress had a volatile meet in Gaya where Das argued furiously:

Our task is either to reform or to destroy these Legislatures. Until now we had boycotted them and our action has reduced their prestige [...] The country knows that those who are in them as members are not the true representatives of the people. Nevertheless, the Legislatures continue to function. It is, therefore, the duty of the Congress to go inside the Legislatures and carry out a more effective boycott. When an Army enters the enemy territory, it does not mean that it has cooperated with the enemy. In the same way, if we enter the Bureaucracy's stronghold, we are not cooperating. Everything depends upon the object with which we enter.²⁶

These views were not new. Das had been arguing with Gandhi on them for a while, at least since 1920. But he had always been vetoed. Now, in the Mahatma's absence, this was Das's moment to make a valiant push—not least because he was at that point in time the president of the Congress party.

But Patel rose to counter Das, and was once again the most vocal supporter of Gandhi in a time of vulnerability—even at the cost of taking on his own brother.

Until the Congress at Gaya, Vallabhbhai had never spoken either at a Congress Session or in meetings of the All-India Congress Committees [...] At the Congress in Gaya, for the first time he spoke in Hindi. Thereafter he spoke often in Hindi, and although his Hindi was always full of Gujarati words and Gujarati expressions, neither Hindi nor Urdu speaking people had difficulty in understanding them.²⁷

When Patel rose, he was emphatic:

I am not a leader; I am a soldier. I am the son of a peasant and do not believe that we can gain independence by merely talking. [...] Once we enter the Legislatures, the people will lose their enthusiasm for independence and the Congress will lose the confidence of the people. [...] It is only when the Congress announced its policy of non-cooperation that it began to be supported by agriculturists, labourers and women [...] only such activity which gives scope for participating in the national struggle and for making

sacrifices. Even if you conducted your campaign for a hundred years, through the Legislatures, you will not get independence.²⁸

A soldier, and not a leader—this was Patel’s sotto voce refrain. The more leadership he showed, the more he emphasized this point. Was it this attitude that kept him forever away from the final, pivotal roles of power? Perhaps.

For now, his argument would win the day—against the Congress president at that. At Gaya, most Congressmen voted for continuing the policy of boycotting the legislatures.

When the conference ended, Das resigned from his post. Soon he formed a competing party—Swaraj—and his closest compatriots in that endeavour were Motilal Nehru, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Vithalbhai Patel. In 1923, the Swaraj Party won a number of seats in the legislative elections, especially in Bengal, but after the death of Das in 1925, the party collapsed and Motilal Nehru returned to the Congress fold.

But for now, while Gandhi languished in prison, his party had split.

Patel wasn’t despairing, though. Instead he seemed to have wondered about the role of Gandhi’s acolytes in the absence of their leader, and answered the question in an article titled ‘The Test of Faith’ in which he argued that though Gandhi’s ‘colleagues have neither his sweetness of manner nor that complete self-control that is so essential in public life [...] if they too like him work tirelessly’²⁹ they could achieve some of the goals. His actions in the months and years that followed would prove that Patel, at least, meant to propel his leader’s agenda, even if single-handedly. In Gujarat he pushed the programme of a mass boycott of foreign cloth, urging merchants to cancel purchase orders for months, and one of the most significant moves was his defiant leadership in May 1923 of what would later be called the Nagpur Satyagraha.

The question was about the right to fly the Indian national flag. What sort of flag was this and why was this controversial? This flag, which had been approved by Gandhi, was actually quite similar to the one India adopted after Independence. It had three sections—saffron, white and green. Some

said this depicted Hinduism, Islam and white for the other faiths, but in classic Gandhi style, the Mahatma insisted that saffron represented sacrifice, white purity and green hope. The only difference was that it had a *charkha*, or spinning wheel, in the middle, and the flag independent India chose has the chakra, or the twenty-four-spoke discus, representing the principles of justice. At the time of Independence, Gandhi initially refused to accept a national flag which did not have the charkha or the spinning wheel, even exclaiming,

I must say that if the flag of the Indian Union will not contain the emblem of the Charka, I will refuse to salute the flag. You know the National Flag of India was first thought of by me and I cannot conceive of India's National Flag without the emblem of the Charka.³⁰

But Nehru convinced him that the twenty-four-spoked chakra from the Sarnath pillar of Emperor Ashoka was the spinning wheel without the spindle and the mal.

This spinning-wheel flag was quite different from the older flags of India's yearning for freedom. For instance, the flag that Bhikaji Cama, the Parsi revolutionary from Bombay, had raised in Stuttgart in 1907 had three strips of red, green and yellow, representing Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, with eight white lotuses for the eight provinces of British India on the top green band, the words Vande Mataram (We bow to the Motherland) written in the middle yellow strip and a white crescent and sun painted in the bottom red for Islam and Hinduism. This flag itself was based on the one the freedom fighter Sachindra Prasad Bose unfurled in Calcutta in 1906 which had the same design elements—lotuses on the top band, sun and crescent at the bottom—but the colour scheme was different. Sachindra Bose's flag had a top band of orange, followed by yellow and green. But 'the flag's first political baptism in Calcutta was almost a quiet affair: no public speeches, no official declarations, no artistic or literary acclaim accompanied its passage through processions'.³¹ A few reports suggest that it may have been presented to the famed nationalist Surendranath Bannerjea in 1906, which is unsurprising as Sachindra Bose was a follower of

Bannerjea. The following year, even though Bhikaji Cama, while unfurling her flag, declared that ‘Indians wanted independence’,³² ‘the flag excited no political reaction from nationalists in India’.³³

By the 1920s, the demand for one flag to bind together the independence movement was gaining steam. Gandhi wrote:

[A] flag represents an ideal. The unfurling of the Union Jack evokes in the English breast sentiments whose strength it is difficult to measure: the Stars and Stripes mean a world to the Americans, the Star and Crescent will call forth the best bravery in Islam. It will be necessary for us Indians—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Parsis and others to whom India is their home—to recognize a common flag to live and die for.³⁴

Coming from Gandhi, this was critical. After all it was he who changed, entirely, the flag of the freedom movement. Before his arrival, there had been other notable suggestions—Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda’s most well-known pupil, had recommended a flag with a thunderbolt,³⁵ representing, no doubt, the power of the civilizational teachings of her dashing mentor. The Home Rule movement led by Tilak and Besant had brought about a flag with ‘five red and four green alternating bands, seven stars, a crescent and a star, and the [(British)] Union Flag in one corner, it symbolized India’s demand for self-government.’³⁶ Gandhi had not only insisted on the use of khadi, or hand-spun cotton cloth, for the flag but had also asked that the charkha be placed right in the middle.

But raising this flag in Jabalpur troubled the British authorities, who started to beat down and jail hoisters. Among those jailed was Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, who is still remembered for her eulogy to the Rani of Jhansi, the hero of the 1857 revolt against the British, recited by schoolchildren to this day: *Khub ladi mardani woh toh Jhansi wali Rani thi* (How wonderfully she fought, this queen of Jhansi!).

Naturally this incensed protesters and the movement spread to neighbouring Nagpur, where Patel rallied forces, getting scores of satyagrahis to pour into the city almost every day.

The movement Patel led established without doubt the primacy and adoption of the Gandhian flag as part of the mass movement against the

British, no mean feat when Gandhi himself was behind bars. By June 1923, even as the flag satyagraha was raging, Rajagopalachari was arguing in Nagpur, propelled by the enormous response to the satyagraha:

You don't find on our flag a tiger or lion or unicorn but only a charkha. It represents industry, good will and our new weapon against brute force. The government wouldn't have minded if we'd put the sign of a gun on it, as they have bigger guns. But the charkha represents thirty crores of charkhas and they can't resist its force.³⁷

Despite numerous beatings and arrests, attempts to march with the flag continued until September, when more than 2000 protesters set free from prison, and they celebrated with a march through the town waving the tricolour flag.

It must be remembered that when the skirmish about the flag started in Jabalpur and spread to Nagpur, most top politicians in India at that time thought it unimportant. Motilal Nehru described it as inconsequential and the Congress took weeks to decide whether it would be a relevant fight, coming soon after the debacle of the Khilafat Movement. In fact, even when the battle was won and the flag marched up and down Nagpur, Motilal Nehru sneered that all this was 'Pickwickian'.³⁸

But both Gandhi and his lieutenant Patel understood the relevance of this victory. After the Khilafat mess, even sitting in jail, Gandhi had been able to score one against the British—all thanks to the leadership of Patel.

The location of the satyagraha made it even more significant. Nagpur was the old base of the Home Rule nationalists, an area of political activity nurtured by Tilak himself. It was geographically at the heart of India, 'the seventeenth largest city [...] with a population of 145,000'.³⁹ 'This major area of cotton production had had a tradition of strikes and political agitation since the first Indian labour strike in 1877 in the Tata-owned Empress Mills over the issue of workers' wage rates.'⁴⁰

But Patel did more than keep alive Gandhi's mission at a time when the Mahatma seemed to have faced a crippling setback. It was a struggle where Patel, no doubt with the blessings of Gandhi, took major decisions—like asking Gandhi's wife, Kasturba, to be prepared to go to prison if required

and also issuing an appeal with her signature asking women in Gujarat to come to Nagpur and join the struggle. Gandhi's imagination of the flag was directly linked to his undisputed leadership of the Congress and the national movement. The charkha was Gandhi's symbol. He had introduced its insignia and the entire philosophy behind it to the Congress, in effect completely transforming the nature of the party and the national movement for independence.

But was everyone buying into his vision? Clearly not.

Gandhi had proclaimed his flag in 1921 but there was no Congress resolution endorsing it. It was almost as if the whole thing existed in Gandhi's mind—which of course it did. But this also meant that the flag did not pop up in many protests. Congress workers did not wield the flag as their totem and most people would not immediately think of Gandhi's flag as a necessary emblem of the countrywide struggle for independence. Some wanted a more sentimental design for a sentimental people, the Indians. The charkha could be, at best, a party symbol but surely not a national emblem? Others argued—notably in a letter to the editor of a newspaper—that having the charkha as a symbol on the national flag would be akin to providing the Indian Army bows and arrows and flint axes to modernize them.⁴¹ Patel even lamented the initial lack of support from other leaders and in the media, in a letter in July 1923: 'But here we have an orchestra in which every person plays whatever tune he likes. All the English newspapers are either opposed to the struggle or are indifferent.'⁴²

To make up for this lethargy, Patel even tried to arouse enthusiasm in his native Gujarat asking the Gujaratis:

Have you heard the mysterious sound of drum-beats from the holy warfield of Nagpur? Remember the flag that was hoisted on the pandal of the Congress session, held on the banks of the Sabarmati in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi, is being dishonoured in Nagpur [...] No country has got the most precious object like this without sacrifice. Today we are fighting for the retention of our flag [...] Get yourself recruited as satyagraha soldiers, sign the pledge and march towards Nagpur when ordered.⁴³

In the end, the Nagpur satyagraha became a turning point—for Gandhi and for Patel. The latter was able to establish a single visual insignia around

which the national freedom movement could be built.

The Nagpur affair was the first political movement which created a deepening relationship between the flag and the Indian population, leading to its emergence as a common symbol of the fight for the freedom of the Indian nation.⁴⁴

The victory of Patel and his men brought the flag national recognition and, perhaps even more importantly, full buy-in within the party at a time when the architect of the flag's design, Gandhi, was weak. It also bought Gandhi a crucial win at a time when the momentum of the national movement seemed to be stalling and his powers were on the wane—certainly there were enough people questioning his wisdom and leadership of the battle for independence.

During the time that the Mahatma spent in prison, Patel's life changed. His once-wealthy lifestyle disappeared, along with the legal practice that he had so assiduously built. There does not seem to have been any romantic interest in his life after the death of his wife, Jhaverba, in 1909. Patel seems to have had little to say to either of his two children, Dahyabhai and Maniben, and, as at least one biographer, Narhari Parikh, mentions, 'his relations with his children were odd'. Patel's household, for the most part of his life, was run by his daughter Maniben. But growing up, Maniben barely spoke to her father.

Vallabhbhai was in the habit of pacing to and fro in his drawing room after his morning bath. Maniben would stand in the doorway of the adjoining room, watching him. Vallabhbhai would then ask her, 'How are you?' and she would say, 'I am well.' That was about all their conversation throughout the whole day!⁴⁵

In time Maniben Patel would emerge as one of Gandhi's most devoted loyalists; for most of her life she wore clothes made of cotton she spun herself on her charkha, taking a vow never to marry, and later in her life acted as private secretary to her father. Both of Patel's children participated in politics, winning elections, and were also elected to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Parliament, after Independence. Maniben Patel had been in court crying when Gandhi was sent to prison (she had also heard the last

words of the Mahatma to her father: ‘Let the people know that the charkha and the constructive programme will bring them Swaraj whether I am in gaol or outside. It is your duty to take the message to the people. God be with you!’⁴⁶ and in the period afterwards the contours of a new life of austerity and deep political engagement took shape within the Patel family. Parikh suggests that it was Gandhi, even more than Patel, who played the role of a father, constantly advising and guiding Maniben, and that Patel’s mother at least once chastised him for neglecting his children, especially on the occasion of Maniben’s marriage.⁴⁷

Even as early as the mid- and late 1920s, the tone that Patel often took with Maniben had a tinge of exasperation. In a letter that was probably sent to his daughter in 1923, Patel wrote:

I think that if you are at peace with yourself, you would recover quickly. Keeping awake at night means that your mind is not at peace. This leads to constipation. I think your worries are without any foundation. It is strange that after having been educated, you have failed to have a happy disposition.⁴⁸

On 31 March 1924, he told her in a letter,

I have heard that after going there [Ahmedabad] you started crying. Bapu has enough worries, then why add more? [...] When I ask you, you do not speak anything. When I go on asking, you begin crying and complain against me. I am unable to understand as to what you are complaining about. [...] I tried my best. [...] You do not speak with anybody, not even with your brother, and day and night you weep bitterly [...] what does all this mean? I feel it is mere childishness. [...] I simply want to impress upon you that you have no reason to be unhappy.⁴⁹

In April, he revisited the same theme:

I think that if you keep peace of mind you will recover soon. Insomnia is [an] indication of [a] disturbed mind. Insomnia causes constipation also. I think your anxieties are baseless. How is it that after having so much education one cannot live cheerfully? People think that I might be harassing you, or they might think that your behaviour is childish. Both these situations are undesirable.⁵⁰

There is no doubt that, quite like the motherless children of many great men, Maniben was burdened with sorrow for a mother she did not know at

all, and a father who was barely around. Patel even refers to why he never remarried in one of his letters to his daughter, ‘I am not unaware that you had bitter dose of miseries. Yet you won’t have the idea of misery from step mother. That’s why many people have to suffer many other greater miseries than the separation of mother.’⁵¹

So what was Patel’s solution for Maniben’s chronic unhappiness? Naturally, he turned her over to Gandhi. ‘I wish that you will empty your heart to Bapu. You will get peace in abundance.’⁵²

But this did not solve Maniben’s problems—neither emotional nor material. She had no money of her own and after Sardar Patel’s death, his daughter was reduced to a life of penury. To Verghese Kurien, the founder of Amul who knew Maniben well, she described herself as a ‘witch’.

My father was always very busy fighting for the independence of India. He had no time for me. He was always busy and in our traditional Gujarati families, the fathers cannot even hug or cuddle their daughters. My mother died very early and although my father loved me very much, he could never show it. So, I was brought up without any love and I never got married. When you are brought up without any love like I had been, you become a witch.⁵³

If there is one devastating indictment of the price for freedom, this must be it.

Glimpses of the paternal role Gandhi played for Patel’s children can be seen in the tone and tenor of two very short letters quite early in their relationship, in 1924 and 1925. On 16 September 1924, Gandhi writes to Patel:

You are a lion-hearted one and should not be nervous. Do what you are engaged in with greater vigour and do not let anybody be afraid. I would like to complete my fast here. Maniben may become nervous because of this, but please tell her that there is nothing to be afraid of.⁵⁴

The following year, Gandhi advised Patel about a job for Dahyabhai: ‘I do not think we should post Dahyabhai in the Mill. If he is with the Birlas, the most he would do is in the Mill. We shall talk about it in detail when we meet. I am discussing it with Jamnalal [Bajaj].’⁵⁵

Along with his English clothes, Patel threw away the good life into the bonfire of Swaraj. Maniben was pulled out of the convent school she attended, and as a response to some of her letters about financial hardships, Patel said, ‘Poverty is not something at which one should be sorry. If we have accepted poverty voluntarily or if there is sudden adversity, we should be able to face it happily.’⁵⁶ Gandhi acknowledged Patel’s sacrifice when he said, ‘He [Patel] voluntarily chose the path of misery and suffering to serve the country as the elders of his family had done.’⁵⁷ This is probably a reference to a story about Patel’s father participating in the 1857 revolt against British rule, but it is unclear from my research whether the story is true Gandhi may even be referring to Vithalbhai’s participation in the freedom movement.

The five years between the Nagpur satyagraha in 1923 and the Bardoli satyagraha in 1928 are when Patel transitioned from a serious, no-nonsense barrister to a full-time leader of the Congress party with organizational powers second, in many ways, only to Gandhi’s.

This evolution of Patel, we shall see, happened through a series of events: from fighting for the flag to fighting dacoits to fighting unjust land revenue taxation in Bardoli.

The most curious battle of Patel’s life happened at a place called Borsad in Gujarat, less than 20 kilometres from Anand. Borsad appears several times in Indian history. Gandhi passed through it during his famous salt tax-breaking Dandi March. Ambedkar wrote about caste discrimination in the area in his story ‘Waiting for a Visa’.

Patel arrived at Borsad to fight dacoits—and an administration in cahoots with the bandits.

The story of Borsad and the dacoits became famous enough in Gujarat to be inserted into folklore. Jhaverchand Meghani, the Gujarati littérateur, even wrote a story about the Borsad dacoits and Patel’s work there. This is told in *A Lamp of Humanity*, which talks about the arrival in Borsad of Ravishankar Maharaj, ‘a saintly patriot and humanitarian [and a] true devotee of Mahatma Gandhi [who] walked as a lamp of humanity in the dark underground world of savages, dacoits and outlaws’.⁵⁸

As it so happened, Ravishankar Maharaj was a close associate of Patel's, sent to Borsad to gather information about why the government was trying to tax the people for additional police protection against dacoit atrocities.

Their reports suggested that the police was hand in glove with the dacoits and was trying to extract money from the local population, which was already plagued by attacks from two specific robbers, Babar Deva and Ali. Patel's two informers reported,

We are satisfied that by far the greater part of the public is completely innocent. The outlaws commit robberies at night; the police commit robberies during the day, and on top of it all, the people are being dubbed collaborators of dacoits. The people maintain that the police is dishonest; it gives to the outlaws guns and ammunition, and fills its own pockets by sharing in the looted property.⁵⁹

With his own inquiries, Patel also discovered that

[The] government knows that the people are innocent. But the government has no money. It still wants to hold its head erect before the princely states in the vicinity. Those states have imposed on their villages additional police to protect them from those very outlaws, but they have not taxed their raiyats. Our government apes those states in imposing the police but money it tries to find out of the people's pockets. Well, if it wants money, let it beg of us. But why should it cast a slur on our name, why should it asperse our behaviour, treat us as criminals and extort the cost of the police as fine?⁶⁰

The struggle was against the Rs 2,40,074 tax the British authorities had imposed on the people of Borsad in September 1923, ostensibly to pay for extra policing. 'The people found it particularly galling; it was they who were suffering from the dacoities and they were now being told that they were encouraging them and further that they should pay for cost of capturing the dacoits.'⁶¹

The people of Borsad—everyone above the age of eighteen—had to pay Rs 2.70 per person. It was little money even for villagers but they, and indeed Patel, were riled about the principle of it. In the leaflets he distributed in the area, Patel told the villagers,

Only by carrying out your pledges [of refusing to pay and protesting non-violently] can you retain your self-respect. The government will confiscate your property, take away your cattle and will have no hesitation in attaching for the recovering of Rs. 2.50

[approximately], property worth Rs. 25,000. All that you should bear patiently. Under no circumstance should you pay a pie or react violently. The government has adopted for itself the untruthful and the dishonest path. Truth is on your side. If you adhere to the principle of non-violence, you are bound to succeed. Anyone who is honest and who practices non-violence can never lose.⁶²

In January 1924, the government backed off. It was announced that the state would pick up the tab for the extra policing and in due course the members of the local legislative bodies would vote on how to raise funds. Around 30,000 people celebrated in Borsad, cheering the victory of their region and Patel's leadership.

Patel told the gathering,

Your relatively small quarrel with the government is over but our main, bigger quarrel [for independence] is still unresolved [...] You have not succeeded because of my skill or cleverness. Today we have gained this victory because we walked along the road shown by the great saint who is now in jail.⁶³

The man in jail was not inert. He was noticing every little defiant move in his name, to the extent of drawing a comparison between the victories of his acolyte. Noting the celebrations in Borsad, Gandhi said,

The satyagraha struggle at Borsad was in many ways superior to that in Kheda [...] the latter was merely a vindication of the honour of the people [...] In Borsad, however, there was a complete victory for satyagraha: honour was vindicated and the object was achieved after a straight struggle.⁶⁴

Always a prescient man, Gandhi could perhaps see that with every victory Patel was refusing to let the embers of the independence revolution die down. He could understand that after he called off non-cooperation, a disillusioned Congress could very well lose the momentum of the march towards freedom. And yet, with Gandhi in jail, and committed utterly to non-violence, how could the status quo be shaken? Who could ensure that the everyday conversation about freedom did not die down?

It was Patel who made sure, by encouraging local revolts to mushroom, that the spirit and demand for independence remained alive and that the

defiance, so painstakingly embedded in the masses, was not throttled and buried.

Incidentally, when Gandhi was released on medical grounds (among other complications, he had had an appendectomy) in early February 1924, and Patel went to meet him in Pune, the Mahatma welcomed him with the words ‘the King of Borsad’. ⁶⁵

But greater things were round the corner.

On 23 July 1927, late in the evening, when the heavy downpour started, the head of the Ahmedabad municipality grew worried. Patel was alone in his house as the skies growled and it began to pour. As it rained through the evening, he grew restless. Finally, he decided to personally head out to see how his city was faring. When he stepped out of his house, it was midnight and still pouring.

The merchant Harilal Kapadia was astonished to find ‘a completely drenched Patel’⁶⁶ at his door in the middle of the night, and soon the businessman was making tea for his visitor. Kapadia offered Patel dry clothes, which was a bit futile because both men went out into the unceasing rain as Patel wanted someone to accompany him on his inspections.

Before long, a municipal engineer, whose name has been recorded in the history books as Gore, had been woken up, and he was walking all over Ahmedabad with Patel and Kapadia. When Kapadia had been pulled out of his home in the middle of the night, he ‘glanced at his walls, which were being whipped by the wind and the rain, and wondered which of them would collapse first’. ⁶⁷ No doubt Gore felt similar emotions.

As they walked, Patel pointed out culverts to fix and drains to repair and insisted that all of it be done immediately. But the destruction of the floods was still too much to stall. In that week, Ahmedabad alone got 52 inches of rain, nearly double its usual annual average of 30 inches. A fifty-year record in rainfall had been broken. The rains would not stop till 29 July, and even though initially Patel tried to keep up a stoic front, writing detailed letters to Gandhi and Maniben while the skies raged on without a word

about the floods, it was soon a topic impossible to avoid, and Patel told Gandhi that the problem was staggering.

The villages of Gujarat were devastated. Across the state, 75,000 houses had been washed away, and around 4000 villages were entirely submerged. Kheda district, the site of Patel's early victory, had received 100 inches of rainfall. People tied their cots to treetops and clung on to them.

In one particular instance, 61 Bhils of a small village, on the bank of the Dhadhar river, took shelter on two small trees adjacent to each other. On the fifth day of their stay, children and old people started falling down through sheer exhaustion, and were dragged away by the current. In this way 31 out of 61 lives were lost.⁶⁸

Patel spent his time and energies in gathering a force of volunteers who could provide relief, in one instance even chastising a charkha wielder: 'If Gujarat goes under, who will ply your charkha?'⁶⁹

Narhari Parikh was one of those who heeded Patel's call, and what seemed to have enthused Parikh was that, all of a sudden during this time of calamity, the stringent and acrimonious community and caste divisions were forgotten.

Just as Harijans [lower castes] and [upper] caste Hindus forgot their man-made distinctions, so also were forgotten the distinctions between Hindus and Muslims. In many a place, Muslims were given shelter in Hindu and Jain temples and one Muslim fakir lived for a number of days in a Shankar's temple. In a particularly orthodox temple, Muslims and Harijans were allowed to go right inside and take shelter. For years Gandhiji had been preaching this lesson to Gujarat and it seemed as if it had at last found acceptance!⁷⁰

Patel had been able to gather 2000 volunteers to provide relief during the floods, and often his efforts far surpassed those of the British government. In fact, not only did the government turn to his team for advice and information in many areas, he even supplied relief material to assist the government in the Kheda district.⁷¹

He managed to raise money from businessmen, traders and ordinary supporters of the Congress and put together a plan. This plan is worth studying even today as an example of how to efficiently distribute relief

measures without creating long-term dependencies. There was free food and clothing for people who had lost everything, but as soon as they could manage, people were encouraged to return to their land, rebuild homes, even if temporary, and everyone who could was urged to till the land to grow food. Those who did not have land but were in a position to work were given assistance in return for food and shelter, but also asked to help in tasks like road repair.

‘Vallabhbhai was insistent that even the smallest piece of land which was cultivable should be cultivated’⁷²—but there was a shortage of seeds. So local chapters of the Congress bought seeds at low cost and distributed it among farmers. When loans to buy cattle were given, Patel ensured that almost all the loans were repaid. To prevent hyperinflation in grain and cotton seed prices, and the eruption of a black market, shops were opened to ensure cheap prices prevailed. ‘Compared to the speed and zeal with which Vallabhbhai acted on this occasion, the government appeared to move at snail’s pace.’⁷³ When the government did wake up, it announced that the King Emperor and the secretary of state would make personal donations of Rs 2000 and 10 pounds respectively.

But the pusillanimity of the government effort did not stop the efforts of Patel and his volunteers. When it was over, the Indian Civil Service officer Hugh Garret offered Patel an award from the government or some recognition. Garret told him that he would like to recommend Patel, to which ‘Vallabhbhai burst out laughing’.⁷⁴

The floods and the relief work also provide a tiny glimpse of a battle that would, much later, stir up the entire subcontinent—Vallabhbhai Patel taking on the princely states of India. In September 1927, he compares efforts made by his team and the municipalities of Bombay and Ahmedabad to what was happening in the princely state of Baroda.

The hope of the people that Maharaja Sayaji Rao will sail by the first steamer available from England after having heard about the catastrophe on the state people has vanished [.] . .] He has remitted one [lakh] rupees by wire to give immediate relief to the people but till now nothing has been spent from that money [.] .] People are lifeless and no one has the courage to shout [.] .] As time passes people are losing faith in the state.⁷⁵

Using a tone of iron-cloaked nicety that would be feared by rajas and maharajas across India, Patel said,

Usually I do not like to criticize any internal affairs of a native state. But the present occasion is such that if the state fails in its duty, then there will be a black spot on the native states and people will be permanently crippled. This is not a political matter, it is humanitarian and matter of piety [. . .] To silently watch the people of such a big state uncared for in their plight is not only a blot on the people of the neighbouring state but it is risky also.⁷⁶

All these arguments and themes would be reiterated by Patel again and again, but for now there was a flood to take care of.

Writing about the flood effort, as was his wont, Gandhi presciently said, ‘After great calamities, a new world is inevitably created. Even if it is perhaps not proper to describe this particular disaster as a very great calamity in that sense, still it is of the same variety.’⁷⁷

A new world indeed was being created, though perhaps not quite in the way Gandhi would have imagined. It would spring forth from the same place Patel and Gandhi had had to abandon after much preparation—Bardoli.

In Ahmedabad in 1921, when the Congress stepped away from the Bardoli Civil Disobedience Movement, one man did not leave the arena. Patel had been nurturing and stoking the fires of Bardoli behind the scenes for nearly a decade until, in 1928, the opportunity to set things ablaze rose again.

Gandhi had always been interested in rousing Bardoli. The Mahatma was known for spotting locations where his impact would be greatest—he had, for instance, correctly predicted the rise of Ahmedabad. Gandhi knew some people from Bardoli from his South Africa days. One of the organizations that had supported him in Africa had been the United Patidar Society of Johannesburg. Two of the leaders of that society were from Bardoli.

But when Gandhi went to prison, someone had to keep Bardoli alive, and once again Patel alone seemed up to the task.

Bardoli has always been recognized as the site of one of Patel’s greatest successes, but it must be acknowledged that the region had a long, if low-

key, history of ferment against British rule, which provided Patel with fertile soil in which to plant his (and Gandhi's) revolutionary seed.

Local Patidar leaders like the brothers Kunverji and Kalyanji Mehta and Dayalji Nanubhai Desai had been building a grass-roots momentum for a fightback against the British since 1905–06. In fact, Kunverji and his wife had even tried to make bombs at home using coconuts shells from techniques described in pamphlets distributed by revolutionary leaders like Rai, Tilak and Pal. Eventually Kunverji and Kalyanji joined the Congress in Surat.⁷⁸

But the brothers realized in a few years that violently uprooting the British from India might not be possible as the government had the power to crush any rebellion. Remember, this was well before the First World War, and unsurprisingly the might of the British Empire seemed insurmountable to the brothers. Around the same time, they began to develop an interest in non-violence, especially after reading a copy of Gandhi's *Indian Opinion* magazine from South Africa.

Inspired, Kunverji then participated in a range of social activities to fight poverty and caste and even created a Patidar Yuvak Mandal in his home town, a place called Vanz in Gujarat. By 1910, the mandal was organizing the Patidars to petition for benefits from the government, especially for farmers.

Soon, their work evolved to a level that the mandal created a boarding house called the Patidar Ashram, some of whose members, mostly students, were influenced enough by Gandhi to skip a meal a day and send money for his satyagraha in South Africa.

In a similar fashion, Dayalji Desai, born in 1877 in Baroda, had been moved by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Ramtirth, both masters of the Vedanta. In 1906 Desai had started work as a government clerk and was posted at the revenue department in Bardoli. But by 1911 he had resigned in order to engage full-time in social work.

Like the Mehta brothers, Desai had twin influences: the revolutionary Tilak and Aurobindo (who at that time was still known as Aurobindo Ghosh and not Rishi Aurobindo), but also the Congress. He was an organizer for

Tilak at the Surat Congress in 1907, and at Lahore in 1909 he had gathered 300 volunteers from Surat to go with him and campaign for a more vigorous agenda in the party. In 1916, Desai became the leader of the Home Rule movement in Surat. Quite like the Mehtas, Desai too started an ashram focused on his community, the Anavil Brahmins. The Anavils were a sect within the Brahmins and were dominant in the Surat region. The Anavil Ashram was quite similar in its range of activities to the Patidar Ashram. Its students, like the ones at the Patidar Ashram, used to save money by skipping meals and send it for the satyagraha in South Africa.⁷⁹

Men like the Mehta brothers and Desai had spread Gandhi's words in many pockets of Gujarat even before the man landed in India. They had certainly succeeded in laying the groundwork for a patriotic movement, and in 1918, at Kheda, people like them were at the forefront of the struggle led by Patel; thousands of volunteers came from the Patidar and the Anavil ashrams. Such was the popularity of Kunverji and Kalyanji that they even got their own moniker 'Dalu-Kalu ni jodi' and it was widely known that it was they who had carried Rai to safety on their shoulders after the pandemonium at the 1907 Surat Congress session.⁸⁰ The Patidar Ashram had provided a platform for many young nationalist leaders like Indulal Yagnik, Shankerlal Bunker, Sumant Mehta, Amritlal Thakkar and even Vithalbhai Patel. The Anavil Ashram for its part deified the likes of Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati and Tilak.⁸¹

Later, in spite of Gandhi's arrest, Patel had kept the fires stoked in the region, and when new land revenue taxes were announced near the end of 1925, the field was ripe for revolt.

It was government custom then to increase land revenue rates every thirty years. The last one had been done in 1896 and so a new one was due for 1926. The man who researched this and came up with a new land revenue tax number was M.S. Jayakar, a member of the Provincial Civil Service who had earlier worked as the deputy collector of Surat. But Jayakar had no background of ever having calculated land revenue rates before this and came up with an almost arbitrary calculation: a 30 per cent rise in taxes and

a reclassification of twenty-three villages from a lower tax category to a higher one.

Among the reasons given by the government for this massive jump in taxation rate were:

1. Increase in the population of the area by 3800 people
2. Construction of several roads and also the introduction of a local railway line
3. Doubling of wages of agricultural labour
4. Increase in the value of land leased and the price of land
5. Increase in the number of milch cattle, bullock carts and agricultural implements⁸²

The villagers of Bardoli countered each of these points. What did a 3800 population increase over thirty years really count for? Nothing. Who built most of the new houses? People who went to Africa and made some money—it had nothing to do with the prosperity of the average person in Bardoli. It was true that prices of agricultural commodities had risen after 1918, but they had started falling by 1925. The cost of cultivation had actually risen by 400 per cent—which meant that the farmer was poorer than ever. Keeping all this in mind, how could anyone suggest a 30 per cent rise in land revenue tax?

When a contingent of farmers and local heavyweights met Patel, still heading the Ahmedabad municipality at the time, about this, he advised them to seek help from the local members of the legislature. But when no assistance came from there, the people turned to Patel again.

Patel told the villagers:

You go back to Bardoli. If the agriculturists are prepared to withhold not merely the increase in the land revenue but the whole of the land revenue, and if they are prepared to face all the dire consequences, that undoubtedly ensue, I am willing to come. Go through the whole taluka, ascertain what the people have to say. Find out how many are ready and then tell me.⁸³

Patel had begun to sniff an opportunity that would not only give him a great victory against the Raj but also shake up the stupor within the Congress, which had begun to worry him and Gandhi. In the years after Gandhi had suddenly called off the Civil Disobedience Movement, many things had

happened within the organization. In June 1925, Das, one of tallest leaders of the Congress (and then of the Swaraj Party), was dead. He had died perhaps not a little disappointed in Gandhi's sudden changes of heart and plans. Just before the Kanpur session of the Congress in December that year, 'there was a heated dispute [.] between Motilal Nehru and three Maharashtrian Swarajists, [M.R.] Jayakar, [N.C.] Kelkar and [B.S.] Moonje, who resigned from their seats'.⁸⁴ Opposition to the Gandhi–Patel duo was thinning in the Congress, but the time to return to a mass movement had still not arrived.

As the villagers from Bardoli turned again and again to Patel for help, word came that after his relentless efforts for flood relief, the British government had finally been shamed into releasing Rs 1 crore for flood rehabilitation.

This would have given Patel a boost but, as Rajmohan Gandhi notes, he ensured that his participation in Bardoli did not imperil the funds sanctioned for flood relief.⁸⁵

Instead, a survey of the mood of Bardoli, so to speak, began across sixty villages. The surveyors were the old faithful, all Patidars or clan members of Patel, led by the redoubtable Mehta brothers, Kunverji and Kalyanji. When their survey was done, they turned to Gandhi, who in turn turned to Patel. 'I have no doubt that the cause is just,' declared Patel. Gandhi replied, 'There is nothing more to be considered. Victory to Gujarat!'⁸⁶

Not yet.

Patel being Patel wanted to assess the ground situation himself. He personally went and sat with leaders from seventy-nine villages. He asked the men if they were ready to sacrifice their belongings and even their lives. He asked the women if they were prepared to see their cattle taken away as a punishment. What would they do, he asked the women, if their husbands paid this tax. The women replied that they would not allow them into the house.⁸⁷

Patel warned,

I shall stand by the side of anyone who [is prepared to take] risks. In 1921 we were on the point of being put to the test but unforeseen circumstances intervened and we had no

opportunity of giving a demonstration of our strength. Now the hour has struck but are you ready? This is not a question which concerns only one taluka. It concerns many talukas and many districts. If you lose, all will suffer.⁸⁸

His people were finally ready. But even then, he asked them to take another week and see if they changed their minds.

A few days later, in a letter to the Governor of Bombay, Patel demanded a review of the land tax:

That would be the least that the government could do in order that justice is done to the people. In that review the people should be given an opportunity to put forward their side of the case and the government must give an assurance that they will give full weight to the arguments thus put forward. There is every possibility of this conflict assuming a grave form and it is in your hands to prevent such a development. If you feel it will help to discuss the matter with me personally I am ready to come whenever you desire.⁸⁹

No such invitation came. All Patel received as a reply was a short note that his letter had been forwarded to the revenue department.

The action now shifted to Bardoli, where a detailed chain of command, from the taluka level right down to village clusters and then each individual village, was formed. This minute and multilayered detailing, in time, became ‘a characteristic of Patel’s campaigns, repeated in each of the satyagrahas presided over by Vallabhbhai Patel’.⁹⁰ At Bardoli,

250 satyagrahi volunteers worked the talukas [. . .] to feed them all a public kitchen was established. Seven motor cars were made available for transport and communication. A publicity bureau distributed 15,000 printed handbills daily and expenditure was some Rs. 700 or more per day. The outside volunteers were, however, always subject to the well-established chain of command, and Patel’s care in maintaining it left Gujarat free from the factionalism of most of India’s other provinces.⁹¹

There is another reason why Bardoli marks a turning point in the evolution of Patel. It is here, in this protest which would mark one of the biggest early successes for the Congress and for Gandhi, that Patel started to perfect an art he would embrace as his very own—the skill of nurturing, cultivating and deploying a network of informers deep into the British government system to gather critical intelligence which would aid the Congress’s campaigns.

Before he came to Bardoli, Patel had already tried using an intelligence network in his campaign in Borsad. There ‘his men discovered a government report advising against punitive police tax’. This gave a major boost to Patel’s activists ‘since it indicated some support within the government itself for the programme of the Congress’.⁹² Later in 1936, his intelligence network would unearth a government file that was so harsh on the Congress that it angered and enthused the troops to fight back against the British government. He had also tested these lifelines during the Gujarat floods, when information about crises reached Patel’s men before it reached the government, forcing the British to redirect relief efforts using Patel’s network in the Gujarat Congress in many places and not its own.

In Bardoli, this network of informers would play a two-way role of informing activists how to proceed and create an almost real-time feedback loop from the ground level, which allowed Patel to determine the success of the strategy day by day.

Reporting on the Bardoli satyagraha, the *Times of India* wrote, not with a little sympathy for the British government:

Patel has completely paralysed the revenue administration of the taluka. He has managed to force the resignations of 79 out of 88 patels in the villages. Now the people think, ‘What can Government do to us when the patels and talatis are on our side?’ [. . .] To tell the truth, these patels and talatis represent the eyes and ears of government in the villages. A collector or deputy collector is practically helpless without them as Bardoli has demonstrated in the last few weeks.⁹³

In time, Patel would nurture these kinds of networks, whose information flow could not only stir or stall his foot soldiers but also provide insights that could bring the administration to a standstill. As we shall see later in the book, these proved invaluable when he battled some of independent India’s most intractable problems—from Hyderabad to Kashmir.

Patel used these early years to embed this chain of information gathering and dissemination deep within the Congress system.

Each district, almost every taluka, and most groups of villages had their Congress organisations and headquarters. Communication up and down was encouraged so that people felt that they were heard and attended. During the satyagraha campaigns, these

headquarters would be bolstered with the arrival of volunteers from outside and the communication network expanded.⁹⁴

What helped this sort of chain of command is that on the ground were men like the Mehta brothers and Desai who had their own cadres. If Patel called for a revolt, they were ready to follow. Bardoli showed the need for such a diversified, intricate cadre force because, as Patel warned the villagers of Bardoli, ‘if you fail in this conflict, rest assured you will not be able to fight again for a hundred years’.⁹⁵

Bardoli came at a critical time for Patel and the Congress, but more importantly, it came at a definitive moment for Gandhi. Would he be able to transform the Congress, when there was clearly a space to do so, and take complete control? Or would he be transformed instead by the party and its factionalism? Since his release from jail, Gandhi had tried to bring the party together once again and merge the Swaraj Party back into the Congress. But the task needed crucial triggers which would show that Gandhi and his closest aides were able to deliver on the ground.

It was at this moment that Patel delivered. He gave the villagers the sense that he had personally tried to reason with the government, which had crassly shunned them. His letter of accommodation had had a response ‘that can scarcely be called a reply’.⁹⁶

He defined the struggle in moral, and not monetary, terms: of course, the villagers could pay, but should they? The law, he said, had been ‘drafted so that the government can interpret it any way it likes. It is a law appropriate only to a truly tyrannical government.’⁹⁷

He also built up a feeling, as had been done in Kheda by Gandhi, that everything had been tried from his side to cooperate with an intractable government, and that there was no path left but to agitate.

What more can I say to the government in these circumstances? We have done everything we could and now there remains only one way, that is to oppose force with force. The government has all the paraphernalia of authority and has physical strength of the armed forces. You have the strength of truth and your capacity to endure pain. These are two rival forces. The government’s stand is unjust and to oppose it is, therefore, your duty. If

that is fixed in your minds, then no amount of the government's brute strength is going to have the slightest effect. They wish to collect money but it is for you to give.⁹⁸

By saying this Patel was shifting the responsibility of the fight to the hands of the peasants.

It is for you to decide whether you will pay the revised land revenue or not. If you make up your minds that you will not give even one pie, whatever the government may do, however many confiscations it may carry out, however many fields it may take away, the government will not be able to collect the revised land revenue, which you are unwilling to accept. The government does not have in its possession any weapons with which it can compel you to modify your decision, but do not make up your mind because someone flatters you or because you have confidence in me.⁹⁹

This is a tough message to give to peasants so early in this non-violent or satyagraha-based phase of the national movement. There would have been reason to believe that this may backfire, and yet Patel persists.

When you take this decision, remember that you are taking it as a pledge, but if you have at the back of your mind the fear that against this powerful government you will not be able to stand out, for heaven's sake do not enter the fight. If you, on the other hand, are satisfied that this government is not prepared to listen to any fair proposal and that by failing to stand up to it, you will only ruin yourselves and your children and in addition lose your self-respect, then alone you should undertake this fight.¹⁰⁰

By doing this, he also took it beyond money.

This is not merely a question of an increase of a lakh of rupees or so, or of 37 lakhs in 30 years but a question of truth and falsehood, a question of self-respect. It is a fight against the government's practice of not giving any hearing to the agriculturists!¹⁰¹

Patel reframed the contours of the struggle. It was not about money. It was against oppression and about self-respect. Even losing in this battle, he seemed to be saying, would be worthwhile.

By escalating the commitment of the villagers of Bardoli to this conflict, Patel prevented any easy rollback—backtracking would be ruinous for their future, he said. It helped that three key legislature members joined Patel in telling the villagers that they too had tried in every way to convince the government that raising the land tax by such an extent was a bad idea.

The Bardoli satyagraha had another unique point. It managed to bring together on the same platform ‘patidars, baniyas, Christians, Muslims and backward classes’. ¹⁰² Even in this, the ground for assimilation had been work in progress for some time. When Gandhi visited Surat in 1916, the ashrams that had supported his South Africa movement listened intently to him. The ‘language and idiom’ that Gandhi spoke

[Were] rooted in Indian mores, the traditional symbols that he used to convey his ideas were similar to those of the Aryasamajist Patidar and Anavils. His message, thus, fell on receptive ears [. . .] as the groups which were to be hardest hit by the government decision were also the most dominant in the area and since they had well-knit caste organizations, Bardoli taluka presented a case of near-mobilised situation. ¹⁰³

Curiously, caste-based mobilizations played an important role.

Significantly enough, it is the traditional caste councils that were used as the primary units of action during the agitation. They were considered so effective that even those castes, such as Baniyas, Rajputs, Kolis etc. which had no caste councils were organised on the same lines as the Patidars and the Anavils. Support for the movement was mobilised through these caste based institutions. ¹⁰⁴

Gandhi and the leaders of the ashrams had created the ground for a potential coming-together of forces, and the land tax provided a common cause.

[T]he Bardoli Satyagraha provides an excellent example of the fusion of traditional ethos and mores with wider political and economic issues. The leaders [. . .] did not altogether ignore professional and secular groups in their scheme of action, but their dependence on caste groups was heavy indeed. The Satyagraha amply proved how a sagacious leadership could utilise the existing social structure and traditional institutions to arouse consciousness against an alien government. It is another matter that in so doing they unwittingly perpetuated the very structure which they professedly desired to demolish. ¹⁰⁵

To use all of this and build it into a successful rebellion needed Patel’s hands-on craftiness. A secret report submitted by the deputy superintendent of police at Surat after a clandestine visit to Bardoli on 31 January 1928 sums up the campaign’s immediate impact, and Patel’s deft move to anchor the rebellion.

Bardoli taluka has now become a permanent settlement for the agitators in numerous Swaraj Ashrams and chaavnis under the dictatorship of Vallabhbhai J. Patel who has made his permanent headquarters in Bardoli and has recently purchased in his own name very valuable land in Vedchhi worth about Rs. 25,000 for Rs. 9,000 and he is going to build another Swaraj Ashram there. [...] The aim and object of these agitators is to keep the fire of non-cooperation agitation burning in this well-organised taluka so that it may be ready at any moment to start satyagraha when required.¹⁰⁶

The deputy superintendent must have been truly frightened by what he had seen in Bardoli, because he goes on to list a range of reasons why he felt sure that the movement would not be successful: people were stealing money in it, and they were running out of money, it was not popular enough and Patel was losing his grip on the satyagraha. The police officer wrote:

[The satyagraha] is a profitable business for the workers who talk like angels but who are adepts in the art of maintaining themselves at the expense and on the charity of other people. It is however very doubtful if Vallabhbhai and his colleagues would again be successful in obtaining the same combination of strength for a campaign as they did last year, because their movements for social reform and uplift of the depressed classes is [sic] not universally popular and the agitation for the prohibition of liquor and toddy drinking has been a failure in the taluka.¹⁰⁷

The officer even referred to corruption.

Instances of immorality in the ashrams have gradually come to light. Some serious embezzlements have been detected with respect to the Bardoli satyagraha fund money.¹⁰⁸

There might have been some truth to people trying to steal money from the campaign because Gandhi's son Ramdas was soon made the treasurer and accountant of the Bardoli satyagraha, but the deputy superintendent of police was merely being optimistic about the rest. Far from collapsing, days after this note was written, Patel was asking 5000 students in Gujarat at a meeting to stop attending classes and participate in the satyagraha. A week later, he was describing the Bardoli satyagraha as the war of Kurukshetra for which the peasants of the area had been prepared for since six years earlier (when Gandhi called off the Civil Disobedience Movement) and telling them that their revolt would

[T]horoughly convince the government as to what evil consequences result through awakening a sleeping lion [. . .] At the time of the [non-cooperation] fight in 1921, the Bardoli taluka was ready to fight selflessly on behalf of the whole country, while the present fight is for their own maintenance and for the welfare of their children [. . .] they will have to face hardships; but, at the same time, the glory of the Bardoli taluka will be immortalised in the history of the fight for Swaraj.¹⁰⁹

Soon afterwards, Patel wrote a lengthy letter to Sir Leslie Wilson, the Governor of Bombay, in which he made a fair offer: '[P]ostpone the collection of revenue according to enhanced rates and examine the issue anew. In the fresh move, the people should be given opportunity to present their case, and assurance be given to them that their presentation would be given proper weightage.'¹¹⁰

At the end of the letter, though, he took a different tone. 'I with all modesty take this opportunity to inform you that there is a possibility of the fight being very grim,' Patel warned, 'and it is in your hands to prevent it and respectfully to give opportunity to the people to present their case to an impartial tribunal.'

How could Patel display such audacity at a time when there was no clear indication which way Gandhi, or even the Congress, would proceed? There was every chance that Gandhi might not regain the momentum of the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Congress might be split into multiple factions, all spending more time quarrelling with one another than fighting the British.

Two things seemed to have assisted Patel. First, he was on home turf and he had personally worked to build networks and fuel resistance in this constituency for a long time. Second, he had in hand an issue that got diverse, even competing groups together. Perhaps he also astutely saw the opportunity—if there was to be a revival of the independence movement led by Gandhi, this was fertile ground for it.

The reply from the government came in two lines:

Mr Patel, Your letter 6th instant regarding the new assessment of land revenue in Bardoli taluka has been placed before His Excellency, and it has been sent to the Revenue Department from perusal and disposal.

—Yours J. Ker, Private Secretary.

If Ker deserves any place in history it is merely to demonstrate how not to respond to a letter from the leader of a brewing rebellion.

Patel now swore to the Bardoli peasants that he would personally lead this fight to the finish. In every conceivable public spot of importance in the taluka, booths and camps proclaiming the satyagraha were established. At least 250 people were assigned just to run these camps. These kiosks were also important to nudge bystanders into joining the campaign (in one meeting in February 1928, at least one local leader had suggested that 25 per cent of the Muslims had reservations about the success of the satyagraha).¹¹¹

Thousands of pamphlets were printed and distributed across Bardoli, and from Kathiawar came folk singers who made new songs of rebellion: ‘Even if we are cut to pieces, we shall keep our pledge. Wake up brave fighters, the battle drums have sounded. Wake up the brave, run away the coward.’¹¹²

The local imam got into the act, especially as the month of Ramzan arrived. The elderly man did not miss a single fast and through it all continued to preach the mission of the satyagraha, which attracted many left-out Muslims to the cause.

But there were other things that could derail the movement—the marriage season, for instance. One of Patel’s lieutenants complained:

The atmosphere fills me with doubt and dismay [. . .] No one seems to me to be in fighting trim [. . .] The marriage season is in full swing [. . .] Gaily dressed people are running about in their carts from village to village [. . .] Are these the people you want to go to war against a mighty government?¹¹³

A swift leaflet from Patel was drafted: ‘If you have any marriages to celebrate, you will have to see that you are through with them very quickly. If you wish to fight a war, then you cannot afford to celebrate weddings.’¹¹⁴

This pamphlet also spoke in detail about the strategy Patel wanted the protesting farmers to use. The question it answered was, what to do when, after having refused to pay land tax, the government sends tax officials and the police to confiscate people’s belongings?

Patel's answer was simple: let them not find a single person to carry the goods! His logic was clear—usually one or two officials would be sent to each household to confiscate goods. The government did not have enough people to send large troops to every defaulting home. What would those officials do? They would look to hire locals to coolie the materials. What if when they arrived, there was no one to be found? Said Patel:

So, arrange matters that the government would find it impossible to discover a single man to help with them in carrying away any confiscated property. That must be the condition throughout the taluka. I have yet to see any officer with authority carrying away on his own shoulders the property confiscated by him.¹¹⁵

It was a brilliant plan. If there were no people around, who would be able to take away the confiscated goods? After all, what could the government do except take away personal property if people failed to pay tax?

As the action increased rapidly on the ground in Bardoli, the government sent Patel another letter reaffirming what he had been warning the farmers about: that the government wanted to confiscate their property if they refused to pay the tax. 'If the people of Bardoli whether on their own initiative or on the advice of outsiders fail to pay up the land revenue, the Governor-in-Council will not have the slightest hesitation in taking whatever steps they are entitled to take,' the letter said.¹¹⁶

Patel seems to have taken offence to the word 'outsider'. He stung back:

You regard me and my colleagues as outsiders. I am helping my own people and am bringing to light your misdeeds. You are forgetting that you speak on behalf of a government which is composed mainly of outsiders. [...] I claim to belong as much to Bardoli as to any other part of India [...] How much nicer would it have been if they [the people of Bardoli] had it in their power equally easily to dispense with this administration of foreigners which has been sapping their vitality and which is maintained in power by force of arms.¹¹⁷

When he received this letter from Patel, the revenue secretary in Bombay was furious. Bardoli was not bankrupt, he lashed back, nor were the people of Bardoli bankrupt. There were, according to him, no signs of financial difficulties, and the decision to increase the land tax was final. As a final

insult, the secretary added: ‘If you wish to carry on any further correspondence on this subject, you may do so through the district collector.’¹¹⁸

The newspapers, which till recently had been praising Patel for his work in flood relief, now swiftly turned against him. The *Times of India* had cheered Patel in his flood relief efforts but it soon changed its tone. This man was pushing farmers to take part in an illegal act, it argued. It was a narrow movement with low chance of success, and, claimed the *Times of India*, even Gandhi was not really supporting it.¹¹⁹

This was, of course, not true. Early in the Bardoli satyagraha, after the response letters of the government, Gandhi had written:

The government’s reply shows merely debating skill and is characteristically rude in its tone. The government goes on to say that Vallabhbhai is an outsider and a foreigner and that if he and his colleagues had not gone to Bardoli, the people would have paid up the land revenue. What is this strange perversity that which leads this foreign government to call a person like Vallabhbhai a foreigner to Bardoli? It is conduct such as this which had led people like myself to consider it a sin to remain loyal to the government and to want to non-cooperate with it. When courtesy reaches such limits, how can one hope for justice?¹²⁰

The government tried other tricks. One deputy collector in a district begged a well-off villager to give at least one rupee so he could claim that at least some of the villagers were ready to pay tax. The villager refused. In some places, the government managed to threaten a few villagers to leave money on the windowsill so that collectors passing by could just pick it up. But when this was discovered, the satyagrahis made such villagers donate the same amount to the movement as punishment.

In an example of the kind of bullying being used by the government, fifty landowners in the Valod village of Bardoli were given a ten-day notice that if their land tax dues were not cleared, they would not only have to pay the tax but also 25 per cent of the amount as fine. In Raniparaj village, the local tax collector severely thrashed and abused the tribal villagers.

But in every case, the villagers fought back. In Amheti village, a frightened Brahmin priest and landowner paid the tax but immediately

faced social boycott, and the next five weddings—a large source of income—were denied him by the villagers, who instead got another priest to conduct the ceremonies. The priest gave Rs 30 to the government but lost earnings worth Rs 100.

Patel went around Bardoli speaking wherever he could and to ever-increasing crowds. You are the hammer, he told the villager, and the government is red-hot metal; if the hammer is strong and steady, it could mould the metal into any shape.¹²¹

The Bardoli satyagraha brought out the crowd-rousing speaker in Patel. He had shown in Ahmedabad that he could be an efficient administrator and he was acknowledged as a great organizer. But Bardoli made him a mass leader who gathered crowds by the thousands to listen to him. He told them:

Remember the law of nature. You know that you cannot have those heaps of cotton until a few cotton seeds are buried under the earth and destroyed. But they are reborn again with a larger life. And hardship and misery are not new things to you. Who puts up with heat, cold, rain, and all the inclemencies of weather, as the tiller of the soil does? [. . .] Why should the farmer who has to work during the torrential rains, who has to till the marshes, get work from the violent bullocks and has to bear heat and cold be afraid of anything?¹²²

In fact he was not shy of taking on the upper castes in his speeches too, if he spotted any backtracking. ‘I wish you to see how for the sake of an appointment [in the government, presumably for a job], a Brahmin with a sacred thread round his neck is wandering about the taluka to attach cattle. See how our own people belonging to the so-called higher communities are changed into monsters by this administration.’¹²³

K.M. Munshi, who had resigned from the Bombay Legislative Assembly in protest, noticed that women were crowding out men from Patel’s meetings, often placing donations at his feet. One old woman was asked by Patel whether she was afraid. She answered—why should I be when you are there to protect us? Not I, said Patel, but Lord Ram. The good lord is always with us, answered the woman, who was then asked if she wasn’t worried about the police coming to her house. She said—not at all, it is only because they are coming that Vallabhbhai has come to my house too!¹²⁴

As the movement got more and more strident, Gandhi weighed in on the issue of social boycott of the few who had cooperated with the British.

By May 1918, nine members of the Bombay Legislative Council asked the governor to create the tribunal of inquiry that Patel wanted. He refused, and they resigned en masse. Patel wrote:

Boycott is a devastating weapon. Boycott can be violent and non-violent. Not to accept services is non-violent. Not to offer services can be violent. Not to accept invitation for dinner, not to attend marriage and other functions at his place, not to have any business dealings with him, not to take his help are non-violent types of boycott. Not to serve him when the boycotted person is ill, not to allow doctor to visit his place, not to help in the funeral when he dies, to turn him away from the well, or temple is violent boycott [. . .]
Violent boycott in the end damages the struggle.¹²⁵

Of course, Patel used to tell his lieutenants that a person who pays will ‘have his head severed’¹²⁶ but he only meant it figuratively.

By the end of May, the government was issuing desperate threats that even more land would be confiscated—1400 acres had already been taken, another 5000 acres was next.

What does that matter, answered Patel, humans needed just six feet of land to be buried, and the Hindus did not even need that (as their corpses would be burnt on pyres).¹²⁷

As the protest stretched into June, Patel decided he would live full-time in Bardoli. No doubt part of the reason was what he had detailed in an earlier speech:

The government says you [the people of Bardoli] are happy. I must say, when I look at your houses, that I cannot see that you are any happier than the peasants of other districts. But we must not become so soft that we even cease to be annoyed at injustice. That is cowardice [. . .] It is this excessive gentleness of yours that is now your biggest difficulty. Therefore let some pride show itself in your eye and your expression, and learn to fight for justice and against injustice.¹²⁸

The threat from the government at the end of May 1928 had only one impact on Patel—as the British and many others would learn in the years to come: it made him even more ruthlessly determined. ‘If the government means to devour the land, I warn them betimes that the conflagration will

spread over all of Gujarat. They will realise not a farthing in Gujarat next year.'

¹²⁹ By this time, even the Congress was openly endorsing Patel's satyagraha in Bardoli, and the rehabilitation of Gandhi at the head of the party was nearly complete. Victory at Bardoli would finish the journey and neither Gandhi nor Patel would ever look back again.

By July 1928, Patel was promising the villagers a peasant revolution and offering Russia as an example.

Russia is a big country [...] where peasants and workers have established their rule. [...] But the state of things is quite different in India. Foreigners are ruling over us and some of us are trying to end it. The city folk assert that it [is] their right to rule the country when it will change hands. But I have to convince these men living in the cities that we do not want their rule if they are going to carry it on the lines on which the foreigners are at present doing it.

¹³⁰ Patel even went to the extent of saying that city-dominated government in independent India would be rejected. (Ironically, after Independence, and his death, that is exactly the sort of government India got.)

We will refuse such raj, if it is granted to the country. Under such rule there is no scope for religion or mercy. The poor have no voice under such rule. You think of securing the present system of administration of the foreigners. But this is not the kind of Swaraj which will provide the starving peasants of India with two full meals a day. The British administration is not carried on through cities. It depends upon millions of villages in India [...] It is the villages, therefore, that are the backbone of the administration of this country.

¹³¹ These words, of course, echo Gandhi's. They build on the Mahatma's dream: a nation of *gram swaraj*, self-sustaining villages. Patel had become, or so one would believe when one saw his proficiency at running municipalities and fighting urban bureaucratic wars, the consummate city dweller. But the village in Patel, where he had come from, never quite died. In fact, this is one of the most relevant insights into his character and one which thoroughly distinguishes him from Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru was utterly urban. To give him credit where it is due, Nehru recognized his class deficiency. He writes early in *The Discovery of India*:

I was not an admirer of my own class or kind, and yet inevitably I looked to it for leadership in the struggle for India's salvation; that middle class felt caged and circumscribed and wanted to grow and develop itself. Unable to do so within the framework of British rule, a spirit of revolt grew against this rule, and yet this spirit was not directed against the structure that crushed us. It sought to retain it and control it by displacing the British. These middle classes were too much the product of that structure to challenge it and seek to uproot it.¹³²

But as history would record, Nehru's India would retain much of the edifice of British India, from its focus on cities and centralized planning to the 'steel-frame of the Raj', which changed only in name from the Indian Civil Service to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), and keeping ridiculous nineteenth-century British laws alive well into the twenty-first century. In 2014, the Indian government embarked on a colonial law—scrapping spree—among the ones finally dropped were the requirement of a permit to fly kites (under the Indian Aircraft Act of 1934); the Treasure Trove Act of 1878, which had a provision to arrest anyone who found anything worth more than Rs 10 on the ground and failed to hand it over to the nearest revenue officer (whatever that might be); a jail sentence for adult males who did not participate in fighting off locust attacks in Delhi; and a 100-year-old law that capped the rate for a boat ride on the River Ganga at 2 annas, even though that denomination itself had been discarded in 1957.¹³³

In retaining the ICS as the IAS, Patel, at least, was more enthusiastic than Nehru who is said to have once quoted someone as saying that it was 'neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service',¹³⁴ but Patel saw it as a unifying force in a country plagued with divisions, an administrative glue. He was one of the most vocal champions for having a united civil service, even though many Indian states would have just preferred their own civil service, because Patel saw that a strong all-India bureaucratic service was critical to binding a nation that had just won independence, and to stop it from splintering any further. And even though Patel died in 1950 and Nehru was prime minister till 1964 the steel frame was never removed.

But when Patel looked towards his own class for leadership, he saw a very different image than Nehru. One of the most poignant, and delicately understated, descriptions of this difference between the two men that I've

read is from a document I stumbled upon while rummaging through the shelves of the beauteous Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University. It was a slim volume of the collected lectures of the guru of Indian architecture, Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi. Doshi was born in Pune in 1927, worked with Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn (especially when Kahn was designing the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad), and created an architectural studio called the Vastu Shilpa Foundation, known around the world for its wise expertise. Doshi has been on the selection committee of the Pritzker Prize ('the architecture Nobel') and won a Padma Shri. He won the Pritzker Prize in 2017.

I was particularly fascinated by a lecture Doshi gave at the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design at Urbino in Italy in 1991. This is the year India transformed into what we now know as modern India, when its economy opened to the world, unleashing forces that have completely changed the country. Doshi's lecture is remarkably prophetic, as even in 1991 he was worried that Indian cities were becoming unsustainable and that mass migration from villages, destroying small, local economies in the pursuit of scale, might not be the path for India. Two people, says Doshi, saw this with some degree of accuracy at Independence, and one could not. 'Mahatma Gandhi,' said Doshi, 'always professed that we must be self-sufficient. And he wrote many books on how to build villages and how to build towns and cities. But so far people have not followed him as much.'¹³⁵

The second was Nehru. 'But he did not believe in small scale industry. He believed in large industrial empires in [the] public sector. He believed that if India has to really reach the level of the world, it must be highly industrialised. And we must have heavy industries.'¹³⁶

Nehru believed what he saw around him. Industrialization had made England great. It had been the backbone of the Soviet revolution.

But, Doshi seems to be asking—and indeed this question lies coiled in the middle of the Gandhi–Patel–Nehru relationship—did Nehru miss out on India's uniqueness in the process?

Patel, says Doshi, did not make that mistake.

The third person was Sardar Patel who died rather early but if he had lived longer the country's fate would have been very different. He believed in Gandhi, he believed in industrialisation but he also knew the backbone of the community, i.e. the ecosystem, the agriculture, the poor man. So here there was a group which was fully aware of the many ways in which the change can take place. However, as the first prime minister, Nehru's perception of what is the goal and means of development prevailed.¹³⁷

There was talk of development that sultry July in 1928 too. The British cabinet was discussing Bardoli and the secretary of state for India was telling the viceroy Lord Irwin,

It seems to me that it might develop in a variety of ways. At present only a small part of the prairie has caught fire, but there are other and very inflammable prairies in the vicinity [...] Primary consideration in my judgement is to break this movement before it has gone any further and to show the whole of India unmistakably that no such attempt can succeed.¹³⁸

Within forty-eight hours of this conversation, the government in India asked for a meeting between the Governor of Bombay, Leslie Wilson, and Patel, who included three key women agitators in his delegation. Wilson told Patel that Lord Irwin wanted peace. But both Gandhi and Patel smelt a rat. And indeed there was an escalation when the government tried to push in troops and use criminal law as well as land revenue law to coerce the people into paying the taxes. Said Patel, 'I have not entered into this conflict in order to save you some money. I wish to teach a lesson, through this campaign, to the peasants of the whole of Gujarat that this government is able to carry on only because of their weakness.'¹³⁹

But by August all such measures had failed. Patel's words were echoing from village to village:

So long as a square foot of land belonging to any agriculturist or to any participant in this fight remains forfeited, this fight will continue. There are two kinds of flies, one, the bee, goes far into the jungle and collects honey from flowers; the other type goes and settles on filth and spreads filth. One gives honey to the world while the other spreads diseases and death. It is the latter type which is at work amongst you; so I have heard. Do not let such come near you.¹⁴⁰

On 6 August 1928, the government agreed to return confiscated land. There would be no increase in land tax. The farmers would pay according to their old tax tariff rate—this happened swiftly and a month after the truce, almost everybody had paid.

As Gandhi prepared to travel to Bardoli, he said, ‘I am going to Bardoli in response to the command of the Sardar. Of course Vallabhbhai often consults me, but does not a commander consult even a private serving under him? I am going to Bardoli not to take Vallabhbhai’s place but to serve under him.’¹⁴¹ When someone asked him to visit the villages, he said, ‘Not unless Vallabhbhai wants me to do so [. . .] I admit I am Vallabhbhai’s elder brother, but in public life no matter whether one is father or elder brother of the man under whom one serves, one must obey instructions.’¹⁴²

Celebrations broke out across Bardoli and in other parts of Gujarat, cheering their leader, a man the people now called Sardar.

Later Gandhi would say about Bardoli:

It is true that we were victorious because of the strenuous efforts of a commander like Vallabhbhai [. . .] I from a distance was wishing your victory. It is true that I have not come in your midst and worked. Yet I was in Vallabhbhai’s pocket, and he could have called me whenever he wanted. But I cannot take the credit for your victory. The credit is yours and your Sardar’s.¹⁴³

The real task, of course, had been done by Vallabhbhai Patel.

Bardoli definitively launched Patel into the very summit of the Indian freedom movement but quite like his legacy, the importance of Bardoli too has never been fully celebrated. In the course of my research I came across a report in the *Economic and Political Weekly* about the celebrations of Patel’s birth centenary in Bardoli. EPW noted that the only leader worth their salt who remembered the importance of Bardoli during the centenary year was Chaudhary Charan Singh, then the president of the newly formed farmers’ party Bharatiya Lok Dal. ‘As a complete stranger to this part and with pretensions of being a farmer himself, Charan Singh proved quite a draw,’ said the EPW.¹⁴⁴

Long after the Bardoli campaign was over, it would echo in a secret government letter talking about Patel's release from prison in 1934, where a British officer wrote to another:

I doubt whether any leader has such a strong hold over an important section of the people as Vallabhbhai has over Gujarat. Vallabhbhai's personal influence in Gujarat is possibly greater even than Gandhi's. He is a practical man who is not obsessed by impossible ideas. I believe that in spite of all the hardships which the rural population of Gujarat suffered during the civil disobedience movement the people would follow Vallabhbhai again in any direction laid down by him.¹⁴⁵



FIVE

‘WHAT IS THIS FEUDAL “SARDAR”?!’

On 30 October 1928, a sixty-three-year-old man, bludgeoned and bleeding, stood before a crowd of mute protestors, who seeing him blood-soaked, were silent no more.

‘I declare that the blows struck on me today will be the last nails in the coffin of British rule in India!’ thundered Lala Lajpat Rai.

He had been leading a large group of peaceful protestors opposing the infamous Simon Commission under the chairmanship of Sir John Allsebrook Simon, and which had in it Clement Attlee, the British prime minister who would push through Indian independence—much to the disdain of his greatest rival, the war hero responsible for genocidal famine in India and Gandhi’s bitter critic, Sir Winston Churchill.

The commission that was supposed to report on India’s political situation did not have any Indians in it—a cause for widespread protests. In fact outrage against the commission was the one thing that united the Congress and Muslim League with Jinnah announcing at the League’s Calcutta session in 1928,

A constitutional war has been declared on Great Britain. Negotiations are not to come from our side. Let the Government sue for peace. We are denied equal partnership. We will resist the new doctrine to the best of our power. Jallianwallah Bagh was a physical

butchery, the Simon Commission is a butchery of our souls. By appointing an exclusively white Commission, Lord Birkenhead¹ has declared our unfitness for self-government.²

But at the same time, the seeds of permanent mistrust between Hindus and Muslims were already being sown. Sir Ross Masood, a prominent Muslim leader and the vice chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, was writing to the British government:

The differences of the Muslims and the Hindus are deep-seated and Muslims feel that they would be swamped in a self-governing India. Their minds are turning more and more to the idea of federation between modernised Afghanistan with Persia in the background and with the allies in the frontier independent territories. The Punjab Muslims have long been talking among themselves of a union of northern Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and Afghanistan.³

This is the point where we must consider the roots of the division of India—not just into India and Pakistan, but into several other possible parts which Patel was instrumental in preventing to a certain extent.

Ross Masood was the grandson of the man widely believed to be the first person to spell out the idea of Hindus and Muslims as two separate peoples, or ‘different nations’. In a speech delivered in 1887, Sir Syed Ahmed spoke of India being ‘the country which is inhabited by two different nations.’⁴ Just thirty years after the revolt of Indian soldiers in the British colonial army in parts of northern India in 1857 where Hindus and Muslims had fought together against British rule, Ahmed explicitly ruled out a shared future for people of the two religions, arguing,

Now suppose that all English, and the whole English army, were to leave India, taking with them all their cannon and their splendid weapons and everything, then who would be the rulers of India? Is it possible that under these circumstances two nations—the Mahomedans and the Hindus—could sit on the same throne and remain equal in power? Most certainly not. It is necessary that one of them should conquer the other and trust it down. To hope that both could remain equal is to desire the impossible and the inconceivable.⁵

But, asked Sir Ahmed, what about the fact that there were many more Hindus than Muslims? He had the answer: Help would come from elsewhere.

At the same time, you must remember that although the number of Mahomedans is less than that of the Hindus, and although they contain fewer people who have received a high English education, yet they must not be thought insignificant or weak. Probably they would be by themselves enough to maintain their own position. But suppose they were not. Then our Mussalman brothers, the Pathans, would come out as a swarm of locusts from their mountain valleys, and make rivers of blood flow from their frontier in the north to the extreme end of Bengal.⁶

Maybe he was confident about this help coming. May he wasn't, but Sir Syed went to emphatically declare:

This thing—who, after the departure of the English, would be conquerors—would rest on the will of god. But until one nation had conquered the other and made it obedient, peace could not reign in the land. This conclusion is based on proofs so absolute that no one can deny it.⁷

Partition historiographers have gone through the curious exercise of trying to determine what—or who—caused Partition. Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India who had to negotiate the partition agreement with the Congress and the Muslim League on behalf of Her Majesty's government, blamed Jinnah's chronic megalomania and called him a 'psychopathic case'.⁸ Scholars like Khalid bin Sayeed have argued that understanding Jinnah's personal ambition is key to understanding the creation of Pakistan, and detect a congruence between the ambition of Jinnah, a domineering man whom reverses in life had made desperate, and the needs and characteristics of his people, a community in search of a saviour who would unite them in the name of glory for Islam.⁹

But writers like Ayesha Jalal have argued that perhaps Jinnah never really wanted a separate country but more of a loose federal structure with greater autonomy for Muslim-majority regions.¹⁰ More recently scholars like Christophe Jaffrelot and Farzana Shaikh have pointed to many contradictions in the creation of Pakistan from the insecurity of the elites to the unclear role of Islam in the creation of the new nation, unclear at least between the nuanced view of Jinnah and the masses who supported the idea. 'Whatever the subtleties of Jinnah's tactics, those who voted with their feet to create Pakistan saw it as a Muslim country.'¹¹ All this may have led

to Pakistan's main problem—a sense of confusion about its identity and the relationship of that identity to its national religion of choice, Islam. A confusion that, some have argued, has led to the rather problematic conclusion that Pakistan is merely 'not India'. As Shaikh has said,

Indeed, much of the uncertainty over Pakistan's identity stems from the nagging question of whether its identity is fundamentally dependent on India and what its construction might entail outside of opposition to the latter. This has prompted the suggestion that Pakistan is a state burdened with a negative identity shaped by the circumstances of Pakistan.¹²

So, from Sir Penderel Moon's assertion that 'There is, I believe, no historical parallel for a single individual effecting such a political revolution; and his achievement is a striking refutation of the theory that in the making of history the individual is of little or no significance. It was Mr Jinnah who created Pakistan and undoubtedly made history'¹³ the debate shifted to Salman Rushdie's striking verdict in the 1983 novel *Shame* on Pakistan being 'insufficiently imagined'. 'Pakistan, the peeling, fragmenting palimpsest, increasingly at war with itself, maybe described as failure of the dreaming mind. Perhaps the pigments used were the wrong ones [...] or perhaps the place was just insufficiently imagined,' wrote Rushdie.¹⁴

This phrase—'insufficiently imagined'—is mentioned in books and articles, essays and commentary, again and again but there are few references to the words that follow: 'a picture full of irreconcilable elements, midriffbaring immigrant saris versus demure indigenous Sindhi shalwar-kurtas, Urdu versus Punjabi, now versus then: a miracle that went wrong'.¹⁵

It is this sentence that captures some of the essence of the arguments that followed from people like Jaffrelot and Shaikh, who spoke of the lack of a unifying identity.

The question of the influence of Hindu nationalism and its role in propelling a divisive dialogue that set the ground for Partition has also been brought into play. The researcher Belkacem Belmekki has argued that some

of the roots of division between Hindus and Muslims, in fact, came from a movement led by prominent Hindus in the late nineteenth century who pushed for the replacement of the language Urdu by Hindi as the court language.¹⁶ Freedom fighter Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who published the monograph *Hindutva* in 1925 also enters the debate through a 1937 speech given in Karnavati where he speaks of ‘two antagonistic nations’, Hindus and Muslims, living side by side. Savarkar says, of his vision of independent India,

We shall ever guarantee protection to the religion, culture and language of the minorities for themselves, but we shall no longer tolerate any aggression on their part on the equal liberty of the Hindus to guard their religion, culture and language as well [...] The Hindus as a nation are willing to discharge their duty to a common Indian State on equal footing. But if our Moslem countrymen thrust on a communal strife on the Hindus and cherish anti-Indian and extra territorial designs of establishing a Mohammedan rule or supremacy in India then let the Hindus look to themselves and stand on their own legs and fight singlehanded.¹⁷

In a way, Savarkar is already responding to the fear of what would happen once the British left, since a large part of India had been under Muslim rule for centuries before the colonizers arrived. Arguments in a similar vein were echoed by some other Hindu leaders like Bhai Parmanand and Nabagopal Mitra. In turn, Muslim icons like Iqbal built on Sir Syed Ahmad’s dream and gave detailed geographical shape to what a separate Muslim homeland would look like.

Like a new Medina—as Venkat Dhulipala has explained in his book by the same name, arguing that far from being insufficiently imagined, the idea had been adequately considered and detailed for years by prominent clerics in Uttar Pradesh, including Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani (founder of the Jamiatul Ulema-e-Islam and later acclaimed as Pakistan’s Shaikhul Islam) who ‘declared that Pakistan would recreate the Islamic utopia first fashioned by the Prophet in Medina’.¹⁸

In this environment of division and distrust, the competing anxieties of the two communities created ever deeper fissures. Even though Rushdie had

seen the miracle go wrong in Pakistan, the magic had begun fading long before that—even in India.

As early as 1924 even that most non-sectarian of humanists, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, was driven to despair, telling a Bengali newspaper:

A very important factor which is making it impossible for Hindu-Muslim unity to become an accomplished fact is that the Muslims cannot confine their patriotism to any one country. I had frankly asked whether, in the event of any Mohammedan power invading India, they would stand side by side with their Hindu neighbours to defend their common land. I was not satisfied by the reply I got from them . . . Even such a man as Mr. Mohammad Ali has declared that under no circumstances is it possible for any Mohammedan, whatever be his country, to stand against any other Mohammedan.¹⁹

A caveat must be added here that this assertion is not quite correct if you look at Middle Eastern history.

Who is Mohammad Ali and why is Tagore being driven to despair by him? Ali is one of two brothers (the other was Shaukat Ali) who spearheaded the Khilafat Movement and rallied Gandhi's support to it. Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's personal secretary, had even seen them kiss Gandhi's feet.²⁰ But it was Mohammad Ali who later wrote,

As a follower of Islam I am bound to regard the creed of Islam as superior to that professed by the followers of any non-Islamic religion. And in this sense the creed of even a fallen and degraded Mussalman is entitled to a higher place than that of any other non-Muslim irrespective of his high character even though the person in question may be Mahatma Gandhi himself.²¹

It must be noted that Gandhi brushed off these harsh words: ‘May not the Maulana [Mohammad Ali] truthfully say that he is superior to the so-called greatest man in the world in so far at least the Maulana believes a religion which in his opinion is the best of all?’²²

But the Gandhian spirit would not, in time, be enough to stop the strife that was brewing. In our story at the moment, the strife was about to kill a man.

Lala Lajpat Rai, who had been on the front line of the protests against the Simon Commission, died barely a fortnight after being brutally beaten. With his death, one of the last leaders powerful enough to stand against the

will of Gandhi was gone. And so began the process of folding back members of the Swaraj Party into the Congress.

It would have occurred to many that Gandhi would now turn an encouraging eye at his devoted general who had just reinvigorated the Mahatma's power. Surely this was the time to give Patel his due—anoint him as the president of the Congress in Calcutta? Not only was Patel the 'natural choice' for the position, several local Congress committees even formally proposed his name.

However, it was not the first time that local and state Congress committees had demanded Sardar Patel as their leader nor would it be the last time that Gandhi would ignore their legitimate demand.

Motilal Nehru himself suggested Patel's name to Gandhi, though he also added Nehru's name as a natural candidate if, for some reason, the president's position did not go to Patel.

Meanwhile, other winds were rising in the east. If Nehru had an interest in justice, charm, and a powerful family name and fortune to back him, Subhas Chandra Bose was the classic prodigy. By the age of twenty-five, he had spent six months in jail. By twenty-seven he had not only become the general secretary of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee but had also become the youngest ever mayor of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation that ran 'the second city of the Empire'. ²³ Nehru had done considerably work among the United Provinces peasantry in the 1920s; Bose was a decade younger and really came into his own in the 1930s.

Nehru had also spent time working as the chairman of the Allahabad municipality, a job that fell to his lot when the Muslim faction of the Congress refused to accept the party's first choice: Purushottam Das Tandon. ²⁴ It was a job Nehru grew to like and in which he tried to weed out sycophancy—though, curiously, he seemed to believe ideating on electoral reform in the municipality ought to begin with an elaborate essay by him, 'bristling with quotations from many philosophers including [the French lawyer and thinker] Montesquieu'. ²⁵

Nehru also spent three stints in prison before 1928—from 6 December 1921 to 2 March 1922, 11 May 1922 to 31 January 1923, and 22 September

to 4 October 1923—the last of which caused a petulant squabble between Nehru and his father. It is a story worth repeating here because it gives insight into the relationship between the two Nehrus and into Motilal's promotion of his son for the president's post as early as 1928.

In 1923, upon being arrested by the police in the princely state of Nabha, Nehru wrote home asking his father not to worry.

But that was clearly asking too much of the proudest father in the world. Motilal had seen the vagaries of the legal system all his life, and he knew how vicious it could get in vindictive hands in a princely state. He was not wrong. The handcuffs were taken off only after twenty hours.²⁶

The moment Motilal Nehru got news of his son's arrest in Nabha, he telegrammed a local minister in Nabha and the viceroy himself. Within days and much to the angst of the local police officers, Nehru was released by the order of the viceroy. But, to his father's bewilderment, Nehru seemed irritable and prickly at being let off. This was a Gandhian move as the Mahatma would have probably refused to be released too.

The temptation to be a hero was overwhelming, causing a petulant Jawaharlal to become rude and insensitive to his father. He had prepared a very heroic draft statement to read in court.²⁷

These, then, were the choices before Gandhi—Patel, the hero of Bardoli, or Nehru, seeking, still, his moment of heroism. He confounded everyone and chose Motilal, the man who had drafted the Congress's response to the Simon Commission. A document accepted by all parties but rejected by three factions:

- Jawaharlal Nehru
- Subhas Chandra Bose
(Both men, and their followers, had but scorn for Motilal Nehru's report [called the Nehru Report] accepting dominion status for India within the empire.)
- The Muslim League which stuck to its old demand of separate electorates and weightage for Hindus and Muslims (which the Congress had broadly agreed to at the Lucknow Congress in 1916) and transfer of residuary powers to the provinces which meant that the League would control Muslim-majority regions.

Two other things happened during that fateful December session of the Congress in Calcutta that would break the party, and India, forever—and depict in the most visual way possible the hierarchy that was Patel's destiny.

First, just when it seemed that Nehru and Bose had reluctantly agreed to Gandhi's dictate on dominion status, Netaji forced a vote on it. Bose lost (1350 to 973 votes) but the young man fighting on home turf had shown his power over the crowds—and more importantly against Gandhi. From that point on, his days in the Congress were numbered.

Plus, a resolution was moved that Patel be felicitated.

Hold on, said 'the supporters of complete independence',²⁸ Vallabhbhai Patel cannot be felicitated until the word 'Sardar' is removed from the resolution. Why? Because it is feudal.

When the resolution was brought in without the word 'Sardar', a roar rose in the crowd gathered at the session: Where is Sardar?

He was not on stage.

Patel had been sitting quietly among the audience when the resolution was moved. As the demand to see him rippled through the crowd, with great reluctance, he stood up in his spot. Go up to the stage, the people cried. But Patel declined until the momentum of the crowd pushed him on to the stage.

When he spoke, it was entirely about the villagers of Bardoli. 'I thank you for having congratulated the peasants of Bardoli. If you are genuinely appreciative of what they have done, I hope that you too will follow in their footsteps.'²⁹

It lasted barely a minute and was one of the most self-effacing and dignified speeches after a marquee victory in the freedom movement.

As he concluded, one word reverberated through the crowd—Sardar.

The Congress presidency in those early years was usually a one-year term, though later Nehru served several consecutive terms and even Bose technically won two terms (1938 and 1939, though he was, in effect, ousted from the party soon after the second victory).

Motilal Nehru's term came to an end in 1929. Once again, the more provincial Congress committees recommended the Sardar's name over

those that supported Nehru's candidature.

The final decision once again rested with Gandhi, who, to start with, would only say that he himself would not take the position.

Nehru had his young band of followers. Two of them started to incessantly pester Patel for his answer—if the Sardar said no, then it would clear the path for their hero to ascend to the president's chair. To quote the Sardar, they harangued him like Nehru's 'hounds'³⁰ at that time.

For a man as apathetic as Patel to have used such strong words and that too while remembering the incident to compatriots in 1948, nineteen years after the fact, gives us a sense of how deep the wound was.

Soon afterwards, in his inimitable style, Gandhi asked Patel to withdraw, and he did.

But this would make their relationship one of the most complex and complicated in the Indian freedom movement. There is little doubt that Patel did not willingly give up a position that was rightfully his, one that he had earned as the leader of the Congress and as Gandhi's most devoted loyalist again and again. The signs of resentment rarely emerged, but as we shall see there were small cracks which reveal friction in this peculiar triad that was built on the camaraderie of competitors.

Why did Patel give up so easily the first two times, and with not much resistance in the occasions that followed? As Rajmohan Gandhi has written, the denial in 1929 was particularly brutal because Patel knew that a new phase of the freedom movement, probably its most definitive, was beginning.³¹ It could well be the stretch that took India to freedom from British rule. And the leader of the Congress in 1929 would get an opportunity to define the path to freedom. But this new era of the Congress had been made possible in large part by Patel's success in Bardoli. It was his leadership of the peasants that had shaken the British Empire all the way to the Parliament in London. His claim (not that he ever made it himself) to lead the Congress was natural and just, and he knew that this moment was unlikely to come again.

Not least because he was being superseded by a younger man (though forty-one years old), who would have seemed raw and impulsive to Patel.

He could see, as Rajmohan Gandhi has noted, that a precedence was being set of the ‘Congress’s throne passing directly from a father to his son’.

While holding Gandhi responsible for his bias, it must be recognized that the oath of Purna Swaraj was also egged on by Nehru’s presidency as he and Bose were agitating for independence rather than dominion status.

Could Patel read the portent of this crowning on the future of the Congress? We do not know. But Patel would have noticed that Nehru, who pitched himself as a reformer, a socialist beyond class and hierarchy with disdain towards titles (‘Please do not Pandit me too much,’³² he wrote to K.M. Panikkar, a fellow Congress member and later diplomat in independent India), was not averse to accepting a seat being vacated by his father. Nor was the father shy of promoting the son for the position.

Yet Patel stepped down at the merest word from Gandhi. And would again and again, though on the rare occasion after putting up some argument, and not averse to scuttling Nehru’s decisions and plans in other ways, as we shall see.

In the end, with Patel, Gandhi always got his way in granting key positions to Nehru. The Mahatma described himself as Patel’s elder brother³³ but though in a sense a father figure to both Patel and Nehru, his relationship with Nehru was more paternal. Upon his death, Patel would weep that the love he had missed from his own parents, he had got from Gandhi and the Mahatma’s wife Kasturba. But it was Nehru who, in things like party positions, got more than his share.

But why did Patel allow it? Why did he not insist on equity? Pursue his own cause more fervently? Use his followers to drum up his candidature? Unleash his own ‘hounds’ on his opponents? How is that a man widely believed to be in complete control of the party cadre of the Congress could not push his own case in the party?

There was an underlying strain of rivalry—though there was a great deal of affection too—between Nehru and Patel. Their relationship, especially in the later years when Patel grew older and was made weaker by disease, was relatively straightforward. Patel was exasperated by Nehru’s naivety and tried to protect India’s strategic interests from the first prime minister’s

enthusiastic idealism (and vacillations). Once India became independent, Patel recognized that he was too ill for greater political ambition and was content to let the younger man take the lead—but, as we will see, not without a significant conflict between the two and considerable resentment, especially in political decision-making. Age also played a factor—Patel was only six years younger than Gandhi, while Nehru was more than twenty years the Mahatma’s junior, a fact that undoubtedly added a different texture to the two relationships.

The more complex, even convoluted, bond is between Patel and Gandhi. The Sardar and the Mahatma’s relationship was likely the most layered in India’s freedom struggle. Saints are not supposed to need generals. But this Mahatma needed foot soldiers to deliver his mission, not least in the moments when he doubted himself. In such times, Gandhi’s emotions could be debilitating. In 1921, weeks before the arrival of the Prince of Wales to Indian shores, ‘Gandhi began publicly to question whether, if swaraj had not come by 31 December, he should survive’.³⁴ On the day the Prince of Wales landed in Bombay, Gandhi wrote that he had ‘an intense longing to lose myself in the Eternal and become merely a lump of clay in the Potter’s divine hands so that my service may become more certain because uninterrupted by the baser self in me’.³⁵ Always a stubborn man, his resoluteness sometimes turned harmful. In 1917, after six years of excluding all milk products from his strictly vegetarian diet, Gandhi contracted such severe dysentery that his body broke down entirely. And yet he would not touch cow’s or buffalo’s milk because he had vowed not to. Finally, as a compromise, goat’s milk was accepted.³⁶

Saints who indulge in such critical self-reflection, and intense vows, need lieutenants who can carry on the task at hand—like protesting the visit of the Prince—without missing a beat.

Gandhi and Patel had one more thing in common: loss of family. The Sardar had lost his father early and perhaps forever sought that affection in Gandhi, which might also explain the absolute nature of his deference to the older man. Gandhi had at best a troubled relationship with his eldest son. The Mahatma refused to allow Harilal to go to study law in England, as he

himself had done, arguing that a British education would be useless in the cause of the freedom struggle. Harilal broke away from the family, turned to alcohol, and fell so far from civility that he was accused by Gandhi of raping a member of the Gandhi family.³⁷ Gandhi perhaps saw a steadfastness of character in Patel which he would have liked to see in Harilal, but affectionate as he was towards Patel, his real weakness was Nehru.

But why?

There are no easy answers to be found—except maybe Nehru’s popularity among younger Congressmen. But one unmistakable strain seems to lead to the tricky question of Hinduism and Islam in the Indian freedom movement.

Gandhi’s own position on religion has been debated endlessly for decades—and this is a debate unlikely to end soon. He was born a Hindu and used Hindu scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gita, constantly as his source of sustenance. He was also more convinced than almost anyone else that the future of India had to be in the joint trusteeship of Hindus and Muslims. Even after Jinnah, another England-trained barrister, had argued for and won the Muslim homeland of Pakistan and the subsequent partition of India, Gandhi remained resolute that India had to remain a secular state (not as being independent of the church but ecumenical) committed to protecting its citizens regardless of their faith.

No one, not even committed orthodox Hindus, understood as Gandhi did the power of Hinduism when used in a political movement to galvanize the whole of the country. The Mahatma shaped himself into a character that every Indian recognized—the sadhu, the ascetic, the holy man. He called himself a Sanatani Hindu, suggesting that he followed the most ancient principles of the faith. He used bhajans in his gatherings, and spoke of the vision of Ram Rajya, the perfect society of Lord Ram. In doing so Gandhi acquired for himself the sanctity that only divinity imparts. He moved Ram Rajya beyond its literal meaning. Marxist historian Irfan Habib wrote:

By attributing all his statements to roots in the Indian civilisation, and particularly in Hinduism, he created a picture of Hinduism which made it possible for its followers to

accept modern values . . . Gandhi's Ram was God, and his Ram Rajya did not relate to something that was remotely sectarian.³⁸

Habib suggests that Gandhi extolled aspects of Hinduism by referring to an ancient past that most Hindus of the time would scarcely recognize. For instance, 'those who in the 1880s thought that the caste system was basic to Hinduism, by the year of Gandhi's death would have been ashamed if anyone were to refer to it as an essential part of Hinduism'.³⁹ Habib is technically wrong, of course, but he is conveying a sentiment.

Starting with the Khilafat Movement, many wondered whether Gandhi was doing the same with Islam too. After all,

Muslim rulers in India since the Mughals in the 16th century had consistently refused to recognise the temporal authority of Turkish Sultan as Caliph. Even Sir Syed [Ahmad Khan the 19th century Muslim scholar] had refused to acknowledge the Caliphate. He held that the institution of Caliphate 'with Imam Hasan ended on the expiry of thirty years after the death of the Prophet [. . .] The Sultans of Turkey had no justification to claim the title of Caliph, and that the loyalty to the British ruler was obligatory'.⁴⁰

Gandhi's support to the Khilafat Movement upset several key leaders among both Hindus and Muslims. Reading about the reactions to the Khilafat Movement today is to marvel at the ironies of the Indian freedom struggle.

Jinnah, whose uncompromising demand for Pakistan and strident rhetoric about Hindus and Muslims being separate nations incapable of living together led to the creation of Pakistan, was infuriated and disappointed at Gandhi's promotion of the movement. At the 1920 Nagpur Congress he fumed at journalist Durga Das, 'Well, young man, I will have nothing to do with this pseudo-religious approach to politics. I part company with the Congress and Gandhi.'⁴¹

Jinnah particularly deplored the Khilafat agitation, which had brought the reactionary mullah element to the surface. He was amazed, he said, that the Hindu leaders had not realised that this movement would encourage the Pan-Islamic sentiment that the Sultan of Turkey was encouraging to buttress his tottering empire and dilute the nationalism of the Indian Muslim. He recalled how Tilak and he had laboured to produce the Lucknow Pact and bring the Congress and the [Muslim] League together on a common platform.⁴²

There was some cause for Jinnah's grievance. The Lucknow Pact of 1916 was, by all accounts, a breakthrough. The pact can 'easily be considered one of the most important events in the trajectory of the nationalist movement in India . . . the Congress for the first time openly and explicitly conceded the principle of communal representation by accepting separate electorates for Muslims'.⁴³ For Jinnah, it would have seemed like the Congress was deserting him just when it seemed that finally some of the differences had been settled.

That the Lucknow Pact was successfully negotiated is perhaps more striking than that it should later break down. For one thing, the two bodies who made the Pact were quite fundamentally arrayed against each other in their notions of their own identity. [Even so, till almost 1920, the Congress and the League had a functional relationship with overlaps of memberships but the real split came after the Chauri Chaura incident in 1922 as we shall see.] The Congress claimed to speak for all Indians, including Muslims, whereas the Muslim League claimed to speak for the Indian Muslims, and had in fact spoken with some success for them in the years preceding the Pact.⁴⁴

But even in negotiating the Pact, the two organizations had different aims.

Congress under moderate leadership had worked for a secular India and had repeatedly deplored recognition of communal or religious distinctions in political matters, whereas the Muslim League asserted that Indian Muslims must work as members of the Muslim community for representation and safeguards for that community as such. If the Congress sought to calm the fears which lay behind this Muslim demand for safeguards, it might give up something of its claim to all-India representative identity and compromise its secular aims to the extent of acquiescing in these safeguards; but safeguards offered to one community meant a corresponding sacrifice by other communities—in this case the Hindus in particular.⁴⁵

But there were others angling for the leadership of the Hindus:

At the same time the leaders and ideologues among the extremists in or on the edge of Congress had envisioned Indian nationalism in terms of Hindu greatness and pride in India's Hindu past, and had evoked Hindu symbols, all of which had tended to reinforce Muslim aloofness from Congress.⁴⁶

Clashes between Hindus and Muslims, though sporadic, go back to the first recorded riot in Ahmedabad in the eighteenth century. However, the conditions between the two communities had become increasingly fractious

since the 1880s. Clashes occurred regularly during 1885–93 and 1907–14; conflict soared in regions like Punjab, Delhi, Bombay and the United Provinces.

The Muslim elite, by and large, held aloof from collaboration with the other Indian communities, especially in politics. After some initial hesitation, Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan and Saiyid Ameer Ali set out to dissuade their coreligionists from participating in Congress. For Muslim professional men, landholders, and business men who might have been tempted by Congress, they established the Muhammadan Educational Conference and Central National Muhammadan Association respectively, relying on conspicuous loyalty to the British to ensure the protection and advancement of their interests.⁴⁷

Amidst all this came the hated partition of Bengal into Hindu- and Muslim-majority provinces under the viceroy Lord Curzon in 1905. Massive protests followed in Calcutta, the capital of the British Empire in India, where Bengali nationalists (most of them Hindu) saw the division as an insidious strike against a growing tide of nationalism among Bengali freedom fighters, both Hindu and Muslim. (The Bengal Partition was welcomed by many Bengali Muslims who were peasants working the lands of Hindus. But many Hindu bhadraloks opposed it. When the partition was cancelled in 1911, Muslims realized their weak position even in a province where they had a majority.)

But the rift had been created. In 1906, representatives of Muslim communities were demanding separate electorates in the legislatures with ‘representation in excess of its [the community’s] proportion of the population or “weightage”,’⁴⁸ and the Muslim League was created with the Aga Khan at its head to explicitly articulate these demands.

In the reforms of 1909,

Morley acceded to pressure from the viceroy and Muslim leaders like the Aga Khan, president of the Muslim League, and granted Muslims separate representation and weightage. Muslims were also given a vote in the general constituencies wherever they fulfilled the voting requirements. Not only did most Congressmen regard the Muslims’ disproportionately large representation in relation to their share of the population as ‘gross injustice to other communities’ (in the words of the Bombay Presidency Association) but they also opposed it as tending to perpetuate the division between Muslims and Hindus. [The electorate was very small, and Muslims poorer than Hindus. So the voter requirement was lower for Muslims than Hindus.]⁴⁹

This is the backdrop against which Jinnah, at that time a member of both the Congress and the Muslim League, had worked with prominent Congress leaders like Gokhale, Pal, Rai and Naidu to build an intricate set of compromises and counter compromises for peace and cooperation between India's largest communities. One can see why Jinnah would be attached, possibly even unduly so, to this achievement.

What were these compromises and who got what in the end?

If one attempts to draw up a balance sheet of this compromise in terms of the gains and losses of both Congress and the Muslim League, one sees that both sides made concessions in order to win something of what they wanted. Some of the Muslim League's gains were obvious: Congress had accepted its demands for electorates in which the Muslims should vote separately from other Indians and, further, had agreed to join in demanding weightage for Muslims in all those provinces where the Muslims were in a minority.⁵⁰

The Lucknow Pact provided the basis of an argument that would continue till the partition of India—some might argue that it continues even today.

Once arrived at in the Lucknow Pact, the mutual acceptance of separate electorates became the basis for future dialogue up to 1940; the Nehru Report tried to do away with them in 1928, but most Muslims insisted on treating them as a bench-mark in any negotiations. [The Motilal Nehru Report rejected the Lucknow compromise and even Jinnah's concessions under pressure from M.R. Jayakar and the Hindu Mahasabha. Jinnah was disgusted and left the country to practice as barrister in London.] The percentage of Muslim representation in every provincial legislature in 1917 (each of which included official and European representatives) was less than that conceded in the Pact.⁵¹

But there were some key concessions on the side of the Muslim League too.

On the other hand, the League had given up its claim to legislative majorities in the two major provinces where it had a majority of the population, Bengal and the Panjab, so that Muslims were now everywhere reduced to a minority or, at best, parity. Not only had the Congress abandoned its opposition to separate electorates and weightage for religious communities. It had also accepted the right of the League to speak for the Muslims, and this might be taken as a surrender by the Congress of its claim to speak for all India and even as implying recognition of the Muslim League as an equal partner in working to shape India's future.⁵²

The Congress agreed to the Lucknow Pact because it was a chance, through the generosity of separate representation, to give a sense that it was taking into account demands from the Muslim masses.

But in return, Congress won the confidence and cooperation of many Muslims in the immediate sense; and furthermore, by so doing Congress made the Muslims' claims its own and might have calculated that in a more fundamental sense it might thus become more truly representative of all Indian communities. The Pact constituted a statesmanlike attempt by most of the leading Indian politicians of the day to grapple with a problem involving the fears of a large number of Muslims, as well as various Indians' views of the very nature of the India they wished to build.⁵³

It was moment of open-mindedness both on the side of the Congress and the Muslim League, a moment of acceptance and accommodation which their later relationship sorely lacked.

It was an attempt marked by a willingness on the part of the participants to compromise and even to sacrifice their interests or principles in the short run for the sake of working in a united fashion for the larger goal of self-government. The Pact also marked a readiness to face facts, [The Pact did but the Nehru Report did not.] and in particular a readiness on the part of both nationalist Muslims and congressmen to recognize that separate electorates and weightage for Muslims had been introduced into the legislatures by the Morley-Minto reforms, and that continued opposition to them in these circumstances would seem all the more unfriendly and menacing to Muslims.⁵⁴

But this delicate compromise would end with the rise of Gandhi. At the 1920 Nagpur session of the Congress, Gandhi would cajole the party towards a new constitution which declared that the aim of the Congress was to attain swaraj or self-rule through 'peaceful and legitimate' (replacing the word 'constitutional') means. He also 'spelled out his programme of non-violent non-cooperation'.⁵⁵

The very nature of the Congress was being transformed, and Jinnah declared: 'With the greatest respect for Gandhi and those who think with him, I make bold to say in this Assembly that you will never get your independence without bloodshed.'⁵⁶

Jinnah was right but the epicentre of the bloodshed that broke the back of imperialism happened not in India but in Europe when the Second World

War depleted England and fatally weakened the command and control levers of the empire.

He was right about one more thing: the rise of mullahs in the Muslim leadership which would, in time, extract a heavy price. Agreement on this came from an unlikely quarter: B.R. Ambedkar, who would have his own bitter quarrel with Gandhi eventually. Ambedkar was scathingly critical of Gandhi's (in Ambedkar's opinion) blind support to the Khilafat Movement. Ambedkar wrote:

There is evidence that some of them knew this to be the ultimate destiny of the Muslims as early as 1923. In support of this reference may be made to the evidence of Khan Saheb Sardar M Gulkhan [who was president, Islamic Anjuman, Dera Ismail Khan] who appeared as witness before the NWF Committee to report upon the administrative relationship between the settled area of NWFP and the tribal area and upon the amalgamation of the settled districts with Punjab.⁵⁷

Ambedkar admits that by supporting the Khilafat Movement, Gandhi was able to join the Muslims and the Hindus in a common cause against the British. 'The credit for this must of course go to Mr. Gandhi. For there can be no doubt that this was a great act of daring.'⁵⁸ But Gandhi's route of non-violent protest did not bear immediate fruit.

The Musalmans were not in a mood to listen to the advice of Mr. Gandhi. They refused to worship the principle of non-violence. They were not prepared to wait for Swaraj. They were in a hurry to find the most expeditious means of helping Turkey and saving the Khilafat. And the Muslims in their impatience did exactly what the Hindus feared they would do, namely, invite the Afghans to invade India. How far the Khilafatists had proceeded in their negotiations with the Amir of Afghanistan it is not possible to know. But that such a project was entertained by them is beyond question.⁵⁹

This idea horrified Ambedkar and he was even more startled by Gandhi's support for it.

It needs no saying that the project of an invasion of India was the most dangerous project and every sane Indian would dissociate himself from so mad a project. What part Mr. Gandhi played in this project it is not possible to discover. Certainly, he did not dissociate himself from it. On the contrary his misguided zeal for Swaraj and his obsession on Hindu-Moslem unity as the only means of achieving it, led him to support the project.⁶⁰

A fuming Ambedkar wrote:

Not only did he advise the Amir not to enter into any treaty with the British Government but declared, ‘I would, in a sense, certainly assist the Amir of Afghanistan if he waged war against the British Government. That is to say, I would openly tell my countrymen that it would be a crime to help a government which had lost the confidence of the nation to remain in power.’ Can any sane man go so far, for the sake of Hindu-Moslem unity?⁶¹

The charge of being too lenient towards the Muslim orthodox leadership would be brought against Gandhi again and again. To his credit, the Mahatma never veered from his vision of what composite India ought to look like, but at the same time he also refused to acknowledge the divide that already existed. Besant acknowledged that things had been different at the time of the Lucknow Pact and that there was a distinct change of mood through the Khilafat Movement. She wrote:

If the relation between Muslims and Hindus were as it was in the Lucknow days, this question would not be so urgent, though it would even then have almost certainly arisen, sooner or later, in an Independent India. But since the Khilafat agitation, things have changed and it has been one of the many injuries inflicted on India by the encouragement of the Khilafat crusade, that the inner Muslim feeling of hatred against ‘unbelievers’ has sprung up.⁶²

His critics have maintained that he tried to overcompensate at every stage to ensure his vision of a united, free India came to be. But it didn’t and his compromises left fissures that are still alive.

Historian Mukul Kesavan has read Gandhi’s support of the Khilafat Movement as rank opportunism, done for two reasons.

One, he saw it as a quick, cheap way of getting the Muslims on board. What Gandhi was doing here was trying to repopulate the Muslim enclosure in the nationalist zoo by manipulating a Muslim version of Tilakite populism. [...] Gandhi’s second reason for espousing this curious cause was that it allowed him to take over the Congress. By promising to deliver the Congress, he secured the support of the Khilafatists, and by promising to deliver the Muslims, he effectively took over the Congress without being a member or ever standing for election. In the short term, he succeeded brilliantly. In the long term, this adventurist coup did the anti-colonial movement incalculable damage.⁶³

Others like Vinay Lal have argued that

It is not at all clear to me that, in supporting the Khilafat movement, Gandhi sought in exchange a promise among Muslims to support cow protection. I do not say that Gandhi did not hope, through his championing of the Khilafat movement, to bring Muslims into the mainstream of national political life, but that is quite different than the conception of him as an opportunist waiting to extract his pound of flesh.⁶⁴

Jinnah may have gathered as early as 1920 that Gandhi would not accept the idea of Muslims being represented by the Muslim League alone. It is, though, undeniable that it was Jinnah who was right about the Khilafat Movement, and Gandhi who was wrong.

Although Patel had supported the Khilafat Movement, perhaps Gandhi, the wiliest politician of them all, sensed that impressionable, emotional Nehru would offer less resistance and provide greater support, at least on this count, to the Gandhian ideal. As it happened, pragmatic and unwavering Patel did ask tougher questions than the younger man.

Only months after Gandhi denied Patel the Congress chair despite the events at Bardoli where numerous Hindus and Muslims had fought together, Allama Iqbal delivered his famous speech at the annual session of the Muslim League on 29 December 1930. Iqbal was renowned as a poet. He was also, then, the president of the Muslim League. In this speech Iqbal charted a vision that would define the League and divide the country: a homeland for Muslims.

He began by pointing out that Lutheran Christian Reformation or the Reformation of Christianity triggered by the German priest and theologian Martin Luther in 1517

[W]as directed against this church organisation [. . .] for the obvious reason that there was no such polity associated with Christianity. [. . .] Thus, the upshot of the intellectual movement initiated by such men as Rousseau and Luther was the break-up of the one into [the] mutually ill-adjusted many, the transformation of a human into a national outlook, requiring a more realistic foundation, such as the notion of country, and finding expression through varying systems of polity evolved on national lines [. . .] The conclusion to which Europe is consequently driven is that religion is a private affair of the individual and has nothing to do with what is called man's temporal life.⁶⁵

But Islam was not like that. In fact, it was, in Iqbal's words, the very opposite.

[I]t is not an exaggeration to say that India is perhaps the only country in the world where Islam, as a people-building force, has worked at its best. In India, as elsewhere, the structure of Islam as a society is almost entirely due to the working of Islam as a culture inspired by a specific ethical ideal. [...] Muslim society, with its remarkable homogeneity and inner unity, has grown to be what it is, under the pressure of the laws and institutions associated with the culture of Islam.⁶⁶

The religious and the social ideal of Islam could not be separated, argued Iqbal.

The nature of the Prophet's religious experience, as disclosed in the Quran, however, is wholly different. [...] The religious ideal of Islam, therefore, is organically related to the social order which it has created. The rejection of the one will eventually involve the rejection of the other. Therefore the construction of a polity on national lines, if it means a displacement of the Islamic principle of solidarity, is simply unthinkable to a Muslim. This is a matter which at the present moment directly concerns the Muslims of India.⁶⁷

His demand was simple:

I would like to see the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single State. Self-government within the British Empire, or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India.⁶⁸

Iqbal was of course giving a framework to a conversation that had erupted in fits and starts in the freedom movement for more than a decade. As early as 1918, the Aga Khan was dreaming of a

South Asian Federation with India as its nucleus and centre. He was in favour of a United States of India within the British Empire. His scheme of distribution includes handing over two or three districts of the Western United province to Punjab; detaching Sind from Bombay province and with the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan it would form Indus province, with Quetta as its capital. Further this federation would have expanded towards Afghanistan and Iran [...] Such a state would inevitably form a permanent source of danger in India.⁶⁹

In his speech Iqbal argued that

India is the greatest Muslim country in the world. The life of Islam as a cultural force in the country very largely depends on its centralisation in a specified territory. This centralisation of the most living portion of the Muslims of India, whose military and police service has, notwithstanding unfair treatment from the British, made the British

rule possible in this country, will eventually solve the problem of India as well as of Asia. It will intensify their sense of responsibility and deepen their patriotic feeling.⁷⁰

If this happens, argued Iqbal,

[T]he North-West Indian Muslims will prove the best defenders of India against a foreign invasion, be that invasion one of ideas or of bayonets [...] The Right Hon'ble Mr. Srinivasa Sastri [the scholar and politician who left the Congress to form the Liberal Party] thinks that the Muslim demand for the creation of autonomous Muslim states along the north-west border is actuated by a desire 'to acquire means of exerting pressure in emergencies on the Government of India'. [...] It is actuated by a genuine desire for free development which is practically impossible under the type of unitary government contemplated by the nationalist Hindu politicians with a view to secure permanent communal dominance in the whole of India.⁷¹

Iqbal's speech rejected the option of joint electorates because it saw them as a step towards Hindu majoritarianism.

The Nehru Report, realising [a] Hindu majority in the Central Assembly, reaches a unitary form of government because such an institution secures Hindu dominance throughout India; the Simon Report retains the present British dominance behind the thin veneer of an unreal federation [...] The Hindu thinks that separate electorates are contrary to the spirit of true nationalism, because he understands the word nation to mean a kind of universal amalgamation in which no communal entity ought to retain its private individuality. Such a state of things, however, does not exist. Nor is it desirable that it should exist. India is a land of racial and religious variety.⁷²

As the scholar Javed Majeed has written, 'He [Iqbal] repeatedly emphasises the heterogeneity of the subcontinent in terms of race [...] in order to deny the validity of any form of Indian nationalism.'⁷³

Understanding Iqbal's arguments in this speech is to understand the ideological and theological nature of many of the fissures of modern India. This is not a man merely demanding a piece of land or political power. His arguments are far more complex and draw not only from his interpretation of the nature of Islam but also its relations with Hinduism and other 'people of the book', i.e., Christianity and Judaism.

Iqbal forcefully argued that India's Muslims constituted 'a nation' far more effectively than the Hindus.

We are 70 millions, and far more homogeneous than any other people in India. Indeed the Muslims of India are the only Indian people who can fitly be described as a nation in the modern sense of the word. The Hindus, though ahead of us in almost all respects, have not yet been able to achieve the kind of homogeneity which is necessary for a nation, and which Islam has given you as a free gift. No doubt they are anxious to become a nation, but the process of becoming a nation is kind of travail, and in the case of Hindu India involves a complete overhauling of her social structure.⁷⁴

This argument, repeated even today, is one of the most fractious problems of Indian history. Why are Hindus, with a civilization that has remained unbroken for 5000 years, not a nation? Because nations are made of homogeneity. What kind of homogeneity? Of language, cultural habits and, very often, religion. This is the Westphalian imagination of the nation state based on the idea of what constitutes a nation as conceived in the treaty to the Peace of Westphalia signed in 1648. This treaty ended the Thirty Years' War, the most vicious religious battle between Protestant and Catholic states in Europe in which at least eight million people were killed. Many countries were entirely ruined by the war—as Günther Franz's 1940 book *Der Dreissigjährige Krieg und das Deutsche Volk* (The Thirty Years' War and the German People) calculated, German states lost between 25 to 50 per cent of their population to the violence. The peace treaty, when it came, was based on an idea of homogeneous regions, especially in culture and religion, constituting 'nations' or 'nation states'. This is both the Abrahamic and the colonial lens of looking at India, asking, quite naturally, the question that if customs and language differ from region to region in India, and if Hindus worship 'different gods' in various places, how can the Hindus, and India, be considered a nation before 1947 or the post-British political creation of an independent country? Conservative, Marxist and neo-colonial historians have used this argument repeatedly to suggest that India is a tenuous construct which was, and is, entirely open to geographical alteration and change. This line of argument also makes it easy both for colonial invasion and Communist revolution to make a case for the violent upheaval and transformation of India.

But more recent advances in the study of nation states have led us to a more intricate and nuanced analysis. We now know that the Westphalian

model is, in fact, just one way of considering how or on what nations are constructed. It is a Western framework using Western experiences. There is, however, another construct—of civilizational states. The Chinese thinker Zhang Weiwei and the British academic Martin Jacques have spoken about the civilizational state which is when countries with histories as ancient as China (and India) build their sense of nationhood based on their long civilization. Jacques wrote:

For over two millennia, the Chinese thought of themselves as a civilization rather than a nation. The most fundamental defining features of China today, and which give the Chinese their sense of identity, emanate not from the last century when China has called itself a nation-state but from the previous two millennia when it can be best described as a civilization-state: the relationship between the state and society, a very distinctive notion of the family, ancestral worship, Confucian values, the network of personal relationships that we call guanxi, Chinese food and the traditions that surround it, and, of course, the Chinese language with its unusual relationship between the written and spoken form.⁷⁵

What implications does this theory have on Chinese nationhood?

The implications are profound: whereas national identity in Europe is overwhelmingly a product of the era of the nation-state—in the United States almost exclusively so—in China, on the contrary, the sense of identity has primarily been shaped by the country's history as a civilization-state. Although China describes itself today as a nation-state, it remains essentially a civilization-state in terms of history, culture, identity and ways of thinking. China's geological structure is that of a civilization-state; the nation-state accounts for little more than the top soil.⁷⁶

Change Confucianism to Hinduism and the exact argument holds for India —only the timeline would probably be older than two thousand years. This argument is well understood by some of the greatest living scholars of Hinduism, like Diana Eck at Harvard, who wrote:

Bharata [the ancient name of India] is not merely a convenient designation for a conglomerate of cultures [...] Nor was Bharata ever the name of a political entity like a nation-state, at least until 1947, when it became the proper name of independent India. And yet it is arresting to consider a sense of unity construed in and through the diverse imagined landscape [...] a sense of connectedness that seems to have flourished for many centuries without the need for overarching political expression or embodiment [...] There is arguably no other major culture that has sustained over so many centuries, and across such diverse regions, a fundamentally locative or place-oriented world view.⁷⁷

This geographical sense of coherence was mentioned more than a hundred years ago by the Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda:

In Europe, political ideas form the national unity. In Asia, religious ideals form the national unity. There must be the recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land. What do I mean by one religion? Not in the sense of one religion as held among the Christians, or the Mohammedans, or the Buddhists. We know that our religion has certain common grounds, common to all sects, however varying their conclusions may be, however different their claims may be [. . .] So there are certain common grounds, and within their limitation this religion of ours admits of a marvellous variation, an infinite liberty to think, and live our own lives.⁷⁸

It is particularly important to mention this correlation between the civilizational narrative of nationhood because parts of it would evolve into a Hindu sense of nationhood and, in time, would fiercely compete with Iqbal's worldview. These would become the two competing strains of nationalism in India—with the Congress, the unwieldy, amorphous tent trying to accommodate disparate viewpoints, including derivatives of Hindu and Muslim nationalism.

But Iqbal does not comprehend this civilizational line of thought, or perhaps he ignores it. To him nations are about commonality. Therefore, he urges:

Nor should the Muslim leaders and politicians allow themselves to be carried away by the subtle but fallacious argument that Turkey and Persia and other Muslim countries are progressing on national [. . .] lines. The Muslims of India are differently situated. The countries of Islam outside India are practically wholly Muslim in population. The minorities there belong, in the language of the Quran, to the 'people of the Book'. There are no social barriers between Muslims and the 'people of the Book'. A Jew or a Christian or a Zoroastrian does not pollute the food of a Muslim by touching it, and the law of Islam allows intermarriage with the 'people of the Book'.⁷⁹

Iqbal's argument was that Muslims could only form a nation with other Muslims, because Islam was as much political ideology as spiritual guidance. The division between religious life and civil or political life that Europe had attempted was just not possible in Islam.

Is religion a private affair? Would you like to see Islam as a moral and political ideal, meeting the same fate in the world of Islam as Christianity has already met in Europe? Is

it possible to retain Islam as an ethical ideal and to reject it as a polity, in favour of national polities in which [the] religious attitude is not permitted to play any part? This question becomes of special importance in India, where the Muslims happen to be a minority. The proposition that religion is a private individual experience is not surprising on the lips of a European.⁸⁰

Iqbal argued that Christianity, for all the closeness between the people(s) of the book(s), operated in a fundamentally different way from Islam.

In Europe the conception of Christianity as a monastic order, renouncing the world of matter and fixing its gaze entirely on the world of spirit, led, by a logical process of thought, to the view embodied in this proposition. The nature of the Prophet's religious experience, as disclosed in the Quran, however, is wholly different.⁸¹

This had simply not happened, said Iqbal, not without some justification, living as he did in a society divided and subdivided into ethnic groups.

It might have been a fact in India if the teaching of Kabir and the Divine Faith of Akbar had seized the imagination of the masses of this country. Experience, however, shows that the various caste units and religious units in India have shown no inclination to sink their respective individualities in a larger whole. Each group is intensely jealous of its collective existence. The formation of the kind of moral consciousness which constitutes the essence of a nation in Renan's sense demands a price which the peoples of India are not prepared to pay.⁸²

What Iqbal is saying is that in the absence of broad-based unity that takes hundreds of years to develop in any society, Muslims just could not be sure that their rights would be protected in a Hindu-majority country. In other words, Muslims could either be part of the ruling class (as erstwhile Muslim rulers including the Mughals had been) or they needed clear geographical regions dedicated to Muslims.

Towards the end of his speech, Iqbal tried to explain why he believed that this demand for an exclusive Muslim homeland should not worry the Hindus:

Nor should the Hindus fear that the creation of autonomous Muslim states will mean the introduction of a kind of religious rule in such states. I have already indicated to you the meaning of the word religion, as applied to Islam. The truth is that Islam is not a Church. It is a State conceived as a contractual organism long before Rousseau ever thought of such a thing, and animated by an ethical ideal which regards man not as an earth-rooted

creature, defined by this or that portion of the earth, but as a spiritual being understood in terms of a social mechanism, and possessing rights and duties as a living factor in that mechanism.⁸³

As it so transpired, at least some Hindus were thinking along similar lines. By 1923, Hindu leaders like Bhai Parmanand were claiming that the solution was ‘complete severance between the two peoples. India could be partitioned in such a manner as to secure the supremacy of Islam in one zone and that of Hinduism in the other.’⁸⁴

This is the context in which the Gandhi–Nehru–Patel relationship developed. Some commentators have noted that Iqbal, though Muslim, was proud of his Kashmiri Brahmin ancestry, and that was a common ground between the poet and Nehru. Iqbal had famously written about his Brahmin ancestry:

I am a rose from the paradise of Kashmir
Look at me, for in India you will never find again
A son of Brahmin familiar with the mystical knowledge of Maulana Rumi and Shams-i-Tabrej
My ancestors were all worshippers of idols like Lot of Manat.⁸⁵

That might have been one of the factors for their apparent bond when they met in 1938. Patel of course shared nothing of this camaraderie. He showed no enthusiasm in contemplating separate representations for separate communities either.

Before the Lahore session of the Congress in December 1929, once again, the provincial committees recommended Sardar Patel’s name for president. After having been overlooked in favour of Motilal Nehru in 1928, the Mahatma was now, in journalist Durga Das’s words,

[E]xpected to welcome the nomination of the hero of Bardoli, his most dependable lieutenant. When Gandhi announced his preference for Jawaharlal, the general body of Congressmen, especially the senior leaders who felt they had been superseded, were astonished. For one thing, it was considered odd that a son should succeed his father to the Congress throne, and for another there was regret that Sardar Patel’s outstanding services had been overlooked.⁸⁶

In classic political newshound style Durga Das goes on write that

[H]aving learnt from private enquiries that Gandhi had succumbed to pressure from Motilal [Nehru], I sought Gandhi's version. The Mahatma pointed out that Motilal had repeated with greater emphasis the argument put forward in his letter of July 1928 that Jawaharlal represented youth and dynamism. He had agreed with Motilal, and the choice was particularly appropriate when the Congress was about to launch a fresh struggle. He added that Sardar Patel would be with him in any case and that he was strengthening the movement by bringing Jawaharlal in as an active leader. The Sardar would be the obvious choice for the next session.⁸⁷

This is suspicious and questionable logic. Patel had already proven his ability and fitness to lead a prolonged and difficult campaign, having successfully led a major revolt against the British in Bardoli with little or no help from any other leader of the freedom movement. Why then would his immense grassroots experience not outweigh his age? Also why would Patel, at fifty-three, be considered too old when outgoing president Motilal Nehru had first become Congress president at the age of fifty-eight in 1919 and had been selected instead of Patel after Bardoli in 1928 at the age of sixty-seven? Gandhi himself had become Congress president in 1924 at the age of fifty-five. Not only that, at least five Congress presidents before Patel and the one immediately after him were nearly the same age as Patel was now when they took office. Hakim Ajmal Khan was fifty-eight when he took over the presidentship in 1921; Das, in 1922, was fifty-two; S. Srinivasa Iyengar who became president in 1926 was also fifty-two; and Madan Mohan Malaviya was seventy-one when he took office.

Durga Das does not seem to have bought into this age argument either. He wrote:

It is certain that Gandhi's decision marked a turning-point in the history of modern India. A dying man [he died in 1931], Motilal was naturally eager to see Jawaharlal Congress President in his own lifetime [...] the effect of Gandhi's decision was to identify the Nehru family with the nation. There is little doubt that this identification was a factor in the choice of Nehru as the first Prime Minister of free India and of his daughter Indira as the third.⁸⁸

But why did Gandhi make this choice? Was it only to indulge one of the tallest and wealthiest leaders of the Congress, Motilal Nehru, whose life was coming to an end? Jawaharlal's mother Swaruprani went into 'a sort of ecstasy'⁸⁹ at the news of the son succeeding the father to the Congress throne. 'Anxious to see his son installed as President in his lifetime, Motilal had been soliciting Gandhi's aid right from 1927. Apart from the youth reason, Gandhi also said that Jawaharlal becoming president was "as good as my being in it".'⁹⁰ Did he see Jawaharlal as more potentially compliant and unchallenging than Patel who had shown extremely strong grassroots mobilization capability?

Patel himself seems to have mentioned at least once that of the two so-called sons of Gandhi, the Mahatma clearly favoured one.⁹¹ The Gandhian scholar Kishorelal Mashruwala has argued that the relationship between Gandhi and Patel was more like that of brothers, and that between Gandhi and Nehru like father and son. This might be a gentle way of suggesting that Gandhi felt less threatened and entirely in control with Jawaharlal at the helm, and Patel, for all his dogged, unquestioning devotion to Gandhi, seemed a more powerful, independent entity.

Apart from these, could there have been yet another reason for Gandhi's reluctance to nominate Patel?

Durga Das only gives us a hint when he writes: '[Congress leader Maulana Abdul Kalam] Azad expressed to me the feeling that "Jawahar would make a great appeal to Muslim youth".'⁹² It is never detailed why Azad felt this but it seems to have been an impression, a divide that started early in the political careers of Patel and Nehru, and there seems to be little doubt which way Gandhi weighed in.

When Patel finally got the president's chair for the first and last time in Congress history, he was already countering the idea of separate representation of religious communities. As early as February 1931, Patel had said: 'Let those who talk of communal representation and seats in the council come with me to rural India where there was no communal problem to solve. The only problem [...] was the problem of hunger and bread.'⁹³

This theme surfaces in his presidential address in the Karachi Congress in April 1931 too.

The most important problem is that of communal harmony. The views of the Congress on this question were set out very clearly in the Lahore resolution which said: ‘Since the Nehru report has been pushed to the background, it is not necessary to declare Congress policy on the question of communal harmony, because the Congress believes that after India becomes free all communal questions will be decided from a national point of view.’⁹⁴

It assured:

Muslims and other communities in general and the Sikhs in particular expressed dissatisfaction on the proposals included in the Nehru Report and this meeting assures the Sikhs, Muslims and other communities that no decision on this question in any future constitution will be accepted which is not agreed to as satisfactory by all parties.⁹⁵

By saying this, Patel and other Congress leaders influenced by Gandhi were simply delaying an impending crisis. At least some of them, Patel and Gandhi for sure, would have argued that a much bigger decision had been taken by the Congress in 1929–30 which would subsume all such concerns —the party had declared that its goal was Purna Swaraj, complete and total independence from British rule. None of the halfway measures of dominion status would do any more.

On 19 December 1929, the Congress, in its Lahore session, had declared the demand for ‘Purna Swaraj’ or complete independence. The party unfurled the flag of independence and announced that ‘people of India had the inalienable right to freedom . . . that there was no liberty without equality, and that universal adult franchise would ensure such equality’.⁹⁶ In a country as impoverished and incapacitated by foreign rule as India, these were astonishing claims, and demands. Never had any political party in India made such a demand or dared to hope that it would be fulfilled.

But what happened next was even more astounding. Leaving aside his pet projects—spinning khadi and the refusal to pay land revenue—Mahatma Gandhi decided he would make salt.

The idea of breaking government taxation laws by making indigenous salt was baffling to most of his supporters. Proving that Gandhi was right about his independent mind, Patel suggested a march to Delhi or, the tried and tested formula, ‘a countrywide breaking of land laws’.⁹⁷

‘Hello, this is a funny thing,’ said C.R. Das, ‘all along Gandhi was saying that if we made khadi we will get swaraj. Now he says we must make salt also!’⁹⁸

Nehru and Bose felt that working towards forming a parallel government would be far more useful than leading a revolt against the salt tax.

Gandhi discarded these suggestions because ‘ . . . he had the perspective of a long drawn out movement in which the mass of the people had to be mobilised . . . the British would pounce on things like a march onto Delhi and parallel government immediately . . . So these ideas were obviously not the stuff mass movements were made of . . . ’⁹⁹

But Gandhi’s political instinct was astute. The life expectancy of the average Indian in 1881–91 was around twenty-five years, and forty years later, during 1921–31 it had remained the same.¹⁰⁰ After nearly 150 years of British rule, only 9 per cent of the population was literate and nine out of ten Indians lived in the villages.

Each sector of the Indian economy was under pressure. The Royal Commission of Indian Agriculture, reporting in 1928, drew a sombre picture of land-exhaustion, for which it could offer only trivial remedies, a prudent government having placed outside the scope of its enquiries, the two major drains on the peasant’s essential resources, viz., rent and taxation [. . .] The 1923 Fiscal Commission’s scheme of ‘discriminating protection’ [with which all its Indian members dissented], left the bulk of Indian industrial sector unprotected. [. . .] Every class of Indians, except, perhaps, the large land-owners, had reason to nurse deep set grievances, which no constitutional jugglery could sweep away.¹⁰¹

What could be a common trigger for every class of Indian? What was the one thing every Indian used every day and which could remind them of the injustice of foreign rule?

Salt.

This was not a novel idea. ‘The first riots in protest against this tax happened in 1844 in Surat district, where, almost hundred years later, the

Salt satyagraha took place.’¹⁰² Even the location of where Gandhi wanted to break salt tax laws was, then, unsurprising. Surat had pioneered such protests in the past, and Gandhi would take the fight there—to a place, and using people, Patel, and to some extent the Mahatma himself, had nurtured for years during the earlier movements against land tax. (Oddly, Patel was not among the seventy people Gandhi marched with to Dandi.)

The [salt] tax was criticised at the inaugural session of the Congress in 1885, and over the years was severely condemned by Dadabhai Naoroji and Gokhale. Even the idea of using salt in a mass mobilisation campaign had been explored earlier. During the Swadeshi movement, Surendranath Banerjee had toured the villages urging the boycott of Manchester cloth and Liverpool salt. Actually, even Gandhi had written against the tax before.¹⁰³

It was not, to be honest, an original idea.

What was novel was the way Gandhi was able to transform it into a powerful tool for communicating with the Indian masses, the British government and the international audience. It was not the originality of the idea that was responsible for his success but the way he handled it.¹⁰⁴

There are other reasons why Gandhi may have chosen this form of mass agitation. In the beginning of 1929, the more radical (or so-called Left wing) of the Congress had a resolution pushed through at the Calcutta session promising dominion status within one year. Then came the British viceroy Lord Irwin’s declaration of the proposed Round Table meetings which seemed to commit to move towards dominion status. But this was met with furious indignation in London and the timeline seemed impossible. There was no way that dominion status could be achieved by the end of the year. And so it was that Gandhi and the ‘Right wing’ of the Congress first welcomed the British statement and then reverted to the year-end deadline by December.

Since Dominion status was impossible on the nail as it were, Gandhi proceeded step by step to the launching of the Civil Disobedience movement in April 1930, beginning with his march to Dandi to make salt. The gap between Government and Congress was between a conference to consider the next step towards Dominion status and a conference

to inaugurate it. Many thought at the time that this was an inadequate ground for a revolutionary movement and that Gandhi had been disingenuous in his conduct.¹⁰⁵

Back home in England, Irwin faced a combined assault from the Liberals and the Tories for hastening the promise of dominion status and when he met Gandhi, Motilal Nehru and Vithalbhai Patel on 23 December 1929, all he could say was ‘that he was unable to prejudge or commit the [Round Table] Conference at all to any particular line’.¹⁰⁶

There is a viewpoint that after hearing Irwin’s statement, Gandhi came away convinced that the radical Left within the Congress would never accommodate a moderate line that gave the British more time and as the deadline passed Leftist Congressmen would start an agitation that could tear apart the party and ignite a violent collision with the British government. In fact, the men Gandhi was perhaps worried would lead the agitation against any conciliatory acceptance of the Irwin declaration were Nehru and Bose —both influenced by militant Left-wing ideology at that time within the Congress.

In Gandhi’s belief this would have been disastrous. Therefore, he took the lead himself in organizing a non-violent movement in which all groups took part. Thus, as he thought, he prevented revolution and left the way open for later cooperation. [Gandhi was careful not to launch a mass movement after Chauri Chaura. Congressmen could do what they liked once Gandhi had broken the law.]¹⁰⁷

The thought of impending revolution among the ranks, especially led by men in the rival camp of the Congress, would have occurred to Patel too. Perhaps that’s why after the initial testiness where he seems to have said about Gandhi’s plans, ‘How am I interested in them?’¹⁰⁸, he swiftly took charge. In February 1930, Patel said in a speech:

The youths were clamouring that [they] want revolt; [they] want independence. [The] time has come (now) to show that this can be put into practice. At the time when shackles are falling upon the leaders for the deliverance of India, they will not be moving about towards the college building on cycles taking [their] books. Those who were raising the cries of ‘Long Live Revolution’ would not be hoping for degrees. Remember, this is the last fight.¹⁰⁹

This exasperation seemed to have been growing in him. In December 1929, in a speech in Bihar, he told the gathered youth:

You are shouting ‘Long live the revolution’ and ‘Down with the Empire’ but I ask you: do you understand the significance of these slogans or are merely repeating them like a parrot who repeats the name of Rama? Would you tell me what is this revolution you are talking about? [...] First bring about the revolution and then shout about its long life.¹¹⁰

As always when there was actual work to be done, Gandhi turned to his most trusted lieutenant and asked Patel to decide where in Gujarat he should break the salt tax laws. With the help two other long-time associates, Mohanlal Pandya and Ravishankar Maharaj, Gandhi and Patel zeroed in on Dandi.

Located on the Surat coast where the sea left deposits of salt on the shore, Dandi was 241 miles (nearly 388 kilometres) from Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram. The Mahatma was sixty-one years old, and about to embark on a journey the length of more than nine marathons. ‘Less than twelve miles a day in two stages with not much luggage—child’s play!’ he exclaimed. ‘The modern generation is delicate, weak and much pampered’.¹¹¹

Before starting his march, Gandhi wrote a curious letter to the viceroy. Among other things, the letter went into the viceroy’s monthly salary in some detail to justify the protest Gandhi was about to start.

Take your own salary. It is over 21,000 rupees [about \$7000 in 1930 rates] per month, besides many other indirect additions. You are getting over 700 rupees a day against India’s average income of less than two annas per day. Thus you are getting much over five thousand times India’s average income. The British Prime Minister is getting only ninety times Britain’s average income. But a system that provides for such an arrangement deserves to be summarily scrapped. What is true of the Viceregal salary is true generally of the whole administration [...] Nothing but organised non-violence can check the organised violence of the British government.¹¹²

The Dandi March was to start on 12 March 1930. Patel went ahead, going from village to village, rousing people before it began. But on 7 March he was arrested at Kanakpura village of Kheda district for breaking a notice served to him by the local magistrate forbidding him from addressing a gathering. He was awarded the maximum punishment: three months in

prison and a fine of Rs 500 or, instead of paying the fine, a further three weeks in jail. Before he went to prison, Patel advised his followers: ‘Our victory depends entirely on our capacity for suffering and sacrifice.’¹¹³ His arrest caused a debate in the legislative assembly on 10 March. Powerful Congress leaders like Malaviya spoke at this debate, asking, ‘Who will go to the Round Table Conference with Mahatma Gandhi in jail or with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in jail?’¹¹⁴

Fellow Congressman C.S. Ranga Iyer replied, ‘They have today not only imprisoned Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel but they have imprisoned the idea of cooperation.’¹¹⁵

Upon Patel’s arrest, 75,000 people arrived at the banks of the Sabarmati and pledged, ‘We, the citizens of Ahmedabad, determine hereby that we shall go the same path where Vallabhbhai has gone, and we shall attain full independence while attempting to do so.’¹¹⁶

Some of the best arguments against Patel’s arrest were presented by (no little irony here) a fellow lawyer: Muhammad Ali Jinnah. He argued that Patel’s arrest was a fundamental violation of the freedom of speech.

[A]n order should not be passed which goes to the root of the principle of liberty of speech [. . .] the precedent that the Government of India is creating—this is what I am afraid of and that is where the danger lies.¹¹⁷

To make his point, Jinnah quoted from *American Government and Politics* by Charles Austin Beard:

Liberty of opinion, of course, is open to abuse; it is constantly abused; but far more to abuse is the right to suppress opinion and far more often in the long history of humanity has it been abused. Still all matters of sentiment may be put on one side. It is hard, cold proposition: by what persons are we most likely to secure orderly and intelligent government by the process of censorship or that of freedom? [. . .] Again and again those who have attempted to stop the progress of opinion by the gallows and prison have merely hastened their own destruction by violence.¹¹⁸

Patel’s arrest kick-started the protests that would have been spearheaded by the Dandi March and when he stepped out after his first stint in prison after 111 days, it was into a different India.

An excerpt from Patel's diaries give a sense of how his time in jail was spent, glimpses of his dry sense of humour, and the neglect of his physical comfort which aggravated his ill-health as the years went by:

On Sunday, 9 March 1930, he writes:

I spent the whole day sleeping. On Sundays we are locked up in our rooms from 3 p.m. while on other days at 5 or 5:30 p.m. In the morning we are let out at 6:30. On Sundays warm water or washing soda are given for washing of clothes. The prisoners spared some of their precious water for me to bathe. I had a very nice bath after two days! After the morning meal I laid down to rest. At 3 in the afternoon we were each given two rotis, a little oil and molasses and then we were locked in.¹¹⁹

His ordeal does not end there.

I refused to take any oil as I did not like it, and I thought it would worsen my cough. In the evening I ate a roti mixed with molasses water. As I had lost my teeth on both sides it was difficult for me to eat without softening the bread in water.¹²⁰

On Monday, 10 March 1930, he writes:

In the afternoon Mahadev [Desai, Gandhi's personal secretary] and [Congress leader J.B.] Kripalani came to see me. I met them in office. The jailer is from Sindh. He does not know Gujarati and we refused to speak in English. This caused a little trouble but we continued talking in Gujarati. [...] I was not permitted to sleep out in the open during the heat of the day and was also refused a lantern at night. [...] I have commenced spinning on the charkha.¹²¹

On Tuesday, 11 March 1930, he notes:

I was informed that orders had been received from the government to treat me as a special prisoner and to give me facilities accordingly. I told them that I did not want any special facilities, and that I was happy, except, of course, for one thing which was scarcely necessary for me to point out. When the Superintendent pressed me, I said that just as the government of India was being carried on with the help of our own people so also was the jail administered. Since in the jail there was no Englishman, whom was I to fight?¹²²

By the time Patel left prison, the ripples of the Dandi March had spread across the country, nearly 60,000 people had been arrested for participating in the protests, and Kheda, which Patel had nurtured so carefully, had once again found itself in the limelight as one of the biggest centres of protest

where some 20,000 people had broken the law and gathered salt. But now Gandhi was in prison. And Patel, released in end-June 1930, soon joined his guru at the Yerwada jail in Pune after leading a procession in Bombay to honour Tilak's death anniversary.

Patel, among many others, was strident that after Gandhi's arrest and without a clear commitment to dominion status, the Congress would not participate in the first Round Table Conference in November 1930. (Many Congress leaders were in jail and the party was keen to be the main representative of India but the British wanted a cross-section of groups.) But he was one of the few Congress leaders to sound an early alarm on a subject that would come to define his life—the British attempt to fracture Indian independence along the lines of the princely states of India and the rest of the country. In a secret home department special report, as early as 24 July 1930, Patel is noted as saying:

I do not understand who can separate them, so come what may but the subjects of the Native States and that of [the] British Raj are but one. None can separate them and if any Native State or officers of the Native States attempt in that direction, that attempt is in vain. The movement for independence which is going on in British Raj is a campaign for freedom for 33 crores [330 million Indian people, i.e., the entire population of the country]. In those 33 crores, native princes also demand freedom because the thing is that we are more independent than the Native States that are slaves. We want to do away with the slavery of these 33 crores, none can make divisions in them.¹²³

All this would be achieved through the only path that the Congress seemed to have embraced under the influence of Gandhi—non-violence. But a bit of violence was about to shake the very foundations of Gandhian non-violence and the British Raj.



SIX

‘COULD THERE BE AN EQUALITY BETWEEN A GIANT AND A PYGMY? OR BETWEEN AN ELEPHANT AND AN ANT?’

Bhagat Singh was born in 1907 on the day when news of his father’s and uncle’s release from prison—they had been jailed for anti-British government activity—arrived at their village of Lyallpur Banga.¹

The uncle, Ajit Singh, had founded the revolutionary Bharat Mata Society with Lala Lajpat Rai, and was forced to flee India in 1909. He returned on the eve of Independence in 1947, dying on the same day India became independent.

Singh was twelve years old when the Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place. But he went to the site of the killings and brought home a lump of earth soaked in blood to keep as a furious memory of the most terrible wrong.

Even as a schoolboy his inspirations were Mazzini and Garibaldi, and then the socialist revolution. When Rai died of injuries sustained during a lathi charge on the crowd protesting the Simon Commission, many, including Singh, vowed revenge. Singh and his accomplices, Shivaram Rajguru and Sukhdev Thapar, targeted the superintendent of police, the Englishman James A. Scott, but inadvertently shot dead his lieutenant, the

assistant superintendent John P. Saunders, who was probably also culpable in the attack on Rai.

About a year later, Singh and an accomplice, Batukeshwar Dutt, threw bombs and revolutionary pamphlets inside the Delhi legislative assembly, and were arrested.

Bhagat Singh was only twenty-three when he was hanged on 23 March 1931.

In April when the Congress session began in Karachi under Patel's presidency, the mood was surly. There were indiscreet murmurings about Gandhi and other Congress leaders' failure to save Singh despite recent conversations and negotiations and an upcoming (second) Round Table Conference.

The first Round Table Conference, between the British government of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and an Indian delegation, was held between November 1930 and January 1931 in London. In spite of the Congress boycott, Ambedkar was able to put reservations for Dalits on the table and the princely states had crucial conversations on their role in independent India.

What took place instead was a series of conversations between the Indian viceroy Lord Irwin and Mahatma Gandhi at the new palatial home of the viceroy in Delhi. This palace and its adjoining areas had been designed by the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. The buildings he designed, with their sheer daunting physical presence, especially the viceregal palace, gave a sense of permanence to the British Raj. Ironically the first big meeting at the palace was to negotiate the end of the Raj.

In England, prominent politician Winston Churchill, still far from the prime minister's chair, snarled,

It is alarming and nauseating to see Mr Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the east, striding half naked up the steps of the viceregal palace, while he is still organising and conducting a campaign of civil disobedience, to parlay on equal terms with the representative of the Emperor-King.²

But Gandhi had won the moral victory. The empire was finally ready to listen, on an equal footing.

At the end of the talks, Gandhi and Irwin came to an agreement that became known as the Gandhi–Irwin Pact. The agreement said that the British government would ‘release satyagrahi prisoners, withdraw the ordinances, return unsold confiscated land, allow residents of coastal areas to collect their own salt and permit unaggressive picketing’,³ and in turn Gandhi would call off the Civil Disobedience Movement. As is often true in such situations, in the end the pact, negotiated hard on both sides, made everyone unhappy. Patel had promised the unqualified return of confiscated land to the peasants of Gujarat and the pact made no such overarching commitment. Nehru and some others were unhappy that the pact spoke about setting free only satyagrahi prisoners. What would happen, then, to the scores of fervent young revolutionaries, especially from Bengal? It was unclear. In Britain, Churchill immediately declared that the pact ‘inflicted such humiliation and defiance as has not been known since the British first trod the soil of India’.⁴

What had Gandhi achieved then?

Well, a certain sense of equality. A critical mass of parity that had hitherto been absent in discussions between the Raj and the Congress. This was—at least it seemed that way to the Indians—two sides speaking with each other rather than the superior British talking at their inferior subjects.

The Mahatma had also agreed to participate in the second Round Table Conference to be held at the end of 1931, ignoring caution from both Patel and Nehru.

As the Karachi session of the Congress rolled out, criticism against the Congress leadership, especially Gandhi, soared, so much so that Patel had to admonish young men holding protests aimed at Gandhi.

Talk does not count. It is service and it is action which makes men respected. If you have the strength behind you and if you do not approve of the constitution which the country has, as a result of the Round Table Conference, you can always throw it into the waste paper basket; but if you have no sanction of action behind you then thousands of Gandhis cannot get you freedom.⁵

In fact, Gandhi had asked the viceroy if, by hanging these men, the Raj was not losing the youth of India, and added that if indeed the decision was finally to hang them then ‘by all means do so before the Congress session is held, so that Sardar Patel and I can face whatever our young men may have to say in their anger at the session.’⁶

At the Karachi railway station, large crowds of young men greeted Gandhi and Patel with black flags—and the two leaders had to quietly thank them to take the sting off the protests.

If there is one theme that runs through the Sardar’s life, it is that even the greatest, most deserving honours often came to him wrapped in intractable problems for him to solve.

His role as Congress president at Karachi was the proverbial crown of thorns, a fact reflected in his speech at the session that was full of the themes that he must battle.

At the session Patel started the speech with a tribute to the three young revolutionaries whom Gandhi and the other leaders were accused of failing to save.

Three of our young men—Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru—have been recently hanged which has inflamed the feelings of the whole nation. I do not agree with the methods adopted by these young men because I do not believe that murder is less reprehensible because it is done for your country. Even so I bow my head before the patriotism, bravery and the spirit of sacrifice which animated Bhagat Singh and his comrades. In spite of the fact that the whole country demanded that the death sentence be commuted to transportation for life the British government chose to hang them which only shows how cruel and heartless the government is.⁷

It is not a very long speech, and it is not maudlin—unsurprising, given Patel’s natural reticence—but it is curiously matter-of-fact, even defensive in parts.

Within the first few minutes, in spite of the grand success of the Dandi March, Patel admitted ‘but that does not mean that we did not commit mistakes. It cannot be disputed, however, that India has proved to the whole world that the collective use of non-violence was not an idle dream but has

become a fact.⁸ (There are some, like Meghnad Desai, who believe Dandi failed to achieve much in spite of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact.)

This hard-hitting tone appears in many places throughout the speech. Patel, it is clear, knows that there is considerable resistance to the idea of Gandhi taking part in the second Round Table Conference. He warned his audience:

I need not dilate on the pact we have entered into with the government in this critical hour. We accepted this with the hope that you will set your seal of approval on it and I will request you to formally approve it. The members of the [Congress] Working Committee were your representatives who had your trust and you cannot refuse to approve the pact. But, you can, if you choose, express lack of confidence in the Working Committee and elect another Committee more worthy of your trust. But if you do that it would mean rejecting the pact and all the sacrifices made by us in the last year would go waste.⁹

He further felt the need to justify why, in the face of British intransigence, the Congress had still extended a hand of negotiation. When one reads this important speech of Patel's as a first-time president of the Congress, a position that had been due to him since 1929, one understands in emotional detail the firefighting role he had taken on within the party and indeed on behalf of Gandhi.

In both tone and verve there is a distinct sense that Patel is assuaging troubled waters in a party where the old guard is already—even as the independence movement is heating up—in some sort of collision with the younger cadre. This was perhaps a foretaste of the kind of conflict Gandhi and Patel would soon have with Bose (and would more easily contain with the malleable Nehru). The protests against the Mahatma and the Congress leadership were significant enough for Patel to spend a large portion of his speech in defending the actions of Gandhi and the Congress Working Committee. In his speech Patel, then fifty-six years old, even alluded to this age difference between the Congress leadership and youth campaigners:

Gandhiji is going to be 63. Now if we old men are not in a hurry, would the young men like you show haste? We wish to see India free before we quit this world. We are in a greater hurry than you are [. . .] If the time comes I will tell you what is what after six months. The government has given us many occasions when we would have been

provoked to act in anger, but anger would not do [. . .] Let us keep our swords sheathed, but let us keep them sharpened and shining.¹⁰

And he gave an elaborate explanation of the actions of the Congress leadership and defended Gandhi's choices.

As satyagrahis we should always claim—and we did—that we are always ready to make peace with our adversaries. The Congress Working Committee felt that if an honourable settlement can be achieved and the right of the Congress to demand full swarajya is accepted the Congress should accept the invitation to take part in the Round Table Conference. It should also, in that case, cooperate in the preparation of a constitution acceptable to all parties. If we failed in that attempt and the only power left to us was to take the path of struggle and make sacrifices, there was no power on earth which could deter us from doing that.¹¹

It was towards the middle of the speech that Patel brought in economics: the question of supporting local industry and the opposition to British goods. Historically, Patel has been positioned as the defender of capital in contrast to the socialist Nehru. What has not been adequately considered is Patel's work as an efficient and diligent fundraiser. In this speech, Patel was firefighting for the Congress and on behalf of Gandhi on an economic point, making the foot soldiers understand, which was challenging.

It is a complicated argument. He was telling them to stop the boycott of British goods, one of the hallmarks of the Gandhian protest, all because the Congress, and Gandhi, were about to extend the dialogue with the Raj. Thus, 'Now that we are engaged in friendly talks, we cannot at the same time do things which will directly hit the British interests.'¹² But, at the same time, so that the storm troopers of the party were not deflated, Patel had to ensure that they did not assume that the boycott of British goods was over. That idea would not go down well amidst an already restive gathering. And so, 'Even though for this reason, we withdraw our boycott of British goods, we do consider that swadeshi is our birth right. We must, therefore, intensify the movement for swadeshi.'¹³

How, though?

Well, by supporting Indian industry.

We must, therefore, encourage Indian insurance companies, banks and other enterprises and persuade all others to do the same [. . .] It is only by making use of their services and goods and making helpful suggestions that we can help them in making their goods and services better and cheaper.¹⁴

To simplify his convoluted logic, Patel brought in the argument of equality. What, he asked, was the basic problem in the relationship between the British Raj and the Indians.

The subject of an equal status and equal treatment is being discussed everywhere, but could there be an equality between a giant and a pygmy? Or between an elephant and an ant? [. . .] If you want to bring equality to between two who are unequal, the only way to do it is to raise the status of the one who is inferior of the two. In this scheme of the government for our cooperation, it is vital that we make a stipulation that we must preserve Indian industry at the cost of harming British and other countries' industries.

Without that we will cease to exist as a nation.¹⁵

Patel effectively turned a complicated balancing-act argument into an argument for the very survival of the nation.

Powerful as they were, his arguments and exhortations on the need for national unity were not very successful. Riots broke out in Kanpur between Hindu Congressmen urging a closure of shops to protest the indignities of the British Raj and Muslim shopkeepers who refused. The riots led not only to looting but also several murders and mass arson.

The Congress claimed to speak for all Indians and still had the support of some prominent Muslim leaders like Azad. At the Karachi session the party got a bit of a boost in its claims of bringing Hindus and Muslims together by the participation of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Khudai Khidmatgars from the North-West Frontier Province. Khan would later come to be known as Frontier Gandhi for his commitment to non-violence but by the time India became independent, and was broken into India and Pakistan, he would accuse Gandhi of betrayal. But we will come to that story in a while.

The Kanpur riots showed that the fissures between Hindus and Muslims ran deep, and were perhaps going out of the control of the Congress, and even Gandhi.

After the riots, Patel, Azad and the businessman Jamnalal Bajaj made a joint appeal where they accepted that they were ‘shocked beyond description to discover that tales of slaughter of women and children belonging to both communities were but too true. For a moment, man had evidently become beast.’¹⁶

Before we move away from the Karachi session of the Congress, we must pause at an incident little remarked upon—the choice of the national tricolour flag. A Congress Working Committee made up of Patel, Azad, Sikh religious leader and independence activist Tara Singh, Nehru, social reformer and activist D.B. Kalelkar, N.S. Hardikar who had an MSc in Public Health from the University of Michigan and had been a close associate of Rai’s, and doctor-turned-independence-activist B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya who was a proponent of the creation of Indian states on the basis of language, considered what ought to be the colours and design of the flag. (The Karachi session also brought up a radical economic agenda that Leftists wanted.)

The first delicate issue that the committee considered was the widespread belief that the flag ought to have communal colours—one bit representing the Hindus, the other the Muslims, etc. It considered carefully the fact that in the initial plan for the flag, the red bit stood for Hindus, the green for Muslims and white for the rest of the communities.¹⁷ The Sikhs, the committee noted, had been objecting that their colour was not represented in the flag. Therefore the wise men of the Congress put down that

[T]he committee are unanimous in holding that the colours of the flag should not bear any communal significance. The question then is whether a declaration to that effect should not satisfy the public as well as those who have objected to the existing colours [. . .] The national flag is always a rallying point for the nation through storm and sunshine and will continue to be so no matter what colours it bears and what design it adopts.¹⁸

The men debated many permutations and combinations for the new flag. What if one just removed the charkha on the flag? That would make it look exactly like the flag of Bulgaria. What about having a white middle

portion? That would replicate the Persian flag. The charkha seemed crucial because it gave the flag a unique identity.

Finally, it was decided that the flag should be of one colour.

If there is one colour that is more acceptable to the Indians as a whole, even as it is more distinctive than another, one that is associated with this ancient country by long tradition, it is the kesari or the saffron colour. Accordingly, it is felt that the flag should be of kesari colour except for the colour of the device. That the device should be the charkha is unanimously agreed to. Various other devices have been suggested in the place of or in addition to the charkha—namely plough, lotus flower and so on.¹⁹

The charkha had developed in importance as a vital insignia for the national movement:

But the charkha is really the device round which our national movement has grown these ten years and its importance should not be lessened by the addition of any other device. We have then to select the colour of the device. The committee have come to the conclusion that the charkha should be in blue. Accordingly, we recommend that the national flag should be of kesari or saffron colour having on it at the left top quarter the charkha in blue with the wheel towards the flagstaff, the proportions of the flag being fly to hoist three to two.²⁰

This unanimous decision was never applied and in a few days, the All Indian Congress Committee (AICC) added an amendment to this earlier submission. The amendment said,

The AICC confirms the following change in the National Flag recommended by the Working Committee: The flag is to be three-coloured, horizontally arranged as before, but the colours shall be saffron, white and green in the order stated here from top to bottom with the spinning wheel in dark blue in the centre of the white stripe, it being understood that the colours have no communal significance but that saffron shall represent courage and sacrifice, white, peace and truth, and green shall represent faith and chivalry, and the spinning wheel the hope of the masses.²¹

The proportions remained the same as before.

The Karachi session of the Congress had started with questions being raised on the efficacy of Gandhi's pact with Viceroy Irwin and tension in the party ranks, and it ended with news of the riots clouding the air. Meanwhile Viceroy Irwin, who had seemed at least willing to listen to the

Congress leadership, was removed from his position. The new British interlocutors, including Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, were far less sympathetic to the Congress's cause than his predecessor but it was with him that Gandhi would parlay during the second Round Table Conference.

Even before he went to the talks in London, Gandhi's pact with the British Raj was crumbling. While the Congress attempted to convince peasants to pay the pending land revenue, in many cases confiscated land was not returned by the government, and farmers were even tortured to get money out of them. Still, Gandhi insisted that the only response from the villagers must be non-violence. Relations between Patel, who had led the farmers through several satyagrahas and on whose request the farmers had refused en masse to pay land revenue, and Gandhi grew terse. In one telegram, Patel writes, 'Harassment peasants Valod Mahad continues. Pending cases not withdrawn still. Confiscated lands not returned in spite offer current year revenue.'²²

In another, Patel rages to Gandhi who is in Shimla, 'Peasants in [the] midst [of] agricultural operations find themselves between [the] devil and deep sea urgent solution one way or other imperative'.

In yet another telegram to Gandhi he says:

Police persecution becoming intolerable. Crowds of peasants rushing ashram with complaints. Yesterday several families of Sankali remained closed doors, police patrolling in front all day. Today reports received that Khoj and Pardi²³ villages completely surrounded by police. Since early morning neither people nor cattle allowed to go out. Police posted several houses Bardoli town blockading entrance. Men women complain filthy abuse harassment. For god's sake allow fight if this cannot be stopped.²⁴

To Nehru he raged:

The opponent [the British government] is firing heavily and the Congress is completely out of action. Poor persons believing on Bapoo [Gandhi] had paid all their current dues. Now they are being pressured for past arrears. I have never found myself in such humiliating position in my life. If Bapoo had been here I would not have kept quiet. Now what can I do in his absence especially when he is in Simla?²⁵

Later, Gandhi would acknowledge, though perhaps with a degree of condescension where he referred to villagers as sheep:

I now understand what is meant when people say that we cannot fight on Gandhi's conditions. We can only fight, if we are to do so, along Sardar's lines. The basis of this argument is this that he understands the peasants better than I. They have the strength of sheep, and not the strength of the lion. Even the few people who are able to pay should not pay because if they do, their united strength of sheep will be broken.²⁶

In their initial conversations, Lord Willingdon had already refused most of the Congress's demands including no commitment to alleviate the problems of peasants. But on Patel's suggestion, and that of other Congress leaders including Nehru, Gandhi still went to London to the second Round Table Conference. It was, of course, a complete failure but something illustrative and compelling for the future of the Congress and the national movement emerged clearly.

Willingdon had refused Gandhi the permission to include Congress leader M.A. Ansari in his delegation and at the Round Table, and other Muslim participants claimed that the Congress did not speak for the Muslims. B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the 'untouchables', claimed the same on behalf of his caste community. And the native princes had their own faction.

Having strived all this time in the independence movement to bring the country together, Gandhi could only watch as the struggle for freedom broke down into groups that viewed each other with animosity.

Meanwhile, back home, another challenge was rising in Bengal. When jailers at Hijli in Bengal killed prison inmates in a shooting, the nationalists in the state rose in protest. There were murders and counter murders. In response and protesting what he saw as inadequate action by the Congress against the government for these murders, Bose resigned from his position as president of the Bengal Congress Committee. Tagore, 'who rarely comes out of his seclusion, presided the other day over a large and representative public meeting at Calcutta and expressed in very scathing terms his

apprehensions of the brutalities alleged to have been perpetrated on the detenues’—wrote Sardar Patel in a letter.²⁷

Bengal was already a faction-ridden centre for the Congress. The state had its own peculiarities which made the smooth functioning of local Congress programmes difficult. Das, one of the tallest early political leaders in Bengal, had been sceptical, in part, of at least some of Gandhi’s ideas.

But what Das wanted was to bring the British to terms in a tidy, a precise, an un-Gandhian way. The opportunists of the Presidency did not share the same aims as the zealots of the centre, for Das and his lieutenants worked a system of non-cooperation with limited liability. He was striving not to achieve Ramraj [or Ram Rajya] in India, but to squeeze the British into making constitutional concessions in Bengal without unleashing a levelling movement inside his own province. When non-cooperation failed, Das and his faction judged that the best way of bringing the British to terms was by entering the Legislative Council.²⁸

From the non-Gandhian point of view of Das and his supporters, this seemed to be the best way forward.

The reforms had enfranchised about 1,330,000 voters in Bengal, many of them Muslims and the richer Hindu peasants of east and west. When the logic of these changes came to work its way into electoral results, it would harm the interests of the Hindu leadership which viewed itself as the political nation of Bengal. Its best course lay in exploiting what was left of its electoral advantage while the going was good. The Bengal Congress was still a powerful body. While the policy of organizing the Congress into linguistic provinces had divided Madras and Bombay into three and five Provincial Congresses respectively, the Bengal Congress had retained all thirty-two of its districts.²⁹

Bengal also had intellectual prowess. It was the home of some of the most sophisticated proponents of nationalism.

At first Das’s tactics seemed correct for Bengal. In 1923 his Swarajists did so well in the elections that they could dominate the Legislative Council. Das also won the first election to the new Calcutta Corporation, with its greatly extended powers. Once he became mayor, he had gained for the party what was to become the poisoned crown of controlling the metropolis. But Das’s success in swinging the party towards electoral politics, and his growing preoccupation with the affairs of Calcutta, drained the militant spirit out of the districts.³⁰

There was no longer the same energy in the confrontation.

When the issue was no longer how to challenge the state, but how to enter its councils, few of the party workers in the districts thought this cause was worth a broken head. For those veterans in the wars of non-violence it was a matter of once non-cooperative, twice shy. The price of bidding for collaboration was local torpor.³¹

The sloth among the foot soldiers was not only about the lethargy of the Congress leaders in Bengal. It was also about the legacy of a city—Calcutta. The capital of India and the British Raj till 1911, Calcutta was used to a prominence that overshadowed every other city in India. With a multitude of scientists, scholars and even spiritualists, Calcutta was illustrious enough for Gokhale, a veteran Congress leader, to have said, ‘What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow.’

In Bengal, it still seemed rational to run politics from the metropolis. No other Indian city dominated its hinterland as completely as Calcutta dominated Bengal. More than one million and a quarter persons lived in Calcutta during the nineteen-twenties; outside it, only 4 per cent of the population of Bengal were urban-dwellers, and indeed twelve and a half million Bengalis lived in hamlets with fewer than so inhabitants apiece.³²

What Calcutta thought today, Bengal thought tomorrow.

The metropolis was the centre of almost all the higher education in Bengal; and so its cultural style was stamped upon the professional classes in all the districts.³³

But Calcutta did not only have cultural and academic power. It also had overwhelming financial muscle. By 1918–19, Calcutta accounted for almost 80 per cent of the income tax collected in Bengal. The city was dominated by that gregarious, erudite, argumentative class, the bhadralok or the Bengali gentry, and it is from them that one of the greatest challengers to Gandhi, Patel and Nehru would rise—Subhas Chandra Bose.

By 1930, the rift between Bose and the Congress leadership including Gandhi had already surfaced. That year the Congress Committee in Bengal ‘controlled by Subhas Bose, claimed to have organized eleven centres of civil disobedience; but ten of them were in the district of Twenty-Four Parganas, only next door to Calcutta.’³⁴ The kind of ground-up, grassroots movement that Patel had created in many parts of Gujarat was evidently

lacking in the Bengal Congress led by, and presumably for, the Calcutta intelligentsia.

The differences of opinion between Patel and Bose towards the end of the 1930s are known, and we shall consider them at length a little later, but the thing to note at this stage is that even in the early 1930s, Patel's relationship with Bose and his older brother Sarat was conflict-ridden. There were differences during this time even with the venerable Tagore, with Patel writing to Nehru:

Tagore has been rubbing the Gujaratis and the Marwaris the wrong way. They complain of his narrow provincial propaganda for Bengal. Shankerlal Bunker sent me the other day a leaflet in Bengali issued by Tagore recommending boycott on non-Bengali mills and the purchase by Bengalees of Bengali cloth alone.³⁵

In 1932, Congress leaders at the national level had squabbled with the Bose brothers for independently launching agitations against the Communal Award of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald which gave separate electorates to different castes and religions in India. Nehru had complained about the Bengal unit deciding its own line away from the national unified doctrine of the Congress. Later, as head of the Congress parliamentary committee, Patel had insisted that lists of candidates for elections from Bengal could not be cleared unless the Bengal branch accepted the policies and programmes of the All India Congress manifesto.³⁶

This fight would rear its ugly head eventually but in the meantime, in April 1932, both Gandhi and Patel were arrested without any clear declaration of how long their term in jail would be. As it was, Patel remained in prison till July 1934 but Gandhi was released in the middle of 1933. The two of them were together at the Yerwada jail in Pune but in 1933 Patel was shifted to the Central Jail in Nashik. The time Patel and Gandhi spent together at Yerwada jail gives us some of the most revealing, and amusing, interactions between the two, the easy banter, and their intimate and difficult relationship. For instance, someone wrote a letter to Gandhi, presumably not a very flattering epistle, and ended by saying from 'one who had the misfortune of living in your [Gandhi's] age'.

‘Tell me,’ Gandhi asked Patel, ‘what sort of reply should I send him?’

‘Tell him to poison himself,’ said Vallabhbhai.

‘I cannot say that,’ said Gandhi, ‘but would it not be better to suggest that he should poison me instead?’

‘I am afraid that would not help him,’ answered Patel. ‘If he poisons you and you die, he would be sentenced to death and he too will have to go. Then he would have to take his chance of re-birth along with you. It is much better if he poisons himself.’³⁷

Another time, Gandhi told Patel that one of Gandhi’s sons had asked him, ‘[A]sked to vote on the subject of temple entry, would any of us be easily eligible?’

Gandhi said that he had replied: ‘All of us would be eligible except Vallabhbhai.’

Patel shot back: ‘No, on the other hand, I would be the only one who would have such a claim, for I have gone to many temples. You, perhaps, base your claims on the fact that you have made it a practice to come to a temple such as this jail and you would send others also to similar temples!’³⁸

It was in Yerwada jail that Gandhi undertook one of his most famous fasts against breaking India into separate electorates for different communities. Gandhi wanted a free nation with one united electorate but pushed into a corner about separate electorates for Muslims and Sikhs, he was determined to oppose separate electorates for the ‘untouchables’ or Dalits. Gandhi’s fast, and the prospect that he might die, startled Indian society. Overnight orthodox habits like barring Dalits from certain temples started to change (such impact, though, was limited), and in many cases upper-caste Brahmins broke all taboo to eat with the ‘untouchables’. Under a mango tree at Yerwada jail, the leader of the Dalits, B.R. Ambedkar, negotiated a Poona Pact with Gandhi. (Ambedkar would later call Gandhi’s fast a filthy act.)

An idea of how strongly many among the depressed classes resented Gandhi’s fast can be had from the remark made by their foremost leader, B R Ambedkar, as he was forced to parley with Gandhi in the Yervada jail. ‘Mahatmaji,’ Ambedkar said, ‘you have been very unfair to us.’ Little would his helpless ire have been assuaged by the Mahatma’s riposte: ‘It is always my lot to appear to be unfair. I can’t help it.’³⁹

This is probably one of the most insightful things Gandhi said about himself.

True, the depressed classes managed to get from the Poona Pact greater representation than was proposed for them in the MacDonald Award. And they got it because Ambedkar pressed hard for it. The one thing he said, repeated and emphasised during his meeting with Gandhi was: ‘I want my compensation.’ Gandhi understood: ‘I am with you in most of the things you say.’⁴⁰

He gave the Dalits a new name from that point onwards, Harijans or the Children of God. (The Dalits got more seats but often from electorates where caste Hindus predominated.)

Patel, who was suffering terribly from nosebleeds and needed surgery to correct his nasal condition, worried during this time about the feasibility of Gandhi undertaking more fasting. From his side, Gandhi wrote to the home department:

[W]e who know it are getting nervous [. . .] The attacks are becoming more and more frequent and more troublesome. The worst attack was witnessed Saturday last. The discharge from the nose and sneezing continued for more than thirty hours. The eyes were blood red and the nose naturally so. The whole day he ate nothing, drinking only tea in the morning and having fruit and milk and boiled vegetable in the evening. He is not able to take his regular meals.⁴¹

Patel, whose own battle with ill health was a constant in his life, may have come to the conclusion that there was little chance that issues like caste division could not be resolved before independence was attained. He presciently told Mahadev Desai, who told him that he feared being crushed between the two stones of upper-caste Hindus and Ambedkar’s lower-caste followers: ‘You need to talk of such a possibility only if you allow yourself to come between two stones [. . .] Let the two parties quarrel among themselves.’⁴²

While he was in prison, Patel received news that his mother had died, followed by his daughter-in-law, and then, his elder brother and prominent Congressman Vithalbhai Patel died in Geneva while on a tour accompanied by his close friend and associate Bose.

Patel was characteristically stoic about the death of his mother and even when his son Dahyabhai was ill with typhoid, he refused to let his daughter

Maniben, who was also in prison at Belgaum, apply for parole to take care of him.⁴³

His relationship with Vithalbhai had been complicated. He had had to give up his first opportunity to go study law in England for Vithalbhai who took it up instead. Years later, Patel would probably have given up his chance to be Congress president in favour of his elder brother. Vithalbhai saw the choice of Patel instead of him for the position as ‘the unkindest cut of all’ and ‘implied humiliation’.⁴⁴ Had it not been for Gandhi’s clear preference for Patel, the older brother might have had his way again.

Even in death, the controversies between the brothers did not cease. Vithalbhai and Bose had been highly critical of Gandhi’s leadership during their travels in Europe. By the time Vithalbhai died in October 1932, Bose had become his primary caregiver. On his deathbed he left a will of sorts, bequeathing three-quarters of his money to Bose to use in promoting India’s cause in other countries.

Bose wrote to Gandhi asking that Patel be freed for a period to attend to the last rites of his elder brother. Gandhi replied that seeking such a favour from the Raj would not be proper. And as Gandhi had anticipated, Patel said the same thing. ‘To ask for coming out from the present stage is neither graceful to me nor to the nation. It does not speak well of a satyagrahi to pressurise the government improperly, taking advantage of such an occasion.’⁴⁵

On its part, and with an eye on public opinion, the British government offered to allow Patel to attend the cremation provided he did not make any political comment during that period, and that he surrendered to be arrested as soon as the programme was over.

‘I cannot purchase my liberty at the sacrifice of my honour and self-respect even on an occasion when my presence outside is highly necessary,’ wrote back Patel.⁴⁶ Finally, Dahyabhai, Patel’s son, conducted the final rites of Vithalbhai Patel.

But there was more about the death of Vithalbhai that was thorny. When Patel saw a copy of the letter in which his brother had left a majority of his estate to Bose, he asked a series of questions: Why was the letter not

attested by a doctor? Had the original paper been preserved? Why were the witnesses to that letter all men from Bengal and none of the many other veteran freedom activists and supporters of the Congress who had been present at Geneva where Vithalbhai had died? Patel may even have doubted the veracity of the signature on the document.⁴⁷

This case would finally go to court pitching Patel and his family in direct conflict with the Bose brothers. After a legal battle that lasted more than a year, the courts judged that Vithalbhai's estate could only be inherited by his legal heirs, that is, his family. Patel promptly handed the money over to the Vithalbhai Memorial Trust.

The faith and trust between Patel and Bose never quite recovered after this incident, and what happened next in the leadership race within the Congress only pushed them further apart.

As Gandhi disbanded civil disobedience in April 1934, the Congress entered a new phase—now Patel would have to win them elections to many seats in the legislatures. And in spite of his ill health, the Sardar would campaign from the North-West Frontier Province to the southernmost tip of the country for the Congress and to push Gandhi's word.



SEVEN

‘THE SO-CALLED SLOGAN OF SOCIALISTS TO MARCH FORWARD IS NOTHING BUT HOLLOW TALK.’

Upon being released from prison, Sardar Patel began to prepare for the Congress to win as many seats as possible in the legislatures. The issue, he said in his classic, unambiguous style, was ‘clear-cut’: having decided to contest elections it was the duty of every Congressman now to see that the party won the maximum number of seats.

But already a new faction had risen within the Congress which had Nehru’s sympathies: the socialists.

To start with, Patel was reticent about commenting on this group which had younger leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, except for stressing that the Congress must remain united to maximize its gains in the upcoming elections.

But soon his exasperation started to show and he was seen advising the socialists not to create divisions within the party and reminding them that the failure of the Congress to sweep the polls would suggest to the government that their policies, including the decision to imprison Gandhi, were correct. Socialism did not come just from reading Lenin, he said, it came from acquiring freedom and therefore he appealed to socialists to go

work in the villages which would help them win the trust of the average Congress worker.¹ To this Narayan retorted, “[W]e shall go to the peasants, but we shall go to them not with a spinning wheel, but with the militant force of economic programme.’²

This became a fundamental divide in the freedom movement and within the Congress. The socialists felt that social revolution, especially in establishing an economy based on socialism, attacking industrialists and nationalizing assets, and even launching an armed ‘people’s’ revolution, ought to be a critical part of the freedom movement. But people like Gandhi and Patel were more focused on getting India independent from British rule before ushering in any social change, which they felt would happen gradually and could be brought about in due course. As Rudrangshu Mukherjee has written:

Indian communists have always had a very uncomfortable relationship with nationalism [.] . .] In 1948, within a few months of India becoming independent, the Communist Party of India (CPI) launched the line that this freedom was fake ('yeh azaadi jhoothi hai'), and argued that the situation in India was ripe for armed revolution.³

This, naturally, is a line Patel completely disagreed with, and remained consistent on the point that India needed to become more entrepreneurial and productive.

Patel would repeat this idea again and again. On 11 August 1947, just before Independence, he said in a speech,

There is a financial crisis [.] . Here words won't solve the problems. There are many scholars. Our socialist friends talk of socialist government. I tell them take one province and govern it in a socialistic way. In England, there is socialist government, but there they talk of increase in the working hours while here there is talk of strikes, and increase in wages and salaries. But from where will the money come? By printing promissory notes in Nasik press [the government mint] the wealth of the nation is not going to increase. Where is money in the country?⁴

Trouble with the socialists clearly persisted and soon an exasperated Patel was saying, ‘At present, we are engaged in marathon debates, when experiments about the efficacy of Western ideology are being conducted in

Western countries. Before our eyes, the borrowed methodology of socialism has been misused in establishing fascism.’⁵

Patel was one of the first leaders in India, if not *the* first, who accurately made the connection between the totalitarianism and authoritarianism of socialism and fascism. After his death, especially in more recent years, in a lot of ill-informed and callous writing, he has been described as part of the Right wing within the Congress. He would have balked at such a description; he certainly did not see himself as part of any ‘wing’, and was not tied to any dogmatic ideology as such. His vision was that of pure pragmatism, a sensible, workable plan, ground-up, to bring India freedom and prosperity. Some historians have started to accept the overwhelming evidence in support of this.

[T]he usage of Eurocentric concepts in studying history is dominant in the writings of historians, either because of the lack of an alternative paradigm or due to ideological commitments as seen in the writings of, particularly, Marxist historians [. . .] The origin of the terms such as ‘Right’ and ‘Left’ is occidental. The frequent use of the term ‘Right’ to identify a particular group within the Indian National Congress with a certain ideology along with its limitations emerged in India with the emergence of Left in the Indian political scene during the mid-1920s. The years 1930–39 were significant in the evolution of a socialist ideology in India.⁶

Historian Neerja Singh argues that the strengthening of the new Left within the Congress led to more friction within the party and greater questioning of the established leaders. She says that

It saw the steady coalescing of the Left-wing point of view within and without the Congress in the form of trade union activities, Kisan Sabha and other mobilizations, and the emergence of the Congress Socialist Party within the Congress. Now, the perspective of the existing leadership of the Congress came to be questioned, criticized and challenged by the newly emergent socialists and the Left in the Congress. They often referred to the existing leadership and their political outlook as the ‘Right’, and ‘Rightist’ [. . .] Moreover, in the usage of the nomenclature ‘Right’ for the senior leaders of the Congress, the Left also referred to them as ‘traditionalists’, ‘conservatives’, and ‘reformists’, implying that they were quintessentially conformist and non-progressive.⁷

The emergence of the Right in the West had a context—it was a ‘post liberal, post-industrial phenomenon’, and was suspicious of democracy. It

also, often, rejected multiculturalism and was concerned with eugenics, social Darwinism (the idea that like in survival of the species, so in society, only the ‘fittest’ deserve to survive) and anti-Semitism.

In India, the people whom newly indoctrinated socialists were calling Rightists had fought the hardest and made the most sacrifices to attain democracy. In speech after speech, programme after programme, Gandhi and Patel had spoken against caste bias and fought against blind superstition. These were men who were pushing for reform in Indian society, not obstructing it. Far from trying to ensure that the weaker sections of society were left behind or removed, Gandhi and Patel and others like them had actually brought the poorest and most marginalized sections of Indian society into the freedom movement.

The so-called Right in India, on the contrary, rejected social Darwinism and eugenism [sic] and accepted the syncretic tradition of human evolution rooted in multiculturalism and Catholicism [. . .] [It] emerged as a protest against exploitation and domination of foreign rule, social obscurantism, feudalism, communalism, caste, untouchability, illiteracy and suppression of women. The nomenclature of ‘Right’ was assigned to leaders of this genre who also subscribed to the principles of democratic welfare state, honoured class collaboration, respected private property and stood for [the] non-violent form of anti-colonial movement.⁸

The entire labelling of the ‘Right wing’, it seemed, was based on the rejection of the tenets of communism and socialism.

On the grounds that they did not accept class struggle, abolition of private property, establishment of [a] socialistic state, the Left scholars termed these liberal, rational, democratic nationalists as ‘Right wingers’, ignoring the fact that they worked within a specific Indian historical setting, with the primary objective of projecting a united opposition to imperialist forces in the context of national struggle against colonial domination.⁹

Senior Congress leaders like Prasad, Patel, Rajagopalachari and Gandhi himself were wary of such labels. In time, this label would become another bone of contention between the feisty socialist Bose and the man he saw as a prime ‘Rightist’, Patel.

Prescient Gandhi had warned Bose, ‘I wish you would choose better and indigenous terms,’¹⁰ but he could not avert the collision that was coming. Prasad too was cautious: ‘I do not think it is always correct to take the analogy of other countries and to apply them in their entirety to our own country because conditions differ.’¹¹

But the man who took the strongest stand against what he felt was mindless ideological mimicry was the Sardar. Patel argued, with the wisdom of experience, that he had built his politics and ideology by living among the poor, among the farmers and the agricultural workers. There were few who understood conditions in the rural, by far the majority, parts of the country, more than him, and he was keen on the uplift of the masses and the transformation of the economy. He was, as he reiterated, ‘a peasant by birth’.

I am a common man possessing common knowledge [...] I have no inferiority complex towards common citizens [...] I desire to go forward as swiftly as I can. But I am afraid that the so-called slogan of the socialists to ‘March Forward’ is nothing but hollow talk. If the socialists or any other party comes forward and points to me some radical plan, which they have the courage to implement immediately, I am ready to enrol myself in their ranks.¹²

Patel was also angered on behalf of Gandhi about the socialists mocking some of the main programmes of the Congress which had been successfully implemented for years and which had brought the party to this point in its struggle for freedom. He was particularly incensed by, it seems, flippant comments about the insignia chosen by Gandhi as symbols of the mass resistance against British rule.

Our young socialist friends cut a joke about the spinning wheel and discreetly talk about the use of the mechanised plough. But he who has passed his whole life in the midst of rural people and living style, as such of common man, I am fully aware what problems in restructuring village life are created by using a mechanised plough. Our socialists may point out to me any such village life or any such association of industrial labourers, which they have been able to manage to their own satisfaction.¹³

As a man of action, Patel is unimpressed by the sloganeering and asks again and again: What is the contribution of the socialists on the ground?

It is very easy to organise processions of mill workers flying red flags, but I would like to ask them what purpose is served by such hustle and bustle, and what next? The answers, which I have received on these issues are wrapped up in uneasy silence. Therefore, I consider it my duty to warn them about the most secret dangers lying in this type of loose way of thinking. You should not forget that there are various types of thoughtless persons, who are always eager and ready to take advantage of our drifting away a bit from our principle of non-violence.¹⁴

Patel was vocal about the dangers of revolutions that had no defined goals and no proven path. He argued that by taking the route laid out by Gandhi, the freedom movement had reached a turning point which could be disrupted by factionalism within the Congress. He challenged the foolhardy notion of ‘revolution’ because the way he saw it, a revolution was already under way in India, and any cut-and-paste ideology would only derail it.

After strong words of chastisement, however, the ever-considerate Patel offered an olive branch: ‘We, elders, have no craze for power as some people believe. When we were young we carried on struggle in the way we understood and did all possible things we could. You shall now do the remaining work.’¹⁵

This is a potent statement. Already by this point in the freedom movement, at least on one occasion, when asked about the future leadership of independent India, Gandhi had spoken of handing the reins over to younger people. Patel was younger than Gandhi but only by six years. Was Patel taking a hint from Gandhi? Did he already know that Gandhi didn’t consider him ‘young’ and wouldn’t pass on the reins of the newly independent country to him?

Either way, the fight with the socialists was about to get worse, and in the middle of all this, Gandhi stepped away from being an official member of the Congress to work for the uplift of villages. This, however, did not mean that his moral power and authority on the Congress would grow any weaker.

In the elections that came, the extensive groundwork laid by Patel, leader of the party across India for the polls, the Congress performed well. It won 61 of a total of 104 seats including 44 of the 49 unreserved seats. Of the 30 seats reserved for Muslims, 16 were won by members of a group led by

Jinnah. As head of the parliamentary committee of the Congress, Patel laid down the template which has since been followed in every election, and was responsible for the day-to-day running of the party.

This is another critical moment when there could have been compromise between the Congress and the Muslim League. The question of a quota for Muslim seats arose again, with pressure from the Muslim League and determined pushback from the likes of Madan Mohan Malaviya and M.S. Aney. Patel wanted a united front of all parties against British rule and rejected Jinnah's demand that the quota system be accepted because it would mean accepting that the Congress did not speak for the Muslims—which would be absolutely antithetical to Gandhi's beliefs.

It was also around this time that the debate between the Congress and the rulers of the princely states of India was heating up, in part because the 1935 Government of India Act had tried to cajole the princes to join a future federation of India. There were numerous reports in newspapers asking why the Congress was not doing more to help the people living in the princely states, considering all its programmes against colonial rule in British India. We find Patel in October 1935 spelling out the Congress position:

[T]he people in the Indian States have an inherent right to Swaraj no less than the people of British India. [The Congress] has accordingly declared itself in favour of establishment of representative responsible government in the States and has in that behalf not only appealed to the Princes to establish such responsible government in their States and to guarantee fundamental rights of citizenship, like freedom of person, speech, association and the press to the people, but has also pledged to the States' people its sympathy and support in their legitimate and peaceful struggle for the attainment of full responsible government.¹⁶

In such speeches of his, there is always a sotto voce nudge and warning—he is asking the princes to see that change is unavoidable as is the desire of the people for democracy, and the princes should learn to accept it.

By that declaration and by that pledge, the Congress feels that even in their own interests the Princes will be well advised to establish at the earliest possible moment full responsible government within their States carrying a guarantee of full rights of citizenship to their people. It should be understood however that the responsibility and the

burden of carrying on that struggle within the States must necessarily fall on the States' people themselves. The Congress can exercise moral and friendly influence upon the States and this, it is bound to do wherever possible.¹⁷,

He also notes a practical consideration and what could easily be a veiled threat to errant rulers.

The Congress has no other power under existing circumstances although the people of India whether under British, the Princes or any other power are geographically and historically one and indivisible. In the heat of the controversy the limitation of the Congress is often forgotten [...] At the same time, it is hardly necessary to assure the people of the States that the Congress will never be guilty of sacrificing their interests in order to buy the support of the Princes. From its inception, the Congress has stood unequivocally for the rights of the masses of India as against any vested interests in conflict with their true interests.¹⁸

Not only was he taking on the princes in 1935, he was also defending Gandhi against the barbs of Ambedkar. He wrote to Ambedkar:

You have said in your reply that the Congress is dependent on the money belonging to upper caste Hindus for the execution of its affairs. The day Congress workers start actual work of removal of untouchability, the monetary help from upper caste Hindus would cease. This in reality is not correct. The monetary help received by the Congress at present comes from those Hindus who do not believe in untouchability and who really desire its removal. The Hindus keeping a strong faith in untouchability have, since the Congress started active work of removal of untouchability, ceased to provide any financial assistance to it.¹⁹,

And that was not all, said Patel, the Congress was fighting many orthodox Hindus who did not want untouchability to end.

It can easily be understood that you may not be satisfied with the Congress efforts at removal of untouchability. It is not that the obstacles, which the Congress experiences in carrying out this programme, are created by the upper caste Hindus alone. Its real test has been experienced by those upper caste Hindus also who are working in this direction. Thus, it is not my intention at all to defend all those Hindus who believe in untouchability. But your belief that as long as Mahatmaji is wedded to the Congress programme and its activities, it would not be possible for him to work for the removal of untouchability, is really erroneous.²⁰

But for all of Patel's work for the party and in defence of Gandhi, in 1936, when the question of choosing the next party president rose again, it was Gandhi who prevailed. Patel had thought that by the natural principle of rotation among senior Congress leaders, the next person to get a chance would be Rajagopalachari or Rajaji. But he was overruled by Gandhi who, once again, offered the position to Nehru, not least because socialists made up a third of the delegates in the 1935 Bombay session of the Congress and 'dreamed of capturing the party machine through Nehru's election'.²¹ [Nehru was also the most popular campaigner capable of winning elections while Patel was a formidable organizer.]

It is from this point onwards that the differences between Patel and Nehru start to really come into focus.

As early as the Lahore session of the Congress in 1929, Nehru had declared: 'I must confess that I am a socialist and a republican and am no believer in kings and princes or in an order which produces modern kings of industries.'²²

There is no doubt that both Nehru and Patel had a deep and abiding concern for India's impoverished masses. But the difference lay in the way they sought to address the problem. Nehru spoke passionately against capital and business but he was a product of the benefits of that class and that wealth. He never gave up, for instance, his own family home Anand Bhawan, 'the first home in Allahabad to have its own swimming-pool, electricity and running water,'²³ whose expenses have passed into folklore, all paid for with what his lawyer father earned from some of the richest capital- and land-owning men in the country.

Patel was a farmer and till the very end, despite his success as a lawyer, maintained a frugal lifestyle with a modest home in Gujarat, among farmers, where he was happiest. He believed passionately in the uplift of the poor too, especially the agrarian poor, and told them in speech after speech that they must fight to win back their dignity and a more prosperous livelihood. In a speech in 1928, he told the farmers of Bardoli,

You have forgotten your dignity as human beings, you have lost your sense of self-respect. You have allowed yourselves to be reduced to the level of dumb-driven cattle.

Anybody may oppress you in any way he likes. You are content to bear it all as a matter of ordinary course even like your own bullocks when they are heartlessly overloaded and hard-driven in the hot burning sun.²⁴

We hear in this of course the echoes of Gandhi who declared that the Congress represented, more than anyone else, ‘the dumb, semi-starved millions’ across this vast country full of mostly peasants. Nehru wrote of Gandhi: ‘He did not descend from the top, he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition.’²⁵ Gandhi, wrote Nehru, changed these toiling masses ‘from a demoralised, timid and hopeless mass, bullied and crushed by every dominant interest, and incapable of resistance’ to ‘a people with self-respect and self-reliance, resisting tyranny and capable of united action and sacrifice for a larger cause.’²⁶

Patel wanted to teach his farmer followers:

[S]hed this ignorance of yours and learn to face suffering like intelligent human beings. Enlightened and pure suffering thus willingly undergone is the highest penance known to men. It will purify you and elevate you if you practise it. Through pain and sorrow, it will enable you to find abiding bliss.²⁷

Both men, apostles of Gandhi, were equally earnest in wanting to lift their impoverished countrymen from the morass of poverty. The paths they sought, though, were inevitably different.

Nehru believed that the ideals and virtues of socialism that he was so passionate about could be used in India to bring about a revolution. In 1927, Nehru and his father had attended the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the November Revolution, taking a detour to Moscow during their summer vacation in Europe.

Upon their arrival they saw:

[T]here was nothing grand left about Moscow’s Grand Hotel. The Communists had covered the plush czarist furniture with coarse covers to make it more socialist. Neither would socialism allow hot water for a bath. Motilal made a great fuss. An unrepentant bourgeois, he refused to be impressed by the poorly stocked shops or the proletariat officialdom. He finally lost his famous temper when the Soviet foreign commissar, G.V. Chicherin, gave him an appointment at four in the morning. His temper did not fetch him

hot water but it did help change the appointment to the marginally more reasonable hour of 1 p.m.²⁸

During the anniversary celebrations, Nehru noticed many people, mostly women, entering the old cathedral of the Virgin Mary right next to the Kremlin, seeing and, no doubt, ignoring the nearby wall which proclaimed in striking lettering Karl Marx's pronouncement: Religion is the opium of the masses.²⁹

Even so, in September 1928, Nehru was still telling students,

Socialism frightens some of our friends, but what of communism? Our elders sitting in their council chambers shake their grey heads and stoke their beards in alarm at the mere mention of the word [...] I wish to tell you that though personally I do not agree with many of the methods of communists, and I am by no means sure to what extent communism can suit present conditions in India, I do believe in communism as an ideal for society. For essentially it is socialism, and socialism is the only way if the world is to escape disaster.³⁰

Some of those frightened friends of Nehru were probably prescient because it was in 1928 that power in the Soviet Union shifted from the Leninists to a man called Joseph Stalin.

While Patel was perceptive enough to detect the common authoritarian streak between communism and fascism, Nehru was under the influence, at least to a degree, of hard-line communist friends like Virendranath 'Chatto' Chattopadhyaya who wrote to him in 1928,

According to my reading of the Indian situation the revolutionary ferment will come to a head just after the Simon Commission has reported to Parliament and the government prepares a plan of reforms for the purchase of the owning class. If you are organisationally prepared by this time, you will be able to strike a blow, just as Gandhi was able to do in 1921. But I hope that this time there will be no sentimental nonsense about the shedding of a few litres of blood, and that the revolutionary movement will be led on purely materialistic lines by trained Marxian revolutionaries.³¹

A few litres of blood were, indeed, shed. But not in India.

In 1937, showing true Marxist virtue in the lack of 'sentimental nonsense' for a man from India who had devoted most of his life to the communist cause, Stalin had Chatto executed in his infamous Great Purge.

To a certain degree, Nehru romanticized the idea of a revolutionary upturn of Indian society, a sort of civil war, as it happened in the Soviet Union, to rid the country of the imperial British and transform society, ridding the poor of centuries of tyranny in one sweep.

However, as both Gandhi and Patel knew, things were far more complicated. It was Gandhi who ‘would warn Jawaharlal after his return from Europe not to put too much faith in British socialism: all their class rivalries disappeared when it came to imperial exploitation of India’.³² To understand Indian nuances, Nehru had waxed eloquent that Gandhi ‘sent us [younger Congress leaders] to the villages, and the countryside hummed with the activity of innumerable messengers of the new gospel of action. The peasant was shaken up and he began to emerge from his quiescent shell’. It was through Gandhi, Nehru said, that he saw ‘for the first time as it were, the villager in the intimacy of his mud hut and with the stark shadow of hunger always pursuing him.’³³

This of course captures a key difference between Nehru and Patel. Nehru had to be *sent* to the villages of India to understand peasant life, the real India, if you will, whereas Patel came from that real India and did not have to go or be sent anywhere to comprehend it.

Patel, therefore, instinctively opposed the idea of revolution by borrowed ideology in India, especially having seen the success of the Gandhian method. He realized, correctly, that triggering a class war would probably do greater harm to India’s path to freedom than good. While Nehru’s ideas came from his extensive reading about communism and socialism, Patel had lived the life of the Indian poor and understood why they chose to follow Gandhi; his perspective came directly from his lived experience, not books.

The two men also parted ways on religion, a divide even more significant than the one on socialism. Nehru was uncomfortable with politics that was suffused with religion and there was reason for his discomfort. There had always been sporadic clashes between Hindus and Muslims since the Islamic invasion of India but after the failure of the Khilafat Movement and the call for separate electorates and a separate homeland for Muslims,

tensions between the two communities had risen significantly. The response to the declarations of Iqbal and the Muslim League came most stridently from the so-termed nationalists within the Congress, led by prominent figures like Malaviya who was in an ideological sense heir to Rai. Nehru's solution to the rising friction was, as he wrote in 1926 to his Cambridge mate Syed Mahmud, scion of a wealthy, land-owning family from Bihar, and who would later become a Congress leader:

I think what is required in India most is a course of study of Bertrand Russell's books [. . .] Religion as practiced in India has become the old man of the sea for us and it has not only broken our backs but stifled and almost killed all originality of thought and mind.³⁴

You can almost hear Patel chortle. The solution to India's problems was reading Bertrand Russell? Really? And who would read him? The more than 90 per cent of Indians who remained illiterate after more than a century of English rule?

(This statement by Nehru also hints at why India focused on building excellent educational institutions of higher learning after Independence in 1947 but did not focus enough on primary education under Nehru's prime ministership.)

Nehru was correct in worrying about the spread of religious strife in India. He saw the beginnings of the damage that religious dogma and conservatism have done in Indian society in everything from birth-based discriminatory systems like caste to conflicts on gender rights. But his solutions were not indigenous. They were derived from ideologies he had only read about and believed to be better, more progressive than the morass of poverty and the dead weight of tradition that he saw around him in India.

Nehru was always uncomfortable with the use of Hindu iconography in Gandhi's politics, famously asking Gandhi when the troubles began following the implosion of the Khilafat Movement, 'Whom would I represent? The Hindus are not going to accept me, and why should the Muslims do so?'³⁵ The question of religion was always perplexing for Nehru—his father was an avowed rationalist, his mother a committed orthodox, and these two sides seem to have battled inside him throughout

his life. Early in his life, in 1922, he seems to have written to Gandhi, enthralled by Hindu scriptures like Tulsidas's Ramayana, his reading of the Bible, and the verses of the Quran. At the end of his life, an infirm Nehru would once again turn to the guidance of the Himalayan mystic Anandamayi Ma. In between however, and not without reason, Nehru bemoaned the baggage of religion which not only germinated social evil but also served as the foundation for the partition of India.

Patel had a far simpler relationship with religion. His speeches, even the very first ones in the early 1920s, were full of appeals for Hindu–Muslim unity and breaking the caste divide. He progresses from urging that every 'untouchable' child attend school to warning that without a resolution of caste-related strife, the path to India's freedom will be thorny. He is not dismissive of the power of religion, nor does he believe that the sense of religiosity that had seeped into the Indian soil for thousands of years could be leeched out by 'revolution'. His is a blunt and practical approach. It is Patel who is telling the Hindus about conversions to Christianity, 'If you had not treated the untouchables inferior even to dogs, would there have been so many Christians?'³⁶ It is Patel who we find rebuking some Liberal Party politicians 'for raising cry of "religion in danger" to allure Hindu voters' and declaring 'that the Hindu religion was not going to be saved by Liberals and their associates in spite of their mouthful of promises'.³⁷ Patel is willing to push his constituents as far as he (or Gandhi) feels they can be pushed but he does not dream of revolution (in fact, as we shall see just a little later, he spells this out).

Socialists want spicy and confrontation-oriented programme. They consider Bapu's village industries programme as bad. They believe that the entire Congress programme is counter-productive. How can we have dialogue with them? Whom do you term as exploiters? And who amongst the so-called exploiters have a prestigious position amongst us? I am not able to understand that. But no capitalist is our enemy. Being friendly with everybody, our goal should be to mould as many people as possible to our point of view. Where do you find fault in this?³⁸

In December 1935, we find Patel even expressing astonishment that Nehru would have anything to do with many socialist groups.

I do not believe for a moment that Jawaharlal would approve of the manner in which the Socialist Party is now working. It is my belief that the Socialist Party is abusing Jawaharlal's name. I believe that if Jawaharlal wanted to establish such a party, he would have resigned from the secretaryship of the Congress and from the Working Committee. As long as he does not do so, I must take it that he supports the official policy of the Congress [...] The Socialists are not agreed even regarding the definition of Socialism. Different people put forward different meanings.³⁹

Patel is not only angry in this speech, he is mocking. He is wondering how such a divided group—as the socialists are, according to him—could be demanding social change?

There are 84 castes among the Brahmins whereas it would seem there are 85 different types of Socialists! That makes it somewhat difficult to express an opinion about Socialism. I do not wish in any case to enter into any controversy regarding it. It is a waste of time to speculate about social and political organisation in the future independent government of India. I would far rather adhere to my duty today in the firm belief that if we stick to it, our problem of tomorrow will automatically solve itself.⁴⁰

There was no choice, said Patel, but to focus on getting to the finishing line of achieving independence first.

If on the other hand, we start quarrelling amongst ourselves now regarding the possible solution of a problem which will only come before us tomorrow, we shall be failing in our duty today and that would be harmful to every party.⁴¹

Soon after Nehru's election to the position of Congress president in 1936, his band of socialist supporters and he fell out with Patel, Rajaji, Prasad and other old-timers in the party who felt that Nehru was trying to bring in socialism through the back door as the party's official ideological line even though it was not what the party had opted for. In protest, several top members of the Congress Working Committee including Patel, Rajaji and Prasad sent in their resignations.

In response, and feeling stifled, Nehru sent in his own resignation, and it took all of Gandhi's guile to broker peace between the two groups.

In 1937, the Congress needed a new president, and once again the old farce played out. It is astonishing how many times this pantomime of prejudice was performed in the selection of the Congress president. It is

impossible to read about this recurring charade without feeling that, in fact, Nehru was in the enviable position of having been given two silver spoons in his lifetime—two opportunities that gave him a leg up in his chosen career. The first was the wealth and influence of his father, and the second, the enduring backing of Gandhi.

In 1937, once again several Congress regional bodies suggested Sardar Patel's name for president. Patel himself was keen on Rajaji but when Rajaji could not be convinced, he suggested the name of another senior Congress leader, Govind Ballabh Pant, to Gandhi.

He wrote to Desai, Gandhi's secretary, with considerable consternation:

People are pestering me here. They say that again choosing him [Nehru] will mean that all of you want to usher in socialism. How to save us from such allegation? Bapuji will agree. Rajaji has washed off his hands. The bridegroom is ready to marry as many girls as offered to him. Now what can be done? In such circumstances if nobody is ready to accept, what about suggesting Pantji's name? The name was once suggested by Bapuji. You ask him. I want to escape.⁴²

Patel did not suggest his own name, refusing to enter an acrimonious battle even though Nehru not only suggested to Gandhi that his last term as Congress president had been too short (eight months) but also warned that while considering him it ought to be kept in mind that he was a socialist. Even so, Gandhi told Patel to step away from the race and Nehru was elected Congress president, yet again.⁴³

While backing away from contesting against Nehru, though, Patel spelt out in clear terms what he saw as possible dangers.

My withdrawal should not be taken to mean that I endorse all the views Jawaharlalji stands for. Indeed Congress, Congressmen know that on some vital matters my views are in conflict with those held by Jawaharlalji. For instance, I do not believe in the inevitability of class war [...] We know Jawaharlalji to be too loyal to the Congress to disregard the decision of the majority. The Congress has no dictatorial powers. He is the chairman of a well-knit organisation [...] The Congress does not part with its ample powers by electing any individual no matter who he is.⁴⁴

On his part, when elected, Nehru was forced to declare that his election was no vote for socialism. ‘Nehru’s [1937] presidential address at Faizpur

[unlike Lucknow] fell distinctly short of offering the LW [Left wing] lead for nationalist-revolutionary struggle in India. Neither did he seek to align “socialist” struggle to the national struggle.⁴⁵

In the elections that followed, the Congress won handsomely in eleven provinces, and despite some objection from Nehru to taking official positions, it went on to, with Gandhi’s blessings and Patel’s intra-party push, take over the administration in seven provinces, followed by another within the year.

In the meantime, the poet, and prophet of Pakistan, Iqbal wrote a set of letters to Jinnah which would prove to be bugle blasts for a homeland for the Muslims carved out of India.

I have no doubt that you fully realise the gravity of the situation as far as Muslim India is concerned. The League will have to finally decide whether it will remain a body representing the upper classes of Indian Muslims or Muslim masses who have so far, with good reasons, taken no interest in it. The problem of bread is becoming more and more acute [...] The question therefore is: how is it possible to solve the problem of Muslim poverty [...] Happily there is a solution in the enforcement of the law of Islam, the Shariat, and its further development in the light of modern ideas.⁴⁶

Iqbal wrote with a forceful and determined argument—he was convinced and it was vital for him now to convince Jinnah.

After long and careful study of Islamic law I have come to the conclusion that if this system of law is properly understood and applied, at least the right of subsistence is secured to everybody. But the enforcement and development of the Shariat of Islam is impossible in this country without a free Muslim state or states. This has been my honest conviction for many years and I still believe this to be the only way to solve the problem of bread for Muslims as well as to secure a peaceful India.⁴⁷

In his message to Jinnah, Iqbal suggested that any price, including a civil war, would be acceptable to him to achieve his goals.

If such a thing is impossible in India the only other alternative is a civil war which as a matter of fact has been going on for some time in the shape of Hindu Muslim riots. I fear that in certain parts of the country, e.g. N.W. India, Palestine may be repeated. Also the insertion of Jawarhar Lal’s [sic] socialism into the body-politic of Hinduism is likely to cause much bloodshed among the Hindus themselves.⁴⁸

In the letter Iqbal argued that Brahmanical Hinduism or upper-caste Hindus would never accept social reform and therefore there could never be cohesion in Indian society. Muslims, he stated, could solve social issues far more easily than Hindus. One could legitimately argue that the fate of minorities even within Islam like the Ahmadiyyas in modern-day Pakistan has proved that Iqbal was wrong but it would also be fair to accept that he understood the kind of hurdles Hindu society would have—and still has—in implementing caste reform.

The issue between social democracy and Brahmanism is not dissimilar to the one between Brahmanism and Buddhism. Whether the fate of socialism will be the same as the fate of Buddhism in India I cannot say. But it is clear to my mind that if Hinduism accepts social democracy it must necessarily cease to be Hinduism. For Islam the acceptance of social democracy in some suitable form and consistent with the legal principles of Islam is not a revolution but a return to the original purity of Islam. The modern problems therefore are far more easy to solve for the Muslims than for the Hindus.⁴⁹

The only solution therefore, according to Iqbal, was ‘Muslim states’.

But as I have said above in order to make it possible for Muslim India to solve the problems it is necessary to redistribute the country and to provide one or more Muslim states with absolute majorities. Don’t you think that the time for such a demand has already arrived? Perhaps this is the best reply you can give to the atheistic socialism of Jawahar Lal Nehru.⁵⁰

These letters have special significance as the Muslim League led by Jinnah won 108 seats across the country in the elections. In Jinnah’s home territory of Bombay, it won 20 of the 30 seats reserved for Muslims. But the League’s numbers were few compared to the Congress which had won 707 seats, 59 of these in seats reserved for Muslims and 15 in wholly Muslim areas in the North-West Frontier Province. The Congress had proved that many Muslim voters in India were willing to stand by it, in spite of the existence of a Muslim League that purported to speak for them.

Unsurprisingly, after the election results, Jinnah tried to form a collaboration with the Congress, but Patel, Nehru and other top brass of the Congress insisted that this could only happen if the Muslim League merged

with the Congress. Nehru had promised the League a coalition government in U.P. but when the Congress got absolute majority, he reneged on the deal. This led to the League launching its virulent campaign against the Congress and Jinnah consolidating his power in the League. There was certainly a sense in the 1937 Jinnah of having finally attained a position of steadfast power among the Muslim community. R.J. Moore has argued that Jinnah, who married an eighteen-year-old at the age of forty-two, and the marriage failed, was intensely lonely and developed a very strong persecution complex.⁵¹ ‘In March 1937, when Nehru remarked that the Congress and the Raj were the only two parties in India, Jinnah replied to the rebuff by claiming the Muslim League as a third, a rightful equal partner of the Congress.’⁵²

By the time of the Muslim League’s session at Lucknow in October 1937 Jinnah

[I]nsisted that ‘an honourable settlement can only be achieved between equals’. He demanded of Nehru that Congress must recognize the League ‘on a footing of perfect equality’. He internalized the Muslims’ sense of suffering and sacrifice from the fire of persecution. He expressed himself with personal conviction: ‘I have got as much right to share in the government of this country as any Hindu’; and ‘I must have [an] equal real and effective share in the power.’ The appeal was underpinned by an assertion that Islamic society was based on the equality of man.⁵³

This was, then, a pivotal point when an agreement could have assuaged this sense of persecution. It was, in a sense, a turning point. But the Congress insistence, by Patel, Azad, Nehru and others, that any joining of forces would have to mean that the League merges with the Congress ended the path of compromise.

It is hard to say what might have happened if an agreement could have been thrashed out in 1937. Some historians have argued that the Congress’s failure to compromise with the League made certain Jinnah’s direction towards Pakistan, but others maintain that having Jinnah and his legislators within the Congress governance system would have caused endless friction at every level.

We do not know which of these two scenarios would have come true but we do know that election or no election, Iqbal was pushing hard for Pakistan, charting out for the lawyer-turned-politician the dimensions and even cartographic vision of the new Muslim homeland in another letter.

I know you are a busy man; but I do hope you won't mind my writing to you so often, as you are the only Muslim in India today to whom the community has a right to look up for safe guidance through the storm which is coming to North West India and perhaps to the whole of India. I tell you that we are actually living in a state of civil war which, but for the police and military, would become universal in no time.

During the last few months there has been a series of Hindu-Muslim riots in India.⁵⁴

The words 'you are the only Muslim in India today to whom the community has a right to look up' reaffirm the sense of status that Jinnah had achieved by then.

In North-West India alone there have been at least three riots during the last three months and at least four cases of vilification of the Prophet by Hindus and Sikhs. In each of these four cases, the vilifier has been murdered. There have also been cases of burning of the Qur'an in Sind. I have carefully studied the whole situation and believe that the real cause of these events is neither religious nor economic. It is purely political, i.e., the desire of the Sikhs and Hindus to intimidate Muslims even in the Muslim majority provinces.⁵⁵

Iqbal wrote that in the negotiations of a settlement for the free India to come,

[E]ven in the Muslim majority provinces, the Muslims are made entirely dependent on non-Muslims.

The result is that the Muslim Ministry can take no proper action and are even driven to do injustice to Muslims partly to please those on whom they depend, and partly to show that they are absolutely impartial. Thus, it is clear that we have our specific reasons to reject this constitution. It seems to me that the new constitution is devised only to placate the Hindus. In the Hindu majority provinces, the Hindus have of course absolute majorities, and can ignore Muslims altogether. In Muslim majority provinces, the Muslims are made entirely dependent on Hindus.⁵⁶

This he said was being done to 'do infinite harm to the Indian Muslims' and that even with quotas the economic problems of Muslims would be far from over.

The only thing that the communal award grants to Muslims is the recognition of their political existence in India. But such a recognition granted to a people whom this constitution does not and cannot help in solving their problem of poverty can be of no value to them. The Congress President has denied the political existence of Muslims in no unmistakable terms.⁵⁷

Iqbal said the problem was not only with the Congress but with Hindu society, and pointed to the Hindu Mahasabha as the true representatives of the Hindus. The Mahasabha, he said, quite like Iqbal himself, rejected the idea that Hindus and Muslims could live together.

The other Hindu political body, i.e., the Mahasabha, whom I regard as the real representative of the masses of the Hindus, has declared more than once that a united Hindu-Muslim nation is impossible in India. In these circumstances, it is obvious that the only way to a peaceful India is a redistribution of the country on the lines of racial, religious and linguistic affinities.⁵⁸

Iqbal argued that this was an inevitable reality and many among the British understood this too, and it was being reaffirmed by the incessant Hindu-Muslim riots. But the Muslim community, he told Jinnah, was not organized enough and not disciplined, and yet he urged him to start planting the seed of this division among his followers.

Some Muslims in the Punjab are already suggesting the holding of [a] North-West Indian Muslim Conference, and the idea is rapidly spreading. I agree with you, however, that our community is not yet sufficiently organised and disciplined and perhaps the time for holding such a conference is not yet ripe. But I feel that it would be highly advisable for you to indicate in your address at least the line of action that the Muslims of North-West India would be finally driven to take.⁵⁹

The idea of a single, united, free India, Iqbal said, was a pipe dream. It would never happen, and it could never survive intact.

To my mind the new constitution with its idea of a single Indian federation is completely hopeless. A separate federation of Muslim provinces, reformed on the lines I have suggested above, is the only course by which we can secure a peaceful India and save Muslims from the domination of non-Muslims. Why should not the Muslims of North-West India and Bengal be considered as nations entitled to self-determination just as other nations in India and outside India are?⁶⁰

Geography is important in Iqbal's letter—it is clear that he has thought through the dimensions of what a Muslim state might look like, and therefore he advises Jinnah:

Personally, I think that the Muslims of North-West India and Bengal ought at present to ignore Muslim [-minority] provinces. This is the best course to adopt interests of both Muslim majority and minority provinces. It will therefore be better to hold the coming session of the League in the Punjab, and not in a Muslim minority province. I think you should seriously consider the advisability of holding the coming session at Lahore in the middle of October when the weather is quite good in Lahore.⁶¹,

It is the north-west, Iqbal says presciently, where the Muslim League and Jinnah's message for a new homeland for Indian Muslims would get an invigorating response.

The interest in the All-India Muslim League is rapidly growing in the Punjab, and the holding of the coming session in Lahore is likely to give a fresh political awakening to the Punjab Muslims.⁶²

In 1937 when it seemed like the battle between the socialists and the Gandhians, and indeed between Nehru and Patel, was rearing its head at every occasion, it was not just Gandhian sober counsel or the fear of the rising Muslim League and Jinnah that kept Gandhi and his two great protégés together.

Another man would soon unite them in common consternation: Subhas Chandra Bose.

The conflict between Bose and the senior leadership of the Congress was nearly two decades old. As a feisty young emerging leader in Bengal, he had been heartbroken, and made no efforts to hide it, when Gandhi called off the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1921. 'We were angry when we learnt of this stoppage of our struggle at a time when we seemed to be consolidating our position and advancing on all fronts,' Bose wrote in disgust.⁶³

In 1928, Bose and Nehru were at the forefront of the protests within the Congress against the acceptance of the idea of dominion status by Gandhi and his loyalists.

Bose was a revolutionary leader and he was never impressed by Gandhi. His leader was the equally fire-and-brimstone Das. This inherent mismatch never quite went away, though each tried to accommodate the other's point of view, and it was Gandhi who suggested Bose's name as Congress president in 1938.

At the time, Bose had just served a year-long jail sentence. He had been warned by the British authorities not to return to India. But, of course, he came back, bringing with him memories of the battle with Patel regarding Vithalbhai's last wishes.

When Gandhi brought up Bose's name for president, Patel demurred, calling Bose 'unsteady'.⁶⁴

But Gandhi had his way, as Gandhi usually did in this matter, and Patel turned his energies towards putting together a mini-city in Haripura village in one of his favourite spots in Gujarat, Bardoli, complete with five hundred cows, a printing press, a telephone and telegraph office and a fire engine.⁶⁵ Bose became the president of the Congress for the first time and Patel remained the powerful party chief. For a while, this arrangement seemed to work. When Patel took strict disciplinary action against errant Congressman Narayan Bhaskar Khare, it was Bose who vehemently defended the Sardar against Khare's campaign to malign Patel as a dictator. Not that Patel needed defending, for in his inimitable style, he told one of the people spreading canards against him:

I have seen the press report about your interview with Gandhiji. You seem to have posed there as a champion of democracy. Your notions of democracy appear to be very curious. Ever since the rejection of your candidature as a Congress candidate for the last assembly elections by the parliamentary board, you have chosen to continuously attack me and carry on propaganda against me [...] If refusal to submit to terrorism and blackmailing is fascism I must confess that you are free to regard me a fascist.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing between the Congress, which was encouraging public committees to work for independence in the princely states of India, and the rulers and administration of those states which naturally saw such activity as a direct threat to their own existence. Surely, if their subjects demanded citizenship rights as the people of independent

India, it would mean independence from princely rule too? Democracy could not be half-achieved. But even in December 1937, Patel was writing to Nehru that as far as possible, the Congress had a clear position of not interfering with the affairs of the princely states and letting the subjects of the princely states raise their own revolt.⁶⁷ Tensions between the Congress and the princely states escalated because the Congress, while promising not to interfere in the affairs of the states ruled by native rulers, was also completely candid in its refusal to accept a future federal structure of India after the British left. India would be one, independent political union under one flag. The Haripura Congress session asked the princely states to become ‘self-dependent’ (suggesting less dependence on the British) and rejected a federal future. ‘India will not accept proposed federal structure. If at any time India accepts federation, that federation will be such that there will not be nominated representatives appointed by the rulers. The representatives of the Congress will not sit with nominated representatives of the rulers,’⁶⁸ said Patel in August 1938.

In September of the same year, Patel is even more certain and clear.

However good or bad the ruler might be, we are not for dethroning him. We do not even think of depriving him of his kingship. What we want is to limit his powers. If a ruler spends lakhs of rupees in arranging the dance of dancing girls and the vulgarity of prostitutes and the farmers remain hungry, then the kingdom cannot be kept alive. So it is not surprising that the subjects demand responsible government. Heydays of the rulers are over. In all native states there is tremendous awakening [...] Some think that the ruler is the incarnation of god.

Patel argued that according to him the ruler was just a trustee.

He is enjoying the right inherited from his parents; so in every country when the king becomes worthless people have a right to dethrone him. But in our country, our forefathers made us ultra-loyal, and that is the reason why we are being suppressed. The rulers have wealth that they have not earned by the sweat of their labour and so they get spoiled at an early age. In the world the worst disease that spreads from power is sycophancy. Rulers like to hear sweet things about them but that is in fact sedition. To tell truth and bitter things is real loyalty. But today everything is being overturned.⁶⁹

A month later he is telling the citizens of Baroda, at that time considered one of the better managed princely states, which even Patel acknowledges, that '[W]hen the ruler resides in a foreign land for ten months in a year, how can the poor fellow know the real state of things? [...] In the world I have not seen a single country whose king lives for ten to fifteen years in a foreign country and people tolerate it.'⁷⁰

Patel's words were being picked up and their import understood and transmitted lucidly and explicitly by the press. The *Hindustan Times* wrote:

The rulers of the Indian States too, it is hoped, will realise that Congress nonintervention does not mean a license to them to resort to repression of any kind in countering the movement for responsible movement. Events in Travancore, Mysore, Hyderabad, Rajkot, Kashmir and the Orissa states are a clear warning to them that the movement for freedom and self-government which originated in British India has spread to Indian states, and the Congress cannot, for all time, be an unwilling witness to unhappy events in the Indian states [...] Sardar Patel has given a double warning to the princes and the British government.⁷¹

With each passing day, as the Congress fuelled more citizens committees in various princely states, the collision course between the Sardar and the rajas and maharajas was set.

In Rajkot, matters got so out of hand that, afraid of the democracy that the Congress sought to bring to the people of the state, the rulers spread word that Patel and Gandhi were out to crush the rights of the minorities, including Muslims. It was here that Patel first faced the combination of an eccentric ruler who had squandered the wealth of his kingdom and his crafty diwan who did whatever it took—including raising cruel taxes on farmers and pawning off every last public asset of the kingdom—to keep the prince on the throne (and the diwan in power). This theme would be repeated on a much more definitive scale in Hyderabad a few years later where, no doubt, the Sardar remembered the lessons of Rajkot and dealt with the administration accordingly.

In the case with Khare, and then again at Wardha, we find instances of how the narrative of Patel being against minorities was maliciously built and spread. The Khare issue blew up when, as the premier of the Central

Provinces, the Congressman allowed his Muslim law minister to release four Muslim men convicted of raping a thirteen-year-old Harijan (Dalit) girl. An incensed Patel wrote to Bose, the party president, that ‘it was a most heinous offence’.⁷²

In Rajkot, the situation turned venomous and armed crowds attacked a meeting Gandhi was addressing, looking to kill Patel. Pandals of Congress meetings were burnt, and later, in one incident, at least one Congress worker was killed trying to save Patel when a meeting was attacked by a Muslim mob. These were not the only instances of violence the Congress was facing from some Muslim communities. In September 1937, Prasad wrote to Patel about the violent reaction of some Muslim groups towards ‘Vande Mataram’, the revolutionary song of the freedom movement, and even the hoisting of the national flag that the party had decided upon, leading to bitter clashes in many areas in Uttar Pradesh.

I have seen that in some districts the Bar Associations have passed resolutions for hoisting the flag on their buildings in the teeth of opposition from the Musalman⁷³ members who being in the minority have walked out in protest [...] Similarly, the Bande Mataram⁷⁴ song is objected to by some Musalmans on the ground that it is invocation to Hindu goddess and in terms it means idol worship which Musalmans can never agree to.⁷⁵

Even though Prasad readily admitted that not all Muslims felt this way, his overall impression was that there was problem in this regard both with the song and also the national flag.

While there are Musalmans who do not look upon the song in this light, there is no doubt a feeling among them not to accept it as National Song just as many of them do not accept the tricolour as a National Flag.⁷⁶

The roots of division were spreading and by June 1938, Patel would write to Nehru, saying, ‘Jinnah’s speeches were very bad. In fact, the impression left on the general public is that they [the Muslim League led by Jinnah] do not desire to have any settlement at all.’⁷⁷

Faced with such violence Gandhi stepped back from aggressively pushing democracy in Rajkot, and protests were fuelled by local rulers in

other states.

All of this gave Patel, and the Congress, an indication of the enormity of the task of unifying a free India, but before that, they still had to deal with Bose who wanted a second term as Congress president. In spite of his reservations in March 1938, Patel had been asking Congressmen to support Bose's presidency⁷⁸ but now his old misgivings reappeared.

If Patel had been wary of Bose becoming president for one term of the Congress, he had deep misgivings about Netaji having a second term.

There are many issues that bitterly divided Bose on one side and Gandhi and Patel on the other. Bose, fundamentally, was sceptical of Gandhi's leadership, having never quite accepted him as his leader, nor did he believe Gandhian methods to be the inevitable path for the Congress to take in the freedom movement. As early as 1928, at the Congress session in Calcutta, Bose had shown off his own cadre of young men and women whom he called the Congress Volunteer Force with their own 'Bicycle, Cavalry and Coded Messages divisions. The troops paraded on the Calcutta Maidan⁷⁹ early each morning under the eye of General Officer Commanding Bose, who dressed himself in breeches, aiguillettes and long leather boots. Gandhi disliked the Force's paramilitary overtones, and complained about the saluting, strutting and clicking of heels.⁸⁰

As Nirad C. Chaudhuri has explained:

With the emergence of Gandhi's leadership, there had also appeared within the Indian nationalist movement a clearly-felt antithesis with three aspects. First, Gandhi's ideas and methods were set against those of the familiar Western type; second, the pre-Gandhian leadership was confronted by the dictatorial newcomer; third, northern India stood against the peripheral regions, such as Bengal, the Tamil country and Maharashtra. Gandhi, himself an extremist and fire-eater, was incapable of tolerating rival extremists and fire-eaters. His usual method of coercing others was to threaten non-cooperation, and such was the value set on his personality and ideas that the threat brought all potential dissidents to heel.⁸¹

As Bose became more and more popular, the differences in approach, if not ideology, grew even stronger.

Nonetheless, a cleavage remained, and as time passed and Bose gained confidence and popularity, he came increasingly to symbolize the opposition to Gandhism [sic]. At his very first meeting with Gandhi in 1921, Bose had not been impressed, but at that time there had been no question of his pitting himself against the older man, whose leadership he had had to accept. Throughout his political career, however, Bose not only remained indifferent to the Gandhian way but also seemed to affect a tolerant superiority toward it.⁸²

But why was this true. Chaudhuri, a Bengali himself, gave the Bengali bhadralok or gentleman's aversion for the masses, the same disdain that we have earlier spoken of in Das, as one of the main reasons. As a Bengali, I am convinced that there is something to this logic.

The reasons for this attitude were manifold. There was, for one thing, the class-conscious Bengali gentleman's deep-seated aversion to a proletarian, which Gandhi was, if not by birth, at all events by theory and adoption. [How Gandhi, the son of a diwan and a barrister, could be proletariat, God alone knows.] There was also the sophisticated and Westernized Indian's impatience with an outlook that was anti-intellectual and preached a deliberate repudiation of culture. Moreover, Bose was a true representative of the Bengali revolutionary school, nurtured on Italian, Irish and Russian doctrines and methods.⁸³

And then, Chaudhuri, I believe, also hit the nail on the head when he wrote about the other reason for Bose's distaste—Gandhi's deep connection with religion. The most ironical thing about the freedom movement, when you start thinking about the subtext, is that even though no one really ever spells this out, there is one thing that Nehru, Bose, Das, Ambedkar, Munshi and Jinnah all had in common: discomfort with Gandhi's religiosity. That is the one thing that binds these otherwise disparate men. In time, Jinnah would blame Gandhi for not being favourable to Muslims, Ambedkar would blame him for depriving the lower castes, and men like Munshi and Malaviya, for neglecting Hindus. As Gandhi had said, it was his destiny to appear unfair. Only Patel—it is impossible not to notice this when one reads the story—remains to a degree balanced and yet at the top of the Congress decision-making team.

Finally, his [Bose's] antipathy for Gandhism had a definite Hindu content which, while never explicitly stated, may be inferred from his attitude and the character of his Hindu inheritance. Sanskrit literature contains evidence to indicate that in ancient Hindu times

the Brahmanic elements, whose Dharma was the way of life of a priestly and warrior folk, felt pronounced contempt for the non-violent and quietist doctrines of the Buddhists and Jainas, which were professed mostly by traders. True Brahmanism held war, and particularly righteous war, in honour and despised non-violence as cowardice; it abhorred self-abasing asceticism; and it looked upon Jaina and Buddhist monks as vagabonds.⁸⁴

As Chaudhuri understood, Bengal, and Bengalis, had a different history.

In Bengal, after the disappearance of Buddhism, this antagonism was transformed into a hostility between the Saktas [worshippers of the principle of Strength in the goddess Durga, and comprising mostly members of the higher castes] and the Vaishnavas of the Chaitanya school, who were largely tradesmen and artisans. For centuries, the Bengali gentleman had looked down upon the beggarly or cringing Vaishnavite. Bose not only shared the sentiment but, besides, had been influenced by the new Hinduism preached by Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Swami Vivekananda, which laid greatest stress on the Brahmanic, or perhaps Aryan, virtues of strength and avoidance of extremes.⁸⁵

Gandhi, said Chaudhuri, would have seemed to Bose as the prime example of all that the Bengali leader was trying to shed.

Gandhi must have appeared to Bose to represent all that was proletarian and even degenerate in Hinduism; and since Bose was a good Hindu, in spite of his Western upbringing, the effect on him of this feeling should not be underrated. After having remained latent for seventeen years, these fundamental differences in thought and feeling came to a head with Bose's election to the presidency of the Congress in 1938.⁸⁶

Chaudhuri may be wrong about deciphering some latent Hindu reasoning behind the deeply socialist Bose's activism, and it is particularly ironic that the socialist Bose would later seek assistance from the Axis powers, both Germany and Japan, to raise an army to fight the British, but there is little doubt about the mistrust between Bose and the Gandhi–Patel duo—a mistrust further compounded in the case of Patel by their personal history following the death of Vithalbhai.

It is a well-known fact that Bose, since his advent in Indian politics, always remained sceptical of Gandhi's political understanding and methods. He often questioned Gandhi's ability to lead the nation against British Imperialism. His firm adherence to Hegelian synthesis of historical evolutionism inspired him to challenge Gandhi's political leadership. He believed that the Gandhian political thesis provoked an anti-thesis. By challenging and replacing Gandhi he could, in his view, invent a synthesis of more radical politics. Bose perceived that at a crucial national-international juncture the Left should

consciously replace the Gandhian political agenda especially on the socio-economic front.⁸⁷

So, Bose was yearning to break free and fight for freedom his own way.

Because of this understanding, at this crucial national international juncture, Bose wanted to free the Congress of its ‘virtual dictator’ and ‘democratize’ the organization.⁸⁸

Ironically both Gandhi and Patel felt that Bose had run his first term as Congress president ‘in the manner of a constitutional monarch’.⁸⁹ Some of this distaste was undoubtedly fuelled by Bose’s arrival at the Haripura session of the Congress in a chariot of sorts pulled by fifty-one bulls, where he then proceeded to wax eloquent on socialism.⁹⁰

This conflict had been building up for a long time. It carried within its volatile core many of the gravest quarrels plaguing the Congress. The socialists within the Congress, many of them very young, wanted a radical new direction for the Congress and its policies—a simultaneous class war which would destroy colonial (imperial) rule and demolish what they saw as the bourgeois, capitalist elite in the country. The socialists within the Congress had been collaborating in many ways with the Communist Party of India which had been banned by the British for eight years starting July 1934. Barred and struggling to push their agenda as an independent party, the socialists wanted to take over the Congress programme. For a time, they had hoped that the elevation of Nehru might do the trick. As president, he would be able to push the socialist cause from inside, and indeed at the helm of, the Congress. But by 1938, it had become clear that Nehru was perhaps too close to Gandhi, and too much of a party man, to encourage radical change. He was, perhaps, too much of an insider.

The socialists may have hoped that their hero would emerge as an upstart leader for the cause but it was far more vehemently Bose, brilliant, as erudite as Nehru (or any of the other top brass of the Congress, but also younger than most of them), but nowhere close to being as awed by Gandhi as the other man was.

The socialists within the party had felt betrayed by Nehru on a number of issues and the hope was perhaps that Bose would deliver where Nehru hadn't.

The first issue arose as a result of the working of the Congress and functional-group oriented interests and parties e.g. Kisan Sabhas [village bodies] and industrial trade unions in direct touch at the state level. The central leadership of the Congress party refused to cooperate with such functional-interest oriented parties, but the State Congress leaders were put in a precarious position. This attitude of Congress leaders greatly annoyed the leftist forces in the Congress which wanted to support the trade unions and Kishan Sabhas, and they expected Nehru to support their efforts.⁹¹

Nehru wanted the socialists to be more committed to the national cause.

However, Nehru at this juncture believed that the leftists in the Congress were not behaving properly primarily because he thought that it might weaken the national movement which was of prime importance. In fact, he strongly advocated that Congressmen should not actively support these function-oriented parties. The second issue of difference between right and left was the attitude of Congress vis-a-vis those who were fighting for freedom under the Indian native States. The Indian National Congress had so far confined its activities to British India. The left faction was of the opinion that the Congress should not only cooperate with the freedom fighters in the native States but also launch mass struggles there.⁹²

But the differences with the 'Right wing', even though no one described as such would accept that term, prevented this from happening.

But the right wing in the Congress prevailed over the left and finally the Congress maintained that it was not in a position to work effectively to this end though individual Congressmen were left free to render assistance to the States' people's movements. Nehru apparently lent his tacit support to this move although he had several times launched upon vitriolic attacks against the princely order.⁹³

The differences between Bose, Gandhi and Patel were not only confined to the workings of the Congress in India. They were also about how they saw the world around them, and how they read the winds now blowing their way—winds of war.

A short timeline leading to the point before, during and right after the decisive Tripuri session of the Congress in March 1939 is useful at this juncture to understand the conflict both within and outside the Congress.

- 18 September 1931** Japan initiates the invasion of Manchuria.
- 2 October 1935–May 1936** Fascist Italy invades and takes over Ethiopia.
- 25 October–1 November 1936** A treaty of collaboration is signed between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy on 25 October, followed by the announcement of the Rome-Berlin Axis on 1 November.
- 25 November 1936** Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan sign the Anti-Comintern Pact, directed against the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement.
- 7 July 1937** Japan invades China, starting the Second World War in the Pacific.
- 11–13 March 1938** Germany absorbs Austria in the Anschluss.
- 29 September 1938** Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France sign the Munich agreement which forces the Czechoslovak Republic to cede the Sudetenland, including strategic Czechoslovak military defence positions, to Germany.
- 14–15 March 1939** Under German pressure, the Slovaks declare their independence and form a Slovak Republic. The Germans occupy the rump Czech lands in violation of the Munich agreement, forming a Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.
- 31 March 1939** France and Great Britain guarantee the integrity of the borders of the Polish state.
- 7–15 April 1939** Fascist Italy invades and annexes Albania.
- 23 August 1939** Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union sign a non-aggression agreement and a secret codicil dividing eastern Europe into spheres of influence.
- 1 September 1939** Germany invades Poland, initiating the Second World War in Europe.
- 3 September 1939** Honouring their promise to guarantee Poland's borders, Great Britain and France declare war on Germany.
- 17 September 1939** The Soviet Union invades Poland from the east.⁹⁴

To Bose and his socialist friends and allies within the Congress, the coming of war was the opportunity they had been waiting for. All-powerful Britain would be forced to focus its resources, military might and money on fighting the war. Its defences in far-flung colonies, even the Jewel in the Crown that was India, would be less meticulous.⁹⁵ This, thought Bose, was the moment to side with the enemies of the Empire and destroy British control of India. Surely such an opportunity when the Crown was vulnerable would not come again?

Gandhi, who had canvassed for conscription among Indians in South Africa during the First World War, was sanguine—non-violence was the answer.

It was not as if Gandhi had not anticipated the war. Mussolini's Italy attacked Abyssinia on 2 October 1935. In response, in a message to an editor in America, the Mahatma wrote,

If recognised leaders of mankind who have control over engines of destruction were wholly to renounce their use with full knowledge of implications, permanent peace can be obtained. This is clearly impossible without the great powers of the earth renouncing their imperialistic designs. This again seems impossible without these great nations ceasing to believe in soul-destroying competition and the desire to multiply wants and therefore increase their material possession.⁹⁶

Man's greed, Gandhi was saying, would destroy the world. He advised non-violence to the Abyssinians.

If the Abyssinians had adopted the attitude of non-violence of the strong, that is, the non-violence which breaks to pieces but never bends, Mussolini would have had no interest in Abyssinia. Thus if they had simply said: 'You are welcome to reduce us to dust and ashes, but you will not have one Abyssinian ready to cooperate with you', what could Mussolini have done? He did not want a desert [...] If the Abyssinians had allowed themselves to be slaughtered, their seeming inactivity would have been much more effective though not for the moment visible.⁹⁷

Incredibly, Gandhi here described the violence unleashed by fascism and communism as transitory. He was making a larger point about the deeper, spiritual response to violence, but it is doubtful that in the face of Hitler and Stalin, anyone really understood his point.

Hitler and Mussolini on the one hand and Stalin on the other are able to show the immediate effectiveness of violence. But it is as transitory as that of Genghis Khan's slaughter.⁹⁸

As Germany swept through Europe, and news of the unimaginable persecution of Jews spread around the world, Gandhi was deeply disturbed and moved. In his 1938 essay 'If I Were A Czech', he took an absolutist and uncompromising stance on non-violence. He said, 'Refuse to obey Hitler's will and perish unarmed in the attempt. In doing so, though I lose the body, I save my soul, that is, my honour.'⁹⁹

A peace-loving man believes it is evil to kill another human, and thus abstains from war. 'He is answered by those who say, "I'd rather kill than be killed." To which Gandhi replied, "No, I'd rather be killed."'¹⁰⁰

Gandhi also wrote:

I think it will be allowed that all the blood that has been spilled by Hitler has added not a millionth part of an inch to the world's moral stature. As against this, imagine the state of Europe today is the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the French and the English had all said to Hitler: 'You need not make your scientific preparations for destruction. We will meet your violence with non-violence. You will therefore be able to destroy our non-violent army without tanks, battleships and airships.' It may be retorted that the only difference would be that Hitler would have got without fighting what he gained after a bloody fight.¹⁰¹

This mass slaughter, Gandhi argued, would enhance Europe's moral stature.

The history of Europe would then have been written differently. Possession might (but only might) have been taken under non-violent resistance, as it has been taken now after the perpetration of untold barbarities. Under non-violence only those would have been killed who had trained themselves to be killed, if need be, but without killing anyone and without bearing malice towards anybody. I daresay that in that case Europe would have added several inches to its moral stature. And in the end, I expect it is the moral worth that will count. All else is dross.¹⁰²

The Gandhian message was surely not the message Bose wanted to hear either. And in that moment, long before Hitler's atrocities on the Jews became common knowledge around the world, the writer Nirad Chaudhuri noted that

[M]any well-educated Bengalis believed or liked to believe that Hitler was some sort of an epic Hindu hero, a great Aryan. So, one of them said to me: ‘Do you know, Nirad Babu, that German tanks fly the Kapidvaja?’¹⁰³ Now, this flag, whose name translated means the Monkey Banner, was flown over his chariot by the Mahabharat hero Arjuna when fighting the battle of Kurukshetra. Those who had personal grievance against the British rule thought of Hitler almost as God.¹⁰⁴

During his travels outside India between 1933 and 1936, in a sense Bose had been weaned off the idea of non-violence.

Bose not only studied European politics but also travelled through each country. Everywhere, he watched political developments closely while experiencing the feeling of seething unrest emerging all over Europe. As Europe moved towards war in the late 1930s, Bose began to realise that India’s great chance for independence lay in seizing upon Britain’s weakness and striking at the basis of the Indian Empire while Britain was involved elsewhere. Two persons who shaped his ideas were Vithalbhai Patel, a former Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and eminent Congress leader who was in Europe at that time, and De Valera, the leader of the Irish revolutionary moment.¹⁰⁵

Bose was inspired by the Sinn Féin and met every fighter against imperialism that he could find.

The Sinn Fein movement inspired him as it had inspired earlier Indian revolutionaries. In Italy he met Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Fascists, and France, the writers Andre Gide and Andre Malraux. Bose concluded after lengthy discussions with Vithalbhai Patel that India would never be able to win freedom without calling on foreign help. The manifesto which they issued indicated the trend of their thinking. Both were convinced that unless India developed international contacts the Indian nationalist movement would not come out of its static position and would not become a factor in international affairs.¹⁰⁶

Some people these days denigrate Bose as being a fascist sympathizer but he was actually nothing of the sort. He had a simple philosophy which Chaudhuri recognizes—the enemy’s enemy is your friend.

Bose also started to believe that the key to India’s freedom could lie in an alliance with Britain’s enemies. He was equally convinced that no country could win its independence without an armed struggle in which international support and foreign assistance were both essential.¹⁰⁷

But what Bose had learnt with the help of Vithalbhai would set him on the collision course with Patel.

Bose wanted the Congress to pull out of governance and engage in a direct conflict with the British, weakening the Raj at a time when it was being forced into a war. Especially since the British government had committed India to the war without consulting the Congress! Both Gandhi and Patel, upset as they were with the unilateral decision of the British, were wary of Bose's line of thinking and his eagerness to coordinate with the Germans to weaken the British.

Bose became

[P]resident of the Congress Party in 1938 at a very critical juncture, when the Axis powers were on the brink of their forward march. As a pragmatic politician Bose wanted the Congress to pursue a policy based not on idealism but on consideration of India's national interest. Bose was interested in neither Fascism nor Nazism; he even viewed them as dangers to the established order in Europe. But at the same time, Bose believed that war might be the only opportunity for overthrowing imperialist hegemony. As a staunch nationalist he was interested in exploiting the world situation in favour of India.¹⁰⁸

So when the war broke out, Bose began to recommend that Indian forces fight against the British.

Naturally, when the war broke out in September 1939 Bose began to advocate a policy of direct action. He pleaded that India would win her independence if she played her part in the war against Britain and collaborated with those powers that were fighting Britain. Bose vehemently opposed Congress's passive stand and called upon it to give an ultimatum to the British government to quit India and to start a civil disobedience movement on a massive scale for complete independence.'

¹⁰⁹

This was never going to be Gandhi's agenda for the Congress, and therefore it was not Patel's either. Patel, as party boss, and once again a legitimate alternative for the presidentship of the party, was also angered when he heard that some of Bose's supporters were claiming that Netaji ought to be given a second chance so that Patel, who according to them was against Hindu–Muslim unity, could be stopped from becoming the head of the party.

‘What I hate the most is the method adopted [. . .] by those [. . .] who charged us with having entered into a conspiracy with the British government,’¹¹⁰ an exasperated Patel wrote to Nehru pointing out that at every step he had only followed Gandhi’s wishes and even when a project had been handled by more than one Congress leader, the blame inevitably fell upon him if things went wrong. ‘I think it is my lot to be abused. Bengal press is furious and they blame me [. . .] In Baroda also I have raised a storm and the Maharashtra press are full of venom and they are out for my blood [. . .] The whole of Kathiawar is aflame on account of Rajkot. There is tremendous mass awakening [. . .]’¹¹¹ Patel wrote to Nehru in February 1939. By May of that year, not for nothing would the Sardar be telling an audience: ‘People call me Hitler, but I tell you that Gandhiji is the greatest Hitler I have seen. But the influence he exerts is born of his inexhaustible love and patience. This is the essential difference between him and the Hitler of Germany.’¹¹² Patel felt the enormity of Gandhi’s affection but there is no reason to believe that he did not see how dictatorial Gandhi’s decisions were.

Gandhi and Nehru both advised Bose not to contest again. Patel and Gandhi tried hard to convince Azad to take on the role but he refused. Gandhi then proposed the name of a relatively minor Congress leader, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, and top leaders of the Congress Working Committee, including Patel and Prasad, supported Sitaramayya. If only Patel had contested with Gandhi’s blessings, there was a fair chance that Bose would have withdrawn but now he faced a man who was no match for him, but one who had Gandhi’s blessings and the support of the top Congress leaders. By choosing to contest, Bose was also shattering recent Congress protocol of having presidents elected unopposed to show unanimous choice and avoid intra-party disputes, at least overtly, on presidentship. He wrote to the Congress leader:

If the Right-wing really want national unity and solidarity, they would be well advised to accept a Leftist as president. They have created considerable misapprehension by their insistence on a Rightist candidate at any cost and by the unseemly manner with which

they have set up such a candidate who was retiring and who had been surprised that this name had been suggested for presidentship.¹¹³

Countered the Sardar: ‘For me, as for those with whom I have been able to discuss the question, the matter is not one of persons and principles, nor of Leftists and Rightists. The sole consideration is what is in the best interest of the country.’¹¹⁴

All of this would not be enough to stop Bose.

On 29 January 1939, Netaji’s charisma was enough to beat the charmless Sitaramayya. Congress delegates spurned Gandhi and Patel’s appeals and voted for Bose. The Bengali leader won the second time by 205 votes.

Gandhi had been defeated, as had the all-powerful party boss Patel. Gandhi, of course, would not take his defeat lying down, and he did the only thing that could have turned the tide against Bose. He made the defeat about him, and not about Sitaramayya. ‘The defeat is more mine than his,’ Gandhi declared in a letter, and left it to Bose to ‘choose a homogenous cabinet and enforce his programme without let or hindrance . . . after all Subhas Babu is not an enemy of his country.’¹¹⁵

The subtext was immediately clear. It was a threat. Gandhi was telling the Congress to choose again—this time between him and Bose. By telling them that Bose was not the enemy of the country, Gandhi was ascertaining that the Congress leaders understood that Bose was an enemy, but of the Congress as envisaged by Gandhi.

Even though the party had ignored Gandhi’s advice, the Congress was not ready to break away from Gandhi. And any middle ground between Gandhi–Patel and Bose had long since disappeared. The young Bengali leader was too aggressive—in fact, too reflective of the mood of the country.

At the Tripuri session of the Congress, where Bose’s older brother Sarat represented him because Netaji was ill, a majority of the Congress Working Committee resigned. Govind Ballabh Pant proposed a new resolution demanding a different Working Committee that was approved and guided

by Mahatma Gandhi. ‘The die was cast. All the subsequent attempts made at compromise were a cry in the wilderness.’¹¹⁶

‘To weaken Bose’s position, Gandhi even issued a public statement advocating unconditional cooperation with Britain in the prosecution of the war.’¹¹⁷ Bose, as president, demanded a mass civil disobedience, instead, against the British Raj.

After Tripuri, a furious Sarat Bose wrote to Gandhi:

What I saw and heard at Tripuri during the seven days I was there, was an eye opener to me. The exhibition of truth and non-violence that I saw in persons whom the public look upon as your disciples [targeting Nehru, Patel, Azad and company] and representatives has to use your own words, ‘stunk in my nostrils’. The election of Subhas was not a defeat for yourself, but of the high command of which Sardar Patel is the shining light.¹¹⁸

Sarat Bose uses the harshest words for Subhas’s opponents in this and the choicest abuses are directed towards Patel.

The propaganda that was carried on by them against the Rashtrapati [president, i.e. Subhas] and those who happen to share his political views was thoroughly mean, malicious and indicative and utterly devoid of even the semblance of truth and non-violence.¹¹⁹

Sarat Bose accused Gandhi’s closest acolytes of having shown none of the Gandhian sense of fairness.

At Tripuri, those who swear by you in public offered nothing but obstruction and for gaining their end, took the fullest and meanest advantage of Subhas’s illness. Some ex members of the Working Committee went to the length of carrying on an insidious and incessant propaganda that the Rashtrapati’s illness was a ‘fake’, and was only a political illness.¹²⁰

An anguished Patel responded:

It pains me to find that he could use such language and attribute such personal motive and charges against his colleagues with whom he happened to differ in politics and thereby bring down the entire Congress politics to the lowest possible level where difference of principles or policy have no place whatever. It would be easy to answer the letter in the same strain but it would be of no advantage to anybody to imitate the tone and temper of the letter which is evidently written more in anger than in reason. After all what answer one can give to such a passionate and abusive denunciation?¹²¹

In the end, it became impossible for Bose to lead a Congress that was full of leaders who were determined to frustrate his programme. No matter how much support he could garner from ordinary, especially younger, followers and members of the party, the machinery of the Congress was against him. Even though he had won the election fair and square, he could not find a path of compromise with Gandhi. Bose resigned.

Rajendra Prasad was elected Congress president and Bose started a campaign against the Congress leadership, which, under Patel's guidance, promptly barred him from contesting for elected offices within the party for three years for breaking party discipline.

The fall-out ricocheted in the Congress and around the country. It had a definitive impact in the battle between the Congress's old guard and the new socialists who loved the fact that Bose had been raising issues that they considered fundamental, including focusing on the trade union movement and talking about the peasants' struggle against landowners.

But even though they considered Bose an ideal candidate, when the Pant resolution appeared, they remained neutral. Bose saw this as treachery.

[He] later complained that if the Congress Socialists had supported him and voted against the 'Pant Resolution', it would have been certainly defeated. He called it a big 'betrayal' [...] It has been maintained by the critics of the policy that the Socialists and the entire left-wing element had made a great advance with the electoral success of Subhas Bose over the combined Congress Right Wing, but the 'Pant resolution' not only pushed their advance back to the old position, but even beyond that.¹²²

This, for the Left wing in the Congress, was a disaster.

And above all the debacle unleashed a great 'psychological depression in' the minds of the entire left-wing of the country when one of their top-ranking leaders was unceremoniously dethroned. Undoubtedly, the [...] policy on Pant Resolution had a paralytic effect on the growing Indian socialist movement.¹²³

This fight dealt a body blow to the Congress's organization strategy in the state of Bengal too which, after Das, was under the charismatic leadership of Bose and his brother. Even in 1928, when it came to a vote between demanding complete independence or settling for dominion status, with

Bose urging a call for independence and Gandhi ready to settle for dominion status, although Gandhi won the vote, two-thirds of the delegates from Bengal had voted with Bose.¹²⁴

The story of the confrontation makes it quite clear that the [Congress] working committee was bent upon crushing Bose's organisational machinery in Bengal soon after the Tripuri Congress. The anti-Bose groups who held Bose responsible for growing degeneration in Bengal Congress lined up with the working committee. The opponents of Bose argued that the letter was exploiting narrow provincial sentiment of Bengal in the garb of 'leftist pretensions' in order to make personal political gains. But the anti-Bose groups lacked wide mass support in Bengal [...] in spite of its apparent victory, the official Congress suffered a moral defect and failed to carry with it the people of Bengal.¹²⁵

Spurned in the Congress, Bose went on to create a new party, the Forward Bloc, hoping to gather together all the radical opponents of the British Raj. But by the summer of 1940, he was under house arrest in Calcutta. The war was on and the Raj was not taking any chances—except that it would take more than the might of the British constabulary to contain Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. On 26 January 1941, dressed in a sherwani, and posing as a Muslim driver, Bose escaped from his home in Calcutta to take the long road to Russia and then Germany through Afghanistan.

Back at home, incensed by the fact that other colonies like Australia and Canada had been consulted before they were committed to the war effort, the Congress was reluctant to offer blanket support for the same. Gandhi suggested unconditional non-violent support, but no one wanted that. The party laid down a condition: In exchange for support in the war effort, the Congress wanted the British government to promise that at the end of the war India would be free. Patel warned the government:

Gandhiji says that when the adversary is in trouble, he should be helped. But I told him that what if the adversary is such that he throttles us? In the 1914 [First World War], one hundred crore rupees were given after sanctioning in assembly [in India], and at the termination of war we were given the boon as Jallianwala Bagh. These two people put blame on each other. So we ask them to declare war aims, then they say, 'Why are you asking us when we are in trouble?' Then they said, 'We do not know what our war aims.' We said, 'You might not be knowing but we know.'¹²⁶

Patel made a comparison between the Nazis and the British government ruling India and declared that the difference between them was not much.

If both of you go to hell we don't care. You were saying that you were on the side of Poland. Whether you were on the side of Poland or not, Poland is finished. They frighten us that if they go away, do you know who will replace us? We say, 'Yes. Perhaps Germans might come. Hitler will come. His chains will be of iron. Your chains are of silver and yet we feel that is heavy. We know that you are better than him. But if you are going to throttle us afterwards, then both of you go to hell. If your intention is evil, let both of you perish.¹²⁷

He said that without meeting the Congress' conditions, there could be no cooperation in the war efforts.

Then we will see [. . .] Today the rulers think that if we do not voluntarily help them in war efforts, they will forcibly take our help. But I tell them now the First World War time is a thing of the past. They shall have to fight there and declare martial law here. If they want the help of India, they have to get the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi. Who are you? What right have you to drag a country with a population of thirty-five crores of people in war? If you behave inimically with us Hitler might deal with you in any way he likes but thirty-five crores of people will curse you, and your empire will crumble like a pack of cards.¹²⁸

He added, 'We are not bargaining but we want proof of British sincerity of their declarations.'¹²⁹

Cornered, the Raj did what it knew best: divide and rule. Viceroy Lord Linlithgow turned to Jinnah.

This was the moment Jinnah had been waiting for. The elections had taught him two important things: The Congress, and Gandhi, had the ability to reach out and gather support from considerable numbers of Muslims, and therefore the claim that only the Muslim League represented Muslims was a tenuous argument, and that, asking the Congress for a collaboration, a coalition of sorts, was unlikely to bear fruit. The Congress leaders, Patel foremost among them, had a very clear idea of the all-India, all-communities nature of the party. Gandhi's principles would be fatally affected if he could not maintain a certain sense of all-encompassing appeal. The Congress, Jinnah had learnt from 1937, would only open the doors to subsume his party.

The results of the 1937 elections were

[A]s glorious for the Congress as they were depressing for the League. Jinnah learned his most important lesson in the face of this electoral defeat. He saw before him the spectre of a Congress party, already an effective mass organization, poised to carry with it the Muslim masses as well over the next few years. Nehru had said as much in his speeches after the elections. The only way to pre-empt this move was to adopt the very same ploy. Jinnah had come to realize that there was no future for him as a leader of the Muslim party if the party did not improve its standing among the Muslim masses.¹³⁰

It was time, Jinnah realized, to really listen to the masses, his people.

He could no longer afford to ignore popular politics. But how does an aloof and arrogant lawyer become a mass politician? It would not be enough to take the message of nationalism to the people: that had already been done with great success by Gandhi and Nehru. Jinnah decided to tap religious instead of nationalist sentiment and he did so by raising the cry of danger at the prospect of Hindu rule under Congress. It was a dangerous decision and secularists like Nehru gasped at its cynicism: Jinnah had to know how convulsively the revivalist imagination can be stirred and he had to know too how transiently liberating that was.¹³¹

The most potent transformation in the Indian national movement is not Gandhi's, Nehru's, Patel's or Bose's. It is Jinnah's. The superbly coiffured, fastidious man, so finicky about cleanliness, so remote that he rarely ever shook hands, the indignant rebel who walked out on Gandhi and detested politics coming too close to religion, would now make the ultimate move of fusing into his politics the ferventness of Islam.

Yet the Congress leaders played into his hands. Initially they had some justification for not taking the threat he posed seriously, since the Muslim League had not made an impression in the elections. What they did not calculate was the difference the Second World War made to the situation. The response of the Congress leaders to the Government's call for support for the British war effort was the only self-respecting one possible for them, but it was just what Jinnah needed to increase his stature with the British and to press his demands as representative of the interests of the Muslim community.¹³²

As Lord Linlithgow struggled with the angry Congressmen whose party members were resigning from the ministries after the elections, Jinnah snapped up the opportunity. He declared that the Muslim League would

fully support the British war effort. What he wanted in return was a sympathetic position on the demands of the League after the war was over.

‘I say the Muslim League [...] would be the ally of even the devil if need be in the interests of the Muslims. It is not because we are in love with imperialism; but in politics one has to play one’s game as on the chessboard,’ declared Jinnah.¹³³

The British government responded with the assurance that power in India would never be transferred to any government ‘whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in India’s life.’¹³⁴

So, if Jinnah could claim the right to represent the large numbers of Muslims in India, and declare on their behalf that they could not live under a Congress or ‘Hindu-majority’ government, it would open the door for a different solution, a homeland for the Muslims. It would prise the door open for Iqbal’s—and Jinnah’s—Pakistan. By the end of 1938, Jinnah was claiming that not only did the Congress not represent Muslims, it also did not have at its heart the best interests of Christians, the lower castes including the Dalits, and basically anyone who was not Hindu upper caste.

I have no hesitation in saying that it is Mr. Gandhi who is destroying the ideal with which the Congress was started. He is the one man responsible for turning the Congress into an instrument for the revival of Hinduism. His ideal is to revive the Hindu religion and establish Hindu Raj in this country, and he is utilising the Congress to further this object.¹³⁵

But before that Jinnah set the stage for further division. He urged his supporters to rejoice when members of the Congress resigned from the government ministries. He spread word and the idea that Muslims were being misruled under the Congress dispensation, even though there was no evidence of it. Every complaint made by the League about the Congress regional governments after the 1937 elections had been proved false and discarded by the British. Yet, Jinnah gave the departure of Congressmen from government positions a name which he urged his followers to spread —Deliverance Day.

Patel refuted the claims and Jinnah and his Muslim League vociferously.

I, as the chairman of the parliamentary sub-committee, would fail in my duty if I did not refute the unfounded allegations made by Jinnah [. . .] I am constrained to characterise these allegations as wild, reckless and intended to endanger communal peace [. . .] What motive Jinnah had in issuing this appeal when he and Jawaharlal Nehru are about to meet in order to explore the possibilities of a settlement, it is difficult to see. It is also inconsistent with the dignity of a great national organisation like the Congress to negotiate under the threat of such a country-wide communal demonstration.¹³⁶

By December 1939, Patel was agreeing with Jawaharlal Nehru via a telegram that ‘no useful purpose will be served by meeting Mr. Jinnah. It is clear that he does not want any settlement but simply wants to create propaganda against the Congress.’¹³⁷

In the same month, Patel despaired:

It is difficult to understand the position of the League. What does it want? Jinnah charges the Congress with atrocities. He never could specify the charges [. . .] The condition precedent to any negotiation which Jinnah makes is that the Congress should accept the League as the sole representative of the Muslims in India. If the Congress accepted that position it would have to throw the pathans of the north overboard; to jettison the Shias who are no less than three out of eight crores of Muslims in India; and to betray Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and other Congress Muslims who have contributed in creating the national Congress today.¹³⁸

As it so happened, no compromise was forthcoming. Jinnah did not stop his accusations. In fact, he had only begun.



EIGHT

‘WE FELT THAT IT WOULD BE UNFAIR TO MAHATMA GANDHI TO PROMISE TO DO THINGS WHICH WE CANNOT.’

You might have noticed by now that the title of every chapter is something Sardar Patel said. When I started writing this chapter I wondered what quote I could use as we enter the last, and most critical, decade of his life.

Patel died on 15 December 1950. It was in the ten years between 1940 and 1950 that this sixty-five-year-old man (his age in 1940, but it could well have been more since the exact year of his birth is a bit of an assumption) changed the cartographic destiny of India.

Faced with a division of the country that none of the Congress leaders wanted, and Gandhi never agreed to till the end, Patel took it upon himself to save, indeed salvage and rescue, the rest of the country from breaking up into pieces.

The journey through these ten years takes place over a bitter path, fraught with quarrels, heartbreak and schisms that all but broke the ties between the men who won India its freedom.

Freedom for India would assume mythical proportions in everything—from the cataclysmic hatred, bloodshed and shenanigans to the epic

morality, courage, superhuman tenacity and the debris of that struggle that glows ominously even seventy years later.

In the end, freedom, for Gandhi certainly, and for the subcontinent, would be a pyrrhic victory—India would never be the same again.

But generations of Indians don't quite grasp that there would barely be an India had it not been for the Sardar whose steadfastness and guile stitched together that which had been united only in philosophy and spirituality—and sometimes not even then—for thousands of years.

Patel had spent the 1930s not only clashing with the British for India's freedom but also facing some of the most vicious attacks, including attempts on his life, and fighting for democracy in the princely states of India ruled by an assorted bunch of rajas and maharajas operating under a British umbrella.

In October 1935, in Madras, he spoke about how the people of the princely states had the same rights to freedom as citizens living in those parts of India under direct British control. In June 1936, writing from Ooty, he said, '[I]t is quite unsafe for the princes to believe that they can maintain a despotic rule.'¹ In 1937, he visited the princely states of Mysore and Rajkot to push them towards a more representative government for their subjects. In May 1938, he was in Sangli, Rajasthan, where he spelled out his ideas:

There are six hundred native states in India. There is no country in the world which has so many states. Some states are so small that even a person who rules over six or seven villages announces himself a ruler. Simply because the kings wear a crown, they do not become totally independent. They are also slaves, and we who are their subjects are slaves of slaves. Though there are so many native states, India is a unit which has unity of a unique type. All the differences have been created by the foreign government in order to firmly establish their rule here.²

Patel blamed the British for allowing despotic rule in many of the states.

The atrocities committed by native state rulers knowingly or unknowingly are under the impression that the [British] empire is at their back. But only corpses can be ruled like that. Everywhere despots are being overthrown.³

In August 1938, at Rajkot, he warned his listeners:

Today in Rajkot the law of the jungle prevails [. . .] Today there is revolt in the whole world. Kings hearing echoes of the revolt. They have understood by now that they are doomed so they are giving us least dose of atrocities. So we have to view Rajkot situation from that point of view.⁴

In Baroda in October 1938, Patel used the old carrot-and-stick when he said,

In the country there are many people who believe that now native states should be totally abolished. People like me and Gandhiji are dreaming that the rulers will again become like the kings of the Puranic Age and ideal Ram Rajya conception will be implemented.⁵

The interesting thing in this speech is the duality—on one hand the talk of the dream of Ram Rajya and a policy of friendly ties, and on the other the description of some states and their administration as garbage. This sort of optimism and pessimism sums up the kind of relationship Patel had with many of the princely states.

This is the policy of the Congress and Congress wants to have friendly relations with the rulers as far as possible. The state of Kathiawad is garbage, and the states of Central India are like gutters [. . .] The ruler has so much distrust over his own people that he thinks his own people will snatch the kingdom from him [. . .] To me the state is like a fruit which is attractive from outside but it is rotten from inside. I want to stop that rot.⁶

In Rajkot in November 1938, he egged people on:

In Rajkot there is not a single person who is pro-ruler. How long the ruler will indulge in lathi-charging? One day, two days, but on the third day the head of the devil will be crushed. If one who wields lathi is stoned, abused, then the devil will turn wild. But if without opposing him if he suffers, then there is a change of heart, and that is the significance of satyagraha.⁷

By December 1938, Patel had got what he wanted, at least to a degree. A meeting with the local ruler that resulted in amnesty for all political prisoners who had been arrested for protesting the misdeeds of the ruler, the Thakore Saheb, and a remission of all fines. A procession of 50,000 residents of Rajkot marched through the city to celebrate this.⁸ But

sometimes this kind of activism extracted its price. Members of the royal entourage (more often than not Hindu) in different states incited mobs by telling them that Patel and Gandhi were against Muslims. Armed gangs came looking for Patel and, once, even Gandhi. But Patel survived and persisted, constantly telling the various rajas that they could not escape the advancing wave of democracy. One can see why by the time the 1940s came along, Sardar Patel had become a figure of awe and fear among the native princes. And Patel would use this power ruthlessly to build the India he wanted.

But in 1940, he was already disagreeing on the fundamental ideas of the future independent Indian state with Mahatma Gandhi, and even on the question of non-violence in this, the seemingly last, leg of the freedom movement.

We have been following Mahatma Gandhi as faithful soldiers for the past twenty years. We are prepared to do so even now but Mahatma Gandhi did not want us to follow him blindly [. . .] we had to think not in our personal capacities but as representatives of our respective constituencies. At least I felt that I would not be able to take my province with me in respect of non-violence to the extent that Mahatma Gandhi expects us to do.⁹

As we have mentioned before, this was a phase in the Gandhi–Patel, and the Patel–Nehru, relationship where the Sardar grows more vocally and visibly assertive about what he wants. It is almost as if, having made personal sacrifices, he was unwilling to be pushed on several national issues.

Mahatma Gandhi, in his first meeting with the Viceroy after the declaration of war told him that if he had his way he would give Britain unconditional support. Mahatma Gandhi alone could say that, because he knows his own strength, but we have our weaknesses and it is not possible for us to go to the extent to which he can go. When we found that we were unable to do so, we felt that it would be unfair to Mahatma Gandhi to promise to do things we cannot.¹⁰

Patel also differed with Gandhi on the nature of the future free Indian state. Gandhi wanted independent India not to have any standing army of its own. Patel disagreed. His experiences across India, both in the British-ruled provinces and the princely states, had given him a fair sense of the troubles

to come. India would need to be strong and that strength could not come from morals alone.

I am not prepared to declare that in a free India we would have no army. During our short experience of administration of two and a half years in the provinces on several occasions we felt the need and had to requisition the military. Mahatma Gandhi did not like this and said so plainly.¹¹

Of course, the Sardar was prescient about this. India would need the army immediately after it became independent as it went to war with the newly created nation of Pakistan in October 1947, barely two months after Independence, for the state of Kashmir.

These differences would arise not just between Patel and Gandhi but also between Gandhi and Nehru, and indeed all three of them—the men who were leading the rebirth of an ancient land often could not make up their mind.

Stung by the relative success of Jinnah's Deliverance Day¹² and startled by the suggestion that many Muslims might see the Congress as their enemy, Gandhi bypassed Patel once again as a rightful claimant to the chair of Congress president and chose Azad,¹³ who thus became president of the Congress for the second time (he had earlier been president at a special session in Delhi in 1923). Whereas Patel—for all his sacrifices and his leadership in building the Congress ground up and his devotion to Gandhi—remained a one-term president of the Congress. But ‘the Maulana’s appointment did not satisfy the Muslim qaum¹⁴’¹⁵

Soon afterwards, in March 1940 in Lahore, Jinnah, smoking a cork-tipped Craven “A” cigarette, addressed in English thousands of people who did not understand the language and yet held on to his every word. ‘Gandhi has three votes, and I have one vote. The Musalmans are not a minority. The Musalmans are a nation by definition,’ he told his followers.¹⁶

He echoed the words of Iqbal in this historic speech when he argued:

Hindus and the Muslims belong to two different religions, philosophies, social customs and literature. They neither inter-marry nor inter-dine and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations that are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their concepts on life and of life are different. They have different epics, different heroes and

different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other, and likewise, their victories and defeats overlap.¹⁷

Hindus and Muslims, even though they had lived side by side for centuries, had so little in common that there was no way they could coexist as part of one nation, argued Jinnah.

To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a state.¹⁸

Jinnah, now called Quaid-i-Azam (Great Leader, though the exact year when he began to be known by this title is unclear), was making a clear and unambiguous demand in the Lahore Resolution. A new homeland that would be

[G]eographically contiguous units demarcated into regions which should be so constituted, with such territorial adjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the north-western and eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute ‘independent states’ in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.¹⁹

In sharp contrast the Mecca-born Azad who had once said, ‘Today if an angel were to descend from the heaven and declare from the top of the Qutab Minar that Swaraj can be obtained in twenty-four hours, provided India relinquishes Hindu–Muslim unity, I would relinquish Swaraj rather than give up Hindu–Muslim unity’,²⁰ declared at the 1940 Ramgarh session of the Congress,

Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievements [...] Our languages were different, but we grew to use a common language [...] This common wealth is the heritage of our common nationality and we do not want to leave it and go back to the time when this joint life had not begun.²¹

But that age seemed to have passed, and Gandhi realized that. He was upset and angered at the interventions of Iqbal and Jinnah. He told Mahadev Desai in 1932, ‘Other Muslims too share Iqbal’s anti-nationalism; only they do not give expression to their sentiments. The poet now disowns his song

Hindustan Hamara.’²² To this Desai asked the Mahatma, ‘Is this not pan-Islamism?’ Gandhi said no.

This anti-nationalism has nothing to do with pan-Islamism. I may defend a Muslim’s stand that he is a Muslim first and an Indian afterwards, for I myself say that I am a Hindu first and am there a true Indian. The present Muslim leadership do not understand ‘I am a Muslim first’ in the old sense. Nowadays to be a Muslim is not to be a nationalist.²³

In Europe, Hitler’s Blitzkrieg rolled over France. Holland, Belgium, Norway, Denmark fell to the Nazis. In September 1940, the Luftwaffe, the German air force, began the relentless bombing of London which included an unbroken stretch of 56 days.

Senior Congress leaders like Rajaji and Patel wanted an agreement with the British—support for the war especially now when it had come to Britain’s doorstep in return for complete independence when it was over. Patel raged:

Our patience is exhausted. It appears that the empire has been showing its real nature. [The] Government at present is doing as if they want to divide, let it do so. But the nationalism that is deeply rooted will not be affected [...] When the sword is hanging on its head even then the empire says we cannot govern because there is disunity amongst us and so it cannot forsake its moral responsibility. The thing behind the curtain of this moral responsibility is dangerous.²⁴

But Gandhi was adamant. ‘I am of the opinion that we should wait till the heat of the battle in the Allied countries subsides and the future is clearer than it is. We do not seek our independence out of Britain’s ruin. That is not the way of non-violence.’²⁵ (Of course, he was one of the few who thought so. There were many in Congress, not the least of whom was Bose, who would have rejoiced at the prospect of acquiring India’s freedom on the debris of Britain’s ruin.) The Mahatma refused to grant his blessings to the Congress supporting the war. He would not compromise on non-violence even though he sympathized with Britain. However, when it came down to a vote, the party rejected the Mahatma’s ideology. A clear break between Gandhi and Patel’s views occurred openly for the first time in more than

two decades. And even though this split would close quickly—even after the Congress's offer of support for the war effort, Britain did not promise straightforward independence after the war—it was a harbinger of things to come.

For now, the two men would choose a middle path. The Congress would start a protest but the satyagraha would be contained, it would not be a mass disobedience movement. Enough to send the message across, but not enough to really hurt the British in their weakest hour.

One by one the Congress leaders were arrested. Patel was sent to his familiar Yerwada jail from where he wrote to Maniben that he was getting enough 'milk, curd, butter, fresh vegetables and there is a nice jail bakery. So good bread is available.'²⁶ He was also thrilled to be sleeping under the mango tree beneath which Gandhi had signed the Poona Pact and occupying the Mahatma's old bathroom. 'I had never dreamt that I shall be living in this sacred place. The ways of god are inscrutable.'²⁷

His health was crumbling. The doctors suspected that he had rectal cancer, but their fears were unfounded. However, his digestive system—never the best to begin with—was a constant source of trouble, and the long stints in prison did not help matters. Although his spirit was still fearsome, his body could no longer keep pace.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 changed the course of the Second World War. The Congress, fearful of a Japanese attack on India, pushed against the idea that non-violence would be of any use if the Japanese attacked. Once again, greater cooperation with the British government was put back on the table, this time with Rajaji leading the charge.

The year 1942 would prove definitive for the Patel–Gandhi–Nehru relationship. At the very beginning of the year, Gandhi had declared that his heir apparent would be Nehru and not Patel, or even Rajaji for that matter.

Somebody suggested that Jawaharlal and I were estranged. It will require much more than differences of opinion to estrange us. We have had differences from the moment we became co-workers, and yet I have said for some years and say now that not Rajaji but Jawaharlal will be my successor. He says that he does not understand my language, and

that he speaks a language foreign to me. This may or may not be true. But language is no bar to a union of hearts. And I know this—that when I am gone he will speak my language.²⁸

For Patel this must have been a moment of final, agonizing disappointment. For decades he had been passed over and discounted for positions of leaderships within the Congress, despite performing without pause back-breaking labour for the party, including raising vast sums of money, at the cost of his health—and now that independence was ever so near, Gandhi was ensuring that only Nehru could claim leadership of the party and what destiny it charted in independent India. Yet Patel never made any argument about this declaration from the man he had devoted his life to. He accepted Gandhi's ruling with the same stoicism that he had shown when Vithalbhai robbed him of his first opportunity to travel to England to study law.

Many reasons have been offered for Gandhi's choice of Nehru instead of Patel. That Patel was older by a more than a decade. That supposedly the youth and the Leftists (socialists) and the Muslims preferred Nehru to Patel. That Nehru had greater charm. And even—well, anyway Patel would be around to protect the country, the Congress and even Nehru. Even if he was not made the heir apparent of Gandhi, Patel would not leave; he would forever be the loyal soldier.

These reasons are just that—reasons, and each has an equally powerful counter argument.

If Patel was older, he was also far more experienced. He had built deep and enduring grassroots networks which he could beckon and run at will. He had the ability to speak to and connect with perhaps the biggest constituency in India—its farmers. He had an advantage neither Nehru nor Bose, Rajaji or even Gandhi had—he did not have to mould or shape himself or learn about the Indian masses to be part of them. He had come from among them, and that is where he remained. It is true that Nehru had travelled more around the world and had a greater interest in world affairs but there is no reason to believe that Patel's knowledge about the world was inadequate, and his intrinsic sense of India at the grassroots was much deeper than Nehru's.

As for the youth who preferred Nehru—who was this youth? The youth from the whole of India? The youth in the villages? Where is the empirical evidence that ‘the youth of India preferred Nehru’? It is astonishing that these claims, made so casually without any distinct evidence, have been so blithely accepted as the truth.

There is no dispute that the Leftists would have preferred Nehru but isn’t it time we held a mirror to that argument? The Leftists were certainly not the dominant faction of the Congress and across India there was no doubt which group would have a larger constituency—the Leftists or the millions of ordinary, traditional Indians. Why was Patel’s weight among ordinary Indians considered any less than Nehru’s charms on Leftists?

And as far as Muslims were concerned, shouldn’t Gandhi have realized with the elevation of Azad that he was fighting a losing battle against Jinnah and the Muslim League? Admittedly Gandhi being Gandhi, it is only natural that he would be inclined to take an idealist position on this matter. But was it fair? Was it just? Was it not cruel of Gandhi to openly declare a definitive successor even before Independence, and in the middle of a war, no less? There are no easy answers to these questions but it would be unfair to dismiss them out of hand.

Having said all of the above, there is one more argument against the elevation of Patel to heir apparent, and de facto first prime minister: He was genuinely ill and it was unclear if his body would be able to take the pressure of prime ministership. Since he died in 1950, there is no running away from the illness argument. But even this argument should be taken with the caveat that despite being an ill, and some might say dying, man, he had the strength, courage and stamina to undertake without question the most challenging task during and after Independence—bringing all the princely states together in the Indian union. So, when we speak of Patel’s illness, it cannot be considered without simultaneously discussing his stamina in uniting India.

Also, it is important to mention here that it was unlikely that Nehru would have settled quietly and without fuss had he not been given the pole

position. ‘The Mahatma may have felt that Jawaharlal was more likely than Patel to resent a number two position,’ wrote Rajmohan Gandhi.²⁹

‘Patel’s soul must have been seared’³⁰ but once again there is no sign that he either protested or quarrelled or even complained about this to anyone. His respect and love for Gandhi, miraculously, never died. If we trace Patel’s decisions and his firm stands from this point on, it can well be surmised that something in Patel would have based his decisions far more on what he—morally, ethically and principally—thought was better for India rather than on the opinions and morals of Gandhi or the ideologies of Nehru. But it must be reaffirmed in all fairness that the deep-seated affection, regard and respect that the three men felt for one and another never went away.

From the reverberating depths of Patel’s silence on the injustice done to whatever ambition he may have possessed, we cannot but hear a change of pace, the altered footfall of his sanguine stride. We cannot but wonder at the impact of Gandhi’s decision on the resolute steps Patel would take during the partition of India and more so immediately after, from ensuring India retained at least a part of Kashmir to sending the military to keep Hyderabad in the Indian union. These were not steps that would have been easy for a lifelong disciple of non-violence. But Patel took them, almost in defiance of Gandhi and Nehru, as if daring them to change the course of his actions. In the end he saved India but his relationship with his mentor was perhaps irrevocably altered, not in extravagant, noisy ways, but altered all the same.

One delicate but devastating hint of the tortured soul was recorded though. Gandhi advised Patel to learn Urdu. The Sardar replied:

Sixty-six years are over and this earthen vessel is near to cracking. It is very late to learn Urdu but I will try. All the same, your learning Urdu doesn’t seem to have helped. The more you try to get close to them, the more they flee from you.³¹

Soon afterwards, Patel’s heart would be shattered once again with news of the death of Jamnalal Bajaj, the businessman and financier of the Congress party, a close friend of Patel’s, and Gandhi’s ‘adopted son’. Following

Gandhian principles, Bajaj had not only forsaken his ‘[British] title of Rai Bahadur, his office as honorary magistrate’, but also coaxed his wife Jankidevi to give up her jewels and live in chastity as Gandhi himself did.³²

Meanwhile the British were being pushed inexorably into an asphyxiating corner by the war. Most of London had been reduced to rubble, Field Marshal Erwin ‘Desert Fox’ Rommel and his Axis forces were pushing British troops to the edge in north Africa, and in the east, Japan had bulldozed over Singapore and Rangoon. How long would it be before India fell? And how long would Indian soldiers who made up almost the entire army of British-ruled India remain loyal to the Crown when faced with a Japanese invasion? The numbers were not very confidence-inducing. The average army unit in India had around 800 soldiers and 30 officers. Only 12 of these, all officers, were British.³³ (The Royal Naval Mutiny in Bombay in 1946 would prove some of these fears true.)

Japanese success in Singapore and Burma prodded Britain to placate Indian doubts about the future in order to unite the country against the common enemy. Yet the very feelings of distrust and hostility they sought to dispel were the feelings they had, particularly towards the Congress Party. Churchill feared a meeting between [Chinese leader] Chiang Kai-shek and Nehru would be likely ‘to spread the pan-Asiatic malaise through all the bazaars of India’, the punctilious Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, called them ‘a collection of declining valetudinarians’ while the Secretary of State, L.S. Amery, agreed, ‘one will have to plough through the old gang down to better and younger stuff’.³⁴

On 1 January 1942 Indian liberals like Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and others appealed to the British prime minister Winston Churchill to break the constitutional deadlock in India with ‘farsighted statesmanship’.³⁵

What they asked for especially was a declaration from London that India should no longer be treated as a dependency, but that henceforth its constitutional position and powers should be identical with those of the other units of the British Commonwealth.³⁶

Churchill, though, was sceptical, and even dismissive. He seemed to have already gathered that the potent force in India was not the liberal party.

On 7 January Churchill, in Washington, warned his colleagues by telegram of the danger of raising the constitutional issue when the enemy was on the frontier. The Indian liberals, he remarked, not without justice, ‘though plausible have never been able to deliver the

'goods', and as a result constitutional change meant inevitably the approach of the Congress to power. 'The Indian troops are fighting splendidly, but it must be remembered that their allegiance is to the King Emperor, and that the rule of the Congress and the Hindoo Priest-hood machine would never be tolerated by a fighting race.'³⁷

Churchill's secretary of state agreed:

The political deadlock in India today is concerned, ostensibly, with the transfer of power from British to Indian hands. In reality, it is mainly concerned with the far more difficult issue of what Indian hands, what Indian government or governments, are capable of taking over without bringing about general anarchy or even civil war.³⁸

But in the War Cabinet, Lord Privy Seal Clement Attlee had different ideas. He argued that while gestures might be futile in politics, this was the moment for Britain to show some statesmanship—or risk losing India. And there was precedence for this. Lord Durham through deft negotiations in the mid-nineteenth century had been able to keep Canada in the British Commonwealth. Now Britain needed a new emissary to do in India what Lord Durham had done in Canada.

It was at this point in the story, when Japanese control of the Bay of Bengal was causing panicked people to leave Calcutta, that Sir Stafford Cripps left for India with a new proposal. By the time he departed, troops from the country had already been dispatched to Singapore and the Middle East despite Congress protests.³⁹

[Cripps] was inducted in Winston Churchill's War Cabinet in February 1942 as Minister of Production. He was also Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons. His prestige was high and he was looked on as 'presumptuous' challenger to Churchill's leadership when the war situation was getting worse.⁴⁰

Cripps had visited India before, was an old friend of Nehru's and knew the prominent cast of characters. He arrived in India on 23 March 1942 with a formal proposition. He was in the country for only three weeks, but it was long enough to drive an even deeper wedge between the Congress and the Muslim League. What Cripps offered was this: after the war, India would become a dominion of the British empire with the right to secede from the Commonwealth.

The Draft Declaration proposed there would be created a new India union which shall constitute a new dominion associated with the United Kingdom or other dominions by a common allegiance to the Crown but equal to them in every respect and in no way subordinate in any aspect of its domestic or external affairs. The Declaration further stipulated that after the creation of new India union a constitution body would be set up to draw a constitution subject to the right of a province to opt out, and form a Union of its own having the same status as that of the Indian Union.⁴¹

It also had a special provision for the states.

Further, the Indian states unwilling to adhere to the new constitution would retain their existing relations with the paramount power until a revision of Treaty arrangements.⁴²

This is broadly what happened in 1947 though Cripps's proposals were rejected. The Congress leaders saw the Cripps proposal for what it was—another step towards the breaking up of India into innumerable, and perhaps perpetually quarrelling, regions. What we would today call the Balkanization of India (after the fissures that broke up the Balkans).

Gandhi met Cripps in Delhi for a little over two hours in the afternoon of 27 March 1942. 'Why did you come if this is what you have to offer? If this is your entire proposal to India, I would advise you to take the next plane home,'⁴³ Gandhi told Cripps in uncharacteristically strong words. 'I will consider that,'⁴⁴ said Cripps. It was, as Gandhi would later say, 'a post-dated cheque'.⁴⁵

Gandhi's fear that the Cripps plan was to divide Indian communities is further confirmed by an anecdote that Azad mentions in his autobiography:

As soon as the press released the text of the War Cabinet's proposals, there was a large volume of criticism in the Indian press. The most critical were the papers which generally expressed the Congress point of view, Hindustan Times of Delhi was one of those which was frankest in the expression of its opinion. While the Congress Working Committee was still in session, Cripps sent me a letter in which he said that though the Hindu press had not welcomed the offer, he hoped that I would consider the proposal from a broader point of view.⁴⁶

This struck Azad as being mighty odd.

This reference to the Hindu press appeared very odd to me. It also occurred to me that perhaps he was putting the emphasis on the Hindu press because I am a Muslim. If he did

not like the comments made by the press, he could easily have referred to the Indian press or a section of it. I replied that I was surprised at his reference to the Hindu press and did not think that there was such a distinction among the different sections of the Indian press.⁴⁷

By this time Cripps was obviously desperate. He would have sensed that the tide was turning against him. And the Congress Party, at the very top of its establishment, was reluctant to accept his proposals.

‘After knowing Gandhi’s hostility to the proposals, Cripps depended on Nehru for the success of his mission. He told Nehru, “If they accepted my terms, I should be such a tremendous figure in England that I could do anything.”’⁴⁸

The Congress, in fact, was divided. In the Congress Working Committee Nehru and Rajaji were in favour of the Cripps proposal.

On 4th April 7 members of the Congress working committee were for it [the proposals] against 5. According to Shiva Rao, a correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* who was close to Cripps and Nehru wrote voting was 6 to 4 in favour of agreement. By 9th April it was reported that there was agreement for accepting the proposals. Nehru is reported to have told the cartoonist Shankar in a few days’ time you will be drawing war cartoons and backing up a national government. I think we are near agreement. C. Rajagopalchari too expressed the same view. *The Hindustan Times* reported on 9th April that there was general expectation of an agreement.⁴⁹

Nehru was particularly keen that India must assist China against Japan, especially since he had been to China and met Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese leader. Chiang Kai-shek and his wife had even visited India to lobby for support.⁵⁰

He was so impressed by China’s struggle against Japan that he felt that the democracies must be supported at any cost. In fact, he felt genuine grief and anguish that India was not fighting by the side of democracies. I may also mention that Jawaharlal has always been more moved by international considerations than most Indians. He looked at all questions from an international rather than a national point of view. I also shared his concern for international issues, but to me the question of India’s independence was paramount.⁵¹

Azad argued here that he differed with Nehru about keeping the focus steadfastly on the goal of Indian independence before any international consideration.

I realised that democracies represented the lesser evil but I could not forget that unless the democratic principle was applied to India's case, all professions of democracy sounded hollow and insincere.⁵²

Within the Working Committee, Patel was drawing the lines more clearly.

[T]he conditions of the countries involved in the war leaves no doubt whatsoever in our mind today that it would be nothing short of a calamity for the Congress to abandon non-violence on any account [. . .] We as individuals [. . .] are believers in out and out non-violence. [. . .] The Working Committee resolution contemplates association in the present war in the remote contingency of the British government making an offer acceptable to the Congress. If that happens, we cannot of course remain in the Working Committee.⁵³

A few days later at a Congress meeting Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of a 'scorched earth policy if the Japanese invaded'—and Patel and Prasad threatened to resign from the Working Committee due to differences with Nehru and Azad.⁵⁴ Patel went to the extent of writing in a letter,

Raja[ji] is spreading poison [. . .] After having entered legislature on Congress ticket [. . .] such propaganda is like breaking the oath which he has taken. [. . .] As per pledge he is bound to act according to the resolutions of the Working Committee. At present he has a mania for fighting with the Japanese. [. . .] He has done tremendous mischief and harm to the Congress organisation. To the country's cause, he has done no less disservice. But I would not be surprised if someday he throws away the sponge and retires altogether from public life, in case he does not get enough support.⁵⁵

(Here's a peek into the Sardar's time in Britain right there in the last sentence. Who says 'throws away the sponge'? Clearly men who had had a stint studying in Britain.)

The differences with Rajaji were not only about the Cripps Mission but also about his acceptance of Jinnah's formula—that the Muslim-majority areas should be separated. Patel disagreed vehemently. This was exactly the danger that he and Gandhi could see clearly in the Cripps Mission and they warned Rajaji about it incessantly. Gandhi even suggested to Rajaji that he might want to leave the Congress and pursue his views outside the party. Rajaji refused to relent, and the Congress, urged by Gandhi and Patel, rejected Rajaji's 'pro-Pakistan proposal 120 to 15 [votes]'.⁵⁶

Amidst all this, in March 1942, Netaji's voice boomed over Azad Hind Radio. He was raising an army, he said. He would take help from the Axis powers, he explained. He was going to march into his beloved motherland to free it, he promised. His news station began to broadcast news bulletins in English, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Punjabi, Pashto and Urdu, all designed to raise a volunteer force for his army, the Azad Hind Fauj, to counter the war propaganda of the British. Bose called the British Broadcasting Corporation the Bluff and Bluster Corporation and All India Radio, Anti India Radio.

Gandhi and Nehru, according to Azad, veered towards opposite sides during this period. Both were committed to India's independence but unsure about what the result of the war would be. As Bose began to transmit his messages,

Gandhiji by now inclined more and more to the view that the Allies could not win the war. He feared that it might end in the triumph of Germany or Japan or at best there might be [a] stalemate. I also saw that Subhas Bose's escape to Germany had made a great impression on Gandhiji. He had not formerly approved many of his actions, but now I found a change in his outlook. His admiration for Subhas Bose unconsciously coloured his view about the whole war situation. This admiration was also one of the factors which clouded the discussions during the Cripps Mission to India.⁵⁷

During this time news spread that Bose had died in a plane crash. Gandhi was deeply moved and sent a message to Bose's mother, praising her son in reverential terms. The news turned out to be false, though his death, it is widely believed, did occur later in a plane accident. Gandhi's words in praise of Bose irritated and disappointed Cripps, and no doubt his masters in London. Azad writes:

Cripps however complained to me that he had not expected a man like Gandhiji to speak in such glowing terms about Subhas Bose. Gandhiji was a confirmed believer in non-violence while Subhas Bose had openly sided with the Axis powers and was carrying on vigorous propaganda for the defeat of the Allies in the battlefield.⁵⁸

During his stay Cripps also had a falling out with the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow.

For any settlement of the constitutional question in India, the Viceroy was the key man. Throughout the negotiations, Linlithgow felt completely ignored. He complained ‘How could I help when I was consulted by Cripps about nothing’. But he had accepted Cripps’s modified defence formula. Linlithgow could not abdicate his responsibility as a Viceroy during the critical war years. Wavell wrote, ‘Cripps did not play straight over the question of Viceroy’s veto.’⁵⁹

This was a strategic mistake by Cripps. It was the viceroy’s words that the Congress top leadership was more likely to trust. But those were not coming.

If the Congress had been given assurances by the Viceroy, then Nehru and Azad’s hands might have been strengthened in winning over their colleagues in the Congress working committee for accepting the proposals. But by sidelining the Viceroy, Cripps showed lack of political adroitness and realism. Cripps proved too confident to be prudent.⁶⁰

In the end, Cripps made it very clear that he could not deliver the clear and unambiguous promise that the Congress wanted, and no one fully bought into his proposal—neither the Congress, nor the Muslim League, the Harijan leadership or the Hindu Mahasabha. The man himself left for England on 12 April 1942.

Various commentators and historians have proposed assorted reasons for the failure of the Cripps Mission.

On the failure of Cripps Mission R.J. Moore wrote that it was crushed by the ‘monolithic millstones of Churchillian conservatism and Congress Nationalism’. Rejecting that Gandhi wrecked the Cripps proposals, S. Gopal maintained that the War Cabinet had no intention of seeing its success. Gowher Rizvi too held Churchill responsible for subverting the proposals. According to Churchill, Gandhi’s pacifism led to the Mission’s failure. Coupland too thought likewise. Peter Clarke states that Gandhi’s hostility, Linlithgow’s dislike of Cripps, the negative influence, exercised by the Congress and the government and Cripps’s lack of political adroitness knocked out the mission.⁶¹

There was a palpable sense that the two parties did not have the same goals, and it has even been suggested that it failed because Patel felt that its success would guarantee prime ministership for Nehru and he scuttled it.⁶²

It has also been argued that the Mission failed because the British could not give what the Congress wanted, and further that the Labour party was not interested in India’s cause of

self-government.⁶³

This suggestion that Patel sabotaged it to get back at Nehru, and Gandhi, is the sort of thing that pops up again and again in this period—while stoic at being passed over the top job, Patel was clearly political enough to hit out when possible. This pattern would continue till his death—and in spite of the affection and bonhomie, these were complicated men who had complex emotions for one another.

While Cripps was being bullied by Churchill and Linlithgow on what exactly to offer to the Congress, there was considerable consternation within the Congress about the nature of the promise of dominion status, especially regarding being part of the Commonwealth.

Rajagopalachari mentioned to Cripps at his interview with him that he thought that the word dominion was better discarded and that the words Free Member State might be substituted with advantage and later was on record as saying that the omission of the word Dominion Status might be one amendment helpful to the prospect of Congress acceptance. More significantly Cripps noted that the first point made by Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad, the Congress president, in his interview with them was about the use of the word Dominion.⁶⁴

But there was a reason these terms had been used.

He explained why it had been used—chiefly to silence possible objections in the House of Commons or from the dominions themselves—and made it clear that it was a question of terminology not substance. They attached psychological importance to it. After the mission had failed Gandhi alleged in an article in Horizon [newspaper; might be *Harijan*] that Cripps should have known that Congress would not look at dominion status, even though it carried the right of immediate secession. Jinnah, by expected contrast, showed himself to be concerned with clarification of the possibility of a second dominion being set up.⁶⁵

Apart from the matter of leaving India open to the threat of Balkanization, the Congress leaders also protested the fact that the Cripps proposal did not assign responsibility of the defence of the realm to Indian hands and kept it reserved for the viceroy or a British commander-in-chief. What was the purpose of a transfer of power if Indians would not even be in charge of defending their own country?

But for the Cripps Mission to try and pull a Durham was incomprehensible. With neither the leeway nor the flexibility to do what Durham had done in Canada, Cripps was destined to fail. Both Gandhi and his main followers were seeing the fight in a light quite different from what Cripps and his masters wanted. Though not for a moment were they supporters of the Axis forces. One British observer said of Patel:

[Patel's] was a bitter opposition to Britain amounting to hatred and anything was better than that Britain should be allowed to stay. He shared Gandhi's defeatism and saw no prospects of saving the country if things continued as they were. He at least thought that there was chance to resist Japan if they were allowed to go about it if their hands free; there is nothing to indicate that he had pro-Fascist or pro-Japanese tendencies.⁶⁶

On the failure of the Cripps Mission, Patel had his own clear-headed assessment. He saw it for what it was—Churchill buckling under American pressure, in large part, to offer Indians a false deal which would probably never materialize once the war was over.

Cripps mission was a false coin. The persons who prepared the draft of the offer were men of evil intention. The offer was stinking with dishonesty and fraud. While returning Cripps himself took about turn and blamed the Congress for the failure of his mission [..] The mission was sent with the intention to change American public opinion.⁶⁷

The Cripps Mission failed because fundamentally what Stafford Cripps had to offer was qualitatively different from what Lord Durham had offered the Canadians. Cripps was offering little immediate succour to the leaders of the Indian national movement and his promise of a long-term resolution could not be trusted. Why? Well, simply because if, at that time, one had asked people who would win the Second World War, the answers would have been divided, to say the least. The Congress leaders were just not convinced that the Allies would win the war. And if indeed Germany and Japan won, and India sided with the British in it, where would that leave India? What would be the fate of India in the case of a Japanese invasion and a British retreat?

These were puzzling questions, and of course no one had an answer to them. So, for the leaders of the Indian national movement to come to any

agreement that was based on promises incumbent upon, and assuming, the eventual victory of the British in the war was difficult.

The draft declaration which Cripps brought with him to India in the early spring of 1942 had much to offer on the longer term, little of substance on the shorter, where Cripps, unlike Durham, was deliberately left with negligible freedom of manoeuvre. That essentially was why his mission failed. Even the longer term and dominion-Commonwealth prospect was conditional upon an allied victory, which looked to many Indian eyes by no means certain, with Singapore having surrendered on 15 February and Rangoon having fallen on 8 March, the day before the War Cabinet decided upon the Cripps Mission.⁶⁸

Naturally the Indians were not convinced whether such an agreement could even be enforced—what if England fell to the Nazis?

Were the signatories to the post-dated cheque upon a failing bank [should be ‘failing bank’ and was later added by a journalist], of the reputedly Gandhian imagery, likely to be in a position to honour their signatures? Gandhi, whatever the phraseology he may or may not have employed, evidently had his doubts and the mere existence of them was bound to diminish the attraction of proposals which had so little to offer immediately.⁶⁹

In the end, though, the Cripps Mission did have some clear benefits—it pushed the needle of a potential and full transfer of power in India to Indians.

But when the mission had ended and could be viewed in retrospect, it became increasingly apparent that it had set, among other things, a Commonwealth seal upon the transfer of power in India. Even dominion status was briefly to serve its purpose, while the broader notion of free membership of a Commonwealth was at the least to contribute to the building of a new relationship over a generation.⁷⁰

Through the entire Cripps period, the Congress was on stormy waters about the one thing that had perplexed it since the war started—the non-violent approach. Every leader vacillated on it, including Patel, though he was perhaps one of the least moved and remained committed to Gandhian non-violence. ‘When such a devastating war is going on in the world, only one person keeps his feet solidly on the ground and says that those who fight with the sword will be destroyed by the sword,’ he said.⁷¹ But even he sometimes worried about what the real consequences of the war would be

and what India's fate would be depending on the choices it made and the side it chose.

Another reason for the mission's failure was how similar Gandhi and Churchill were. Each was devoted to his cause. In Louis Fischer's poetic words, 'A great man is all of one piece like good sculpture.'⁷² But they were also utterly different.

Churchill is the Byronic Napoleon. Political power is poetry to him. Gandhi is the sober saint to whom such power was anathema. The British aristocrat and the brown plebeian were both conservatives, but Gandhi was a non-conformist conservative. As he grew older Churchill became more Tory, Gandhi more revolutionary. Churchill loved social traditions, Gandhi smashed social barriers. Churchill mixed with every class, but lived in his own. Gandhi lived with everybody. To Gandhi, the lowest Indian was a child of God. To Churchill, all Indians were a pedestal for a throne. He would have died to keep England free, but was against those who wanted India free.⁷³

You can probably see whose side Louis Fischer is on from the passage above, and today we could pertinently argue that at least Ambedkar would have sorely challenged the idea (and thought it condescending) that Gandhi imagined 'the lowliest Indian was a child of God'—but it is inescapably true that the relationship between these two men had a startling impact on the success of the Cripps Mission.

One commentator has opined that Patel scuttled the Cripps Mission because its success would have made Nehru's rise as the potential prime minister of independent India inevitable. That is not true because soon after Cripps left Gandhi once again turned to the Sardar to push through what would become his last great mass movement when almost no one else could have pushed it through.

It was a programme that many of his closest followers would be suspicious of and Nehru would not agree to support till the last moment.

Generally, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajagopalachari went in favour of according conditional cooperation to the British government [during the Second World War] while Mahatma Gandhi and most of the members of the Congress Socialist group including his [Gandhi's] staunch supporters were not in a mood to compromise or cooperate with the British authority.⁷⁴

The rift between the groups was vast and with each passing day seemed more difficult to bridge.

A detailed study of the proceedings and working of the Congress Working Committee and All India Congress Committee during 1940-42 clearly reveals that Gandhiji's thinking was far different from that of his closest political friends and followers. In brief, the Congress leadership during this eventful period was divided and not united. Particularly, C. Rajagopalachari's Maulana Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru were not convinced with Gandhi's approach to non-violence.⁷⁵

This rift only widened after Stafford Cripps left India.

A divided Congress needed new glue, a new programme that would become the fulcrum which would turn the national movement towards a new direction now that the adhesive of fighting the war had been ruled out. What could capture the imagination of the people on the brink of a war that they were, for all practical purposes, not really going to participate in?

In Britain, Churchill brought his weary people together with the promise that '[W]e shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.'⁷⁶

In India, Gandhi needed the blood-rush of an equally heady promise. In discussions on what that would be, the Mahatma had significant differences with Azad and Nehru. As Azad remembered it, 'I had on earlier occasions also differed with from Gandhiji on some points but never before had our differences been so complete.'⁷⁷

Gandhi chose—Do or Die.

He asked the British to quit India.



NINE

‘ONE WHO HAD TAKEN A PLEDGE TO
PROTECT THE PEOPLE CANNOT LEAVE THE
CITY EVEN WHEN A SINGLE MAN IS
THERE.’

‘A true student of history,’ wrote Chaudhuri, ‘knows that history does not forgive. In India she has not.’¹

The Sardar would have agreed. He understood more than most other leaders of the national movement for freedom that tides of history are unforgiving and a nation must pay the price for its past mistakes. We now enter the final, most dramatic, phase of India’s independence movement, and the even more tumultuous theatre after Independence. This is also the last part of Sardar Patel’s life. By mid-December 1950, he was dead.

But in these eight years, Patel literally forged the shape of a new India through lines on the ground. The final and most vicious leg of this battle began with disagreements with Rajagopalachari on the acceptance of the idea of Pakistan.

The Congress of Gandhi, Patel and a sometimes conflicted and ambivalent Nehru (he thought that Gandhi’s views, that if attacked by Japan Britain would most probably be incapable of protecting India, that Japan’s quarrel was with Britain and not with India, and that if attacked India would

offer full support—but not necessarily before that—was tantamount to siding with the Axis powers in the war) would struggle to prevent the one thing none of the Congress leaders wanted—a break-up of the country.

In the end, if only to avoid civil war, Nehru, Patel and many of the other Congress leaders reluctantly agreed to Pakistan. They did so also because they wanted to see the back of Jinnah and were convinced that keeping him and his Muslim League within Indian politics would mean endless conflict in the new republic. Mountbatten first persuaded Patel and Nehru who kept Gandhi out of the loop so they could firm up the Partition. By April 1947, the relations between Congress and the League in the interim cabinet had reached breaking point.

Barely a year after Independence, Gandhi was dead. The Mahatma never agreed to the Partition, and yet, ironically, was murdered by a Hindu fundamentalist who accused him of acquiescing in, and even facilitating, the division of the country.

The Nehru–Patel relationship took on a new dynamic after Gandhi died. Like brothers they mourned for the Mahatma. Like brothers they disagreed on certain fundamental things about India and its future. Even on Gandhi's Quit India Movement, launched in 1942. Patel immediately and enthusiastically welcomed the movement. Nehru did not. Disturbed by the military rise of Japan, Nehru had been planning to make a radio broadcast imploring Indians not to desert the British Raj in its hour of need. However, Azad, uncomfortable with the tone of an interview Nehru did right after Cripps left, stopped the radio broadcast.

Jawaharlal gave an interview to the representative of the News Chronicle [newspaper] soon after Cripps left. The whole tone and attitude of the interview appeared to minimise the differences between the Congress and the British. He tried to represent that though [the] Congress had rejected the Cripps offer, India was willing to help the British, and could not offer full support only because of the policy the British government had adopted. I also learnt that there was a proposal that Jawaharlal should make a broadcast from the All India Radio.²

Azad said he categorically warned Nehru against giving the wrong impression.

[I] told Jawaharlal clearly that now that the Working Committee had passed a resolution, he must be very careful about what he said. If he gave a statement which created the impression that Congress was not going to oppose the war effort, the whole effect of the Congress resolution would be lost. The Congress stand was that India was willing to help Britain but it could do so only as a free country.³

Both Nehru and Rajaji were wary of a call for the British to leave India just when Japan seemed to be approaching the country's doorsteps. But Patel was unwavering in his support from the start. The deliberations on what finally became the Quit India Movement began in April 1942. While the official movement only started in August, in June the Sardar was already pitching complete independence as the only way forward. In Ahmedabad he pitched it in business terms—‘whatever you earn, eighty per cent is taken away by the government’—and to Muslims he said,

Let Muslims understand that this fight is not for establishing Hindu rule but to break the shackles of slavery. We will come to understanding after achieving independence. If we hope that Hindus and Muslims will come to understanding before achieving independence, it is a false hope. We are not going to come to understanding by the rifle of the Britishers.⁴

There was a fall-out on the nature of the proposed Quit India Movement even between Azad and Nehru on one side and Gandhi on the other which Patel was forced to bridge. As Azad remembered it:

I had strong conviction that a non-violent movement could not be launched or carried out in the existing circumstances. A movement could remain non-violent only if the leaders were present and active to guide it at every step and I was convinced that the leaders would be arrested at the first suggestion of the movement. If of course the Congress decided to abjure violence, there was scope of a movement. Even a leaderless people could disrupt communications, burn stores and depots and in a hundred ways sabotage the war effort. I also recognised that such a great upheaval might lead to a deadlock and force the British to come to terms.⁵

But Azad said he was prepared to take a risk in the cause of freedom.

It would however be a great risk but I held that if the risk was to be taken it should be done with open eyes. On the other hand, I could not for a moment see how the non-violent movement of Gandhiji's conception could be launched or maintained in war conditions. Things reached a climax when he [Gandhi] sent me a letter to the effect that

my stand was so different from his that we could not work together. If the Congress wanted Gandhiji to lead the movement, I must resign from the presidency and also withdraw from the working committee. He said Jawaharlal must do the same.⁶

Azad called in help from the two people he knew could change Gandhi's mind.

I immediately sent for Jawaharlal and showed him Gandhiji's letter. Sardar Patel had also dropped in and he was shocked when he read the letter. He immediately went to Gandhiji and protested strongly against his action.⁷

There is a sense in Patel's speeches of the time that he perhaps anticipated, not least from the reactions of some of his close colleagues in the Congress, that support for the mass movement could not be guaranteed. He also recognized that there were likely to be doubts in the minds of the people he was urging to take to the streets about the need for British protection during the war. So, Patel threw in the example of the British defeat at Trincomalee in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) which was bombed by the Japanese on 5 April 1942.

When Trincomalee was bombed they fled from there and also advised people to run away. They have made full preparation for running away but where are we to go? They say they want to defend India. India can be defended only by independent India. We are confident about it. That is the reason we tell them to quit India. As such they talk of quitting when the war ends but why not quit now?⁸

On 26 July 1942, he told a youth gathering in Ahmedabad what to do if war came to their doorstep.

Death is determined by god. Nobody can give life to anybody or take life of anybody [. . .] It is the sacred duty of every young man to protect the people from danger, to defend the city and to defend the country [. . .] One who has taken a pledge to protect the people cannot leave the city even when a single man is there.⁹

Significantly, by July 1942, even before the Quit India Movement had been formally ratified by the Congress, Patel was telling Congress workers and people in general that

[T]he struggle [. . .] would not stop even if there was a civil war or anarchy in the country, and that it would shake the whole world. It would be carried on by the masses even if all the leaders were arrested by the government [. . .] The Congress would not interfere if some people lost their temper and took dangerous and drastic steps against the government during the struggle, nor would Gandhi show his disapproval in that connection. Congressmen would certainly observe non-violence during the struggle, but others were not bound by that rule.¹⁰

Some of these statements seem curious. How could a man so determined to support and apply Gandhian non-violence at all costs suddenly use the language of sanctioning violence?

In the Sardar's statements lies the early understanding of a subtle but important aspect of the Quit India Movement. He was acknowledging, presciently, that this movement would be different, even for him, the fastidious organizer. That even he, the powerful party boss of the Congress organizational machine, would be less in control than perhaps ever before. The Congress leaders were divided, including some of Patel's closest colleagues.

In brief, the Congress leadership during this eventful period was divided and not united. Particularly, C. Rajagopalachari, Maulana Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru were not convinced with Gandhi's approach to non-violence. Nehru remained opposed to the idea of mass struggle of 'doing or dying' till August 1942 and gave in at the very end [. . .] Gandhi showed himself as the undisputed leader of the movement over which he had little command. Gandhi initiated the movement but could not lead it [. . .] It was a sporadic outburst of anti-British consciousness.¹¹

Opposition to Gandhi's Quit India Movement plan came from all quarters. The Communist Party of India (CPI) took their orders from Moscow and opposed the movement. As historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee writes,

What needs to be emphasized here is that this decision of the CPI was not based on any understanding of the Indian situation by Indian communists. The opposition to the clarion call of 1942 was the outcome of a diktat emanating from Moscow. When Hitler attacked his erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union, in 1941, the fight against Nazism overnight became a People's War for all communists. The directive from Moscow was carried by Achhar Singh Chinna, alias Larkin, who travelled from the Soviet Union to India [carrying instructions from a Soviet leadership headed by Stalin] with the full knowledge of the British authorities.¹²

In the Indian freedom struggle, the communists, therefore, took the curious line that the colonial power, Britain, was a friendly force—even when the rest of the country was rising against it.

In India, it meant communists had to isolate themselves from the mainstream of national life and politics and see British rule as a friendly force since the communists' 'fatherland', Soviet Russia, was an ally of Britain. A critical decision affecting the strategic and the tactical line of the party was thus taken defying national interests at the behest of a foreign power, whose orders determined the positions and actions of the CPI.¹³

Influential moderates like Sir Cowasji Jehangir urged, in fact, that mass opinion be mobilized against the Congress and in support of the British government's war effort. Fellow Parsi Sir Rustom P. Masani, chairman of the British government's National War Front in India and recently retired vice chancellor of Bombay University, warned students that if they participated in the movement they would go to prison.

Savarkar too did not believe that a mass movement of the kind Gandhi was proposing would work. Instead, he declared:

The first duty we owe to our motherland and community is to utilize the war time for training our people into to-date military efficiency [. . .] the militarization movement is far more farsighted and intensely patriotic than a number of other vociferous stunts current in the market today.¹⁴

The fiercest opposition of course came from Jinnah. He defined the Quit India Movement as a 'challenge to Muslim India. Muslim India cannot remain mere spectators in the face of the situation'.¹⁵

On 9 August 1942, hours after the Quit India Movement was adopted by the Congress, the British government arrested every member of the Congress Working Committee. Till the last moment, perhaps Gandhi had hoped to reach a negotiated settlement with the British. Even as the movement was being adopted by the Congress, he said,

I have definitely contemplated an interval between the passing of the Congress resolution [of the Quit India Movement] and the starting of the struggle. I do not know that what I contemplate doing according to my wont can be in any way be described as in the nature of the negotiation. But a letter will certainly go to the viceroy not as an ultimatum but an

earnest pleading for avoiding conflict. If there is a favourable response, then my letter can be the basis for negotiation.¹⁶

The Congress leaders may have expected that the struggle with the British government at this delicate juncture of the war would be swift. Patel, for instance, had anticipated a favourable conclusion within a week. Gandhi had factored in about three weeks or thereabouts. (They were all delusional. Britain was fighting for its life and did not have the luxury of negotiating with Gandhi. In any case 2 million Indian soldiers were already fighting for the Allies.) A free India, they believed, ought to, and could, be a natural supporter of the Allies, ready to defend its territory against any Japanese aggression. Gandhi had even prepared the ground for this conclusion by clearly communicating his intentions to Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-shek. In June 1942, he wrote to the Chinese premier,

I will take no hasty action, and whatever action is taken will be governed by the consideration, that it should not injure China or encourage Japanese aggression in India or China. I am straining every nerve to avoid a conflict with British Authority.¹⁷

In July he wrote to Roosevelt,

In order to make my proposal fool proof, I have suggested that if the allies think it necessary, they may keep their troops, at their own expense, in India, not for keeping internal order but for preventing the Japanese aggression and defending China. So far as India is concerned, she must become free even as America and Great Britain are free. The Allied troops will remain in India during the war under treaty with the free Indian government that may be formed by the people of India without any outside interference direct or indirect.¹⁸

But that conclusion was not to be. The sweeping arrests by the British at dawn on 9 August gave an entirely different tenor to the Quit India Movement. It would now be led, not by scores of Congress leaders, but thousands of ordinary people. Patel had suggested that this might indeed be the fate of the movement in a speech on 8 August 1942.

Government propaganda in foreign countries is that nobody backs the Congress. Congress consists of handful of persons and they, day in and day out, create all the troubles. Nine crore Muslims are not with the Congress. Seven crore Harijans [Dalits] are

opposed to the Congress and seven crores of [princely] states people also do not side with the Congress. Liberals who are wise are also not with the Congress. Radicals, democrats and communists also are anti-Congress [...] If the people of the country are not with Congress then why are they [the British government] scared of Congress?¹⁹

In this speech Patel also charted out the path, presciently, on what ought to be done if all the Congress leaders are jailed.

Till Gandhiji is there we have to act according to what he orders. We have to put every step forward as he directs. We should not be in haste nor should we remain backwards. But suppose the government took the first step and arrested everybody, then what is to be done? If something like that happens, if the government arrests Gandhiji, then in such circumstances there will not be any consideration about the steps to be taken. Then every Indian, who is born in this land, will be duty bound to take whatever steps he or she thinks proper for attaining independence of the country.²⁰

Once arrested, it was suggested that the Congress leaders, including Gandhi, be deported from India. Gandhi to Aden in what is present-day Yemen, and the rest of the Congress leaders to Nyasaland (present-day Malawi).

The Viceroy believed that the move would have very valuable consequences, both as a deterrent on those who aspired to take the place of the arrested men and a means of giving confidence to waverers who would more radically believe that the Government did not intend to compromise with the Congress. However, the Governor of Bombay unhesitatingly opined against deportation. It would, he thought, shock moderate opinion in India and alienate support from the Government. He further wrote: ‘To deport Patel alone would provide him a halo of martyrdom above others, and I do not favour it.’²¹

An infirm Gandhi remained captive at the palace of the Aga Khan in Pune, while the rest of the Congress leaders were held at Ahmednagar Fort.

Even so the Quit India Movement burst like a rolling storm across India. The government may have arrested 1000 top Congress members in a week but tens of thousands of people poured on to the streets, seemingly without any organized leadership, with just the war cry of ‘Quit India’ on their lips. Even though the press had been suppressed and the leaders jailed, Gandhi’s words had spread:

Here is a mantra, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The mantra is: do or die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery. Every true Congressman or [Congress] woman will join the struggle with an inflexible determination not to remain alive to see the country in bondage and slavery.²²

While they espoused non-violence at every step, both Gandhi and Patel's speeches indicated that they expected that there would inevitably be some violence. And so it was: As schools and colleges shut down and shops and factories downed their shutters, mobs of protestors raged through the streets. And when the police fired on them, hundreds died.

It also threw up unique resistance. In Gujarat,

[A] large number of national songs were composed and were sung. But the Navratri²³ songs also proved to be entertaining. In view of the growing popularity of the Navratri songs, the editors collected songs composed by one Chandidas and published them during the Quit India Movement. The book assumed a significant title, Ranchandi, that is, the goddess of the battlefield. The editors wrote in the preface that in view of the growing popularity of poet Chandidas' Navratri songs, they published them in a book form. Now, Chandidas was itself a fictitious name and the editors used it as a cover to hide the identity of the real author.²⁴

The songs, though, proved to be very popular.

[T]housands of men and women in Gujarat sang these songs as a part of the Navratri festival in the garba [dance] form. In the song titled Avan to raj shan hoi ho bahuchari it says: 'Oh, mother Bahuchari,²⁵ how is it that the British people rule us so ruthlessly? They have exploited us and looted us. They have also imprisoned Gandhiji but, Oh Merciful Goddess, we are not afraid of them. We will destroy the tottering pillars of the British empire; let the earth be drenched with red blood.' In Chandika ramane Chadhya, the poet prays goddess Chandika to bless the devotees and to destroy sinful Britain.²⁶

The songs were traditional appeals to local goddesses for help—only these were not against demons but the British.

We have asked the British to quit, but they keep on sticking to our country. But Chandika has now started her dance of destruction and this will make the British dig their own burial ground. England has been forced by Germany and Japan to make a reverse movement, and now India is about to defeat it. The songs are titled As Amba Albeli, Ma Ambano Ras, Kalikane Prarthna, and Mano Shap, but all of them actually have a

common anti-colonial theme in which people, irrespective of their castes and creeds are advised to unite against their common enemy.²⁷

Like Tilak had once fused the desire for freedom into public Ganapati festivals, these songs became part of the popular garba dance ritual.

The rulers are described as sinful demons who are just waiting for their annihilation at the feet of the goddesses. These songs were sung in the garba during the Quit India Movement. But the Bombay Police Department came to know about it, resulting in the seizure of hundreds of copies of the book. On further inquiry the police discovered that one Kuverji Keshavji Shah, one of the proprietors of the May Printery in Bombay had printed these.²⁸

Shah, of course, went to prison.

On the other side of the country, in Bengal, not only were students leading mass rioting in Calcutta and Dhaka, prominent business houses were sending out word to their distant factories asking the workers to strike.

One significant feature of the August upheaval in Calcutta was the sympathy and active support rendered by the non-Bengali business houses to the movement. Business concerns like Birla Groups as indicated by Government findings, were sending out hired agents to the mill areas outside the city of Calcutta to induce workers to strike. A top ranking Indian business magnate G.L. Mehta put forward a joint appeal of the Calcutta industrialists to the viceroy on 27 August requesting immediate recognition of the National Demand. According to government observation, G.L. Mehta was attempting to form a united front with some local Muslim businessmen in presenting the demand for national government.²⁹

In Banaras, eminent scholar and vice chancellor of the Banaras Hindu University, Dr Radhakrishnan, was giving a lecture on the Gita at the famed Arts College Hall (there were discourses on the Gita every Sunday at the college and 9 August 1942 was a Sunday) when he was informed that Gandhi had been arrested. He immediately stopped the lecture and asked the students to ‘work with a balanced mind’ and left the venue. Within hours thousands of students had gathered on the streets.³⁰

The upsurge of revolutionary passion across the country did not leave the princely states untouched. In Mewar, a powerful movement of women satyagrahis emerged, called Kesaria Saris after the saffron (the colour of

sacrifice in Hindu tradition) saris they wore.³¹ In Meerut, where the Indian soldiers first revolted against their British masters in 1857, a particularly gruesome incident, a ‘mini Jallianwala Bagh’, occurred. In the village of Bhamauri in Meerut, on 18 August, police inspector Mohammad Yakub Khan and his constables fired at unarmed protestors, killing five and injuring eighteen. Another fifty satyagrahis received severe lathi beatings. When one of the main revolutionary protestors Ram Swarup begged for water in custody, one of the policemen urinated in his mouth.³²

In Koraput district of Orissa, the tribals rose in unison with a non-tribal leader Radha Krushna Biswas Roy³³ and in the Santal tribal areas of what is present-day Jharkhand, Paharia freedom fighters—men like Kartik Grihi, Bara Dharma Paharia and Chota Dharma Paharia, Jama Kumar Paharia, Haria Paharia and many others³⁴—shocked the British by their defiance during the Quit India Movement.

While in jail, Gandhi undertook a twenty-one-day fast in 1943 in response to the viceroy’s suggestion that he take responsibility for the violence in 1942 and assure the government that this sort of thing would not happen again. Chaudhuri saw this as a gigantic farce.

There was, however, a comical sequel to the misfired Quit India movement. The months following were a period of mounting disappointment for nationalist Indians, and this followed previous disappointments. England had not surrendered in 1940, Russia had not collapsed in 1941, Japan had not overrun eastern India, the Germans had not advanced into Egypt [. . .] Under the stress of so much denial of hope, nationalist India would have driven to Job-like despair if the Indian people had not acquired in the course of their history an unlimited capacity to become inured to disappointment, counterbalanced by an irrepressible apocalyptic hope.³⁵

Chaudhuri says that the Mahatma going on a fast at this point was more entertainment than anything else.

Even so, 1943 seemed to open like a period of complete emotional dullness for them. In this psychological situation Mahatma Gandhi apparently thought it necessary for the sake of maintaining the reputation of the Congress as well as for the mental comfort of his people to provide them with some excitement. He went on a fast for twenty-one days from 10 February as a protest against what he described as the ‘leonine violence’ of the British government in India. It is not clear whether the British lion or the zoological lion

was meant. Mahatma Gandhi's histrionics were based on an unerring knowledge of his people.³⁶

It had more to do with keeping a restless and bored population interested rather than really fighting the British.

At once all India became agog with the expectation of being fed emotionally, instead of being starved, as they were being in recent months.³⁷

Chaudhuri, working at that time for All India Radio, was entrusted with writing Gandhi's obituary if the Mahatma died. He wrote it but then the fast was called off. Chaudhuri says the same obituary was pulled out, rehashed and used when Gandhi was assassinated in 1948.

The top Congress leaders would spend around three years, give or take, in prison. Gandhi was released in 1944, both Patel and Nehru in 1945. Patel's son Dahyabhai and daughter Maniben were incarcerated too.

During this period, two of Gandhi's closest supporters would die—his secretary, Mahadev Desai, on 15 August 1942 and his wife, Kasturba, on 22 February 1944, days before Gandhi's release. As per her wish, her body was draped in a Khadi sari from yarn spun by Gandhi himself.

Patel was deeply moved by Mahadev Desai's death. 'However I may try I cannot forget that Mahadev is no more,' he wrote to Gandhi on 12 September 1942. 'We have been inspired by you to forget such miseries [..] may god give you strength enough to endure this severe blow.'³⁸

While in prison, the sixty-seven-year-old Patel's health was, at best, indifferent. In a rare detailed letter about his health, the normally taciturn Patel wrote to his daughter-in-law, Bhanumati,

Since the last three months intestine pain was gradually aggravating. So, officers here [at Ahmednagar Fort prison] insisted on getting an X-ray. I did not want [this] because I have to take purgative before being X-rayed. And one has to take enema, and thereafter second enema has to be taken with 'berium'. As my intestines were not able to bear second enema, I declined. But because they were insistent, that process was gone through. X-ray was taken [..] that had [a] bad effect on my intestine and pain aggravated. So, there is intense pain. In the photo the 'spasms' which are in the bowels are seen. There is no medicine for it here.³⁹

Although his digestive and intestinal problems worsened considerably he remained cheerful. He wrote to Maniben: ‘Do not worry about me. I am in a position to make myself comfortable. I have given up cereals and grain forever. I live on fruits, bananas, milk and vegetables. I have asked for cooker so there is no difficulty. I take tomatoes and bananas.’⁴⁰ He constantly worried about his children though. His letters in 1943 and 1944 were full of advice to his grown-up children about prison life and their health. ‘You have no experience of such a life so you have to take care of your health. Utmost precaution should be taken while taking food. Eat less than your appetite,’⁴¹ he said in a missive to Dahyabhai in January 1943. He also wrote several times about Maniben being tortured by the British by keeping her in Surat jail which was ‘like a dungeon, a dumping ground. There is no convenience and proper food is not available. The place is full of garbage. Mosquitoes are in abundance. At a place where no woman can be kept, she has been kept since many days.’⁴² He also wrote to his grandson Vipin asking him, once, to focus on studying Sanskrit.

It was not jail time that later devastated Patel during those years but something else—a deal, a pact negotiated by famed lawyer and senior Congress leader Bhulabhai Desai with Liaquat Ali Khan, Muslim League leader and close aide of Jinnah. The pact spoke of a joint Indian government run by the Congress and the Muslim League with five members each. Gandhi who had initially blessed Bhulabhai’s talks with the League was appalled. In the end the pact was denied by Jinnah and Liaquat Ali and was met with furious reactions from the jailed Congress leadership. But through it Jinnah got what he wanted—equality in British assessment with the far larger and all-India-encompassing Congress.

Much had happened in the world by the time the Congressmen were released: Hitler was dead, Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been devastated by atom bombs, and due to the British government’s policy of diverting food grain to soldiers more than 2 million people had died of starvation in a catastrophic famine in Bengal in 1943.

Soon Bose would be dead, reportedly in a plane crash, but his army, the Indian National Army (INA), had fought the British valiantly near Kohima

in today's Nagaland. Within months of the release of the Congress leaders, the great trial of the INA men would begin in Delhi and would so inflame passions around the country that soldiers in the British Indian navy would rise in revolt, including in one famous incident in February 1946 at the Bombay harbour.

It is important to note here that it was not only among the naval cadre that the urge for freedom had started to surface openly but even members of the Royal Indian Air Force wrote to Patel in November 1945 saying,

Contrary to the current prevailing notions which put a slur on even the good intentions and nationalistic outlook of a great majority of Indian forces—in particular air force personnel, we would like to emphasize that we are not lagging behind anybody in the race for the attainment of freedom. The circumstances under which we live make us conscious of only one thing—*independence*, but gagged [...] Patriotism is not a commodity which can be paid for and assimilated. It is an inner urge and longing of a soul which makes conscious of one's country's status in the eyes of the comity of nations.⁴³

With their letter, the air force personnel sent a contribution of rupees two hundred and ninety to the Sardar.

This context is important for what happened next because it is crucial to understand that it was not only the moral power of non-violence and the relentless personal sacrifice of the Congress leaders but also the Britishers' fear of losing complete control once the soldiers started to mutiny that led to India winning freedom within eighteen months of the naval revolt at the Bombay docks. The British had forgotten neither the bloodbath of 1857, nor that they were a war-weary naval power which ran the empire with a handful of officers. If the Indian soldiers mutinied, there would be a massacre. The terror of the consequences of a sweeping revolt and a mass uproar meant that in the most famous of the INA trials of soldiers Prem Sahgal, Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon and Shah Nawaz Khan, the British Indian Army Commander-in-Chief Claude Auchinleck finally had to commute the life sentences of the three men.

'We will not wait long,' Patel had threatened soon after his release from prison on 15 June 1945.⁴⁴ And he did not have to.



TEN

‘MY LIFE’S WORK IS ABOUT TO BE OVER DO NOT SPOIL IT.’

The trial of the INA soldiers was the last time the flags of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League would rise together in united protest. From this point on, relations between Jinnah and the Congress leaders would grow even more strained, with Patel becoming a figure of especially vehement hatred for the League leaders.

There is an insightful aside from Lord Mountbatten’s papers about the difficult rehabilitation of INA soldiers into the Indian mainstream security forces which is a good counter to the usual purely heroic image. To find employment for former INA soldiers an anti-smuggling force was created comprising mostly INA men.

The force was armed but not properly disciplined. The first time the force got into the news was when two drunk members of it stopped the car of one Professor Abdul Bari, President of the Provincial Congress Committee, and shot him dead. It was quite a family party as Abdul Bari’s driver was also an INA man and ‘Major-General’ Shah Nawaz of the INA was sent down to investigate.¹

As a result of this fiasco, the anti-smuggling group was disbanded.

On 18 June 1945, just three days after his release from prison, Patel was seen objecting to the British government’s—and the Muslim League’s—

definition of who the Congress represented: ‘Congress is not a sectional organisation. It represents Indians belonging to all creeds and races. It can be and has been represented by Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Parsi presidents.’²

After ‘Quit India’, Patel declared that he was now demanding that the British ‘Quit Asia’.³ It was he who predicted that with the departure of the British, other European-ruled bits of India would also soon be free.

Japan may have been defeated by the use of the atom bomb but it has smashed the ego of the Whites. At present entire Asia is burning. Europeans shall have to leave entire Asia. Till they leave Asia, there is not going to be peace in the world. I go ahead and say that after quitting India, Europeans should quit Asia [. . .] When I tell Europeans to quit Asia, then somebody says that in our country Goa, Daman and Diu are also ruled by Europeans. But I say that once number one is erased, automatically zeroes are going to be erased.⁴

Instead, the viceroy Lord Wavell organized a joint meeting of all the stakeholders in Shimla, to whose cool climes the Raj retreated in summer. The offer on the table from the British, once again, was joint electorates: Hindus, Muslims and the so-called lower castes.

The Congress was coaxed into accepting the proposals but Jinnah would not budge from his demand: Only the League would have the right to choose Muslim candidates.

But the Congress could not, and would not, accept that. Doing so would be tantamount to admitting that the Congress was not a party that could represent Muslims. How could the Congress leadership which had not only won many votes from Muslim constituencies but also had Muslim leaders like Azad accept that?

In Azad’s memoirs there is a delightful anecdote which I feel is almost a comic illustration of the quarrels about who should represent which community and why. Sir Evan Jenkins, private secretary to the viceroy Lord Wavell, once introduced a lady to Azad as ‘a proficient Arab scholar’. Azad tried to speak in Arabic with the lady and

[F]ound that the poor lady’s knowledge of Arabic did not extend beyond ‘nam’ [yes] and ‘yowa’ [no]. I then asked her in English why the private secretary thought her to be a

fluent Arabic speaker. She said that she had been in Baghdad for some months and in the dinner party last night, she had told some of the invitees that the Arab used the expression ‘ajib-ajib’ whenever he was surprised. She laughingly added that this had obviously impressed the guests and given them the impression that she was an Arabic scholar.⁵

Patel believed that the British were playing a double game—pacifying the Congress with deals while stoking the League not to accept them. In August 1945, Patel said memorably,

Englishmen talk of Hindu-Muslim conflict but who has thrust that responsibility on its head? If they are sincere, they should handover the reins of government either to the League or Congress [...] But if the policy of the government is to do nothing till the communal tangle is solved, the conflict between the Congress and the government will continue. If I am allowed to rule over Britain for a week, I will create such differences of opinion in Great Britain that England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland would quarrel forever. So, it is not proper to find an excuse and differences like these and to cover the real issue!⁶

In the list of members that the Congress suggested for the executive council for any future government of India had only two Hindu names, one Muslim, one Christian and one Parsi. Azad wrote:

This proves, if proof be needed, that Congress was not a Hindu organisation. It may be said that the Hindus, who constituted the majority community of India would object to such a proposal but be it said to their credit that the Hindus of India stood solidly behind the Congress and did not waver.⁷

The list prepared by Lord Wavell had four names apart from the five each that the Congress and the League had suggested (all the nominees in the League’s list were Muslims of course) and the name of Khizar Hayat Khan, the premier of Punjab, who had taken charge of the Unionist party from Sikandar Hayat Khan. The Congress said they had no problems with Khizar Hayat Khan being part of the council.

But this incensed Jinnah. Under no circumstances would he accept that there would be two Muslim members in the council not nominated by him. If that happened, how would the League claim that they were the sole representatives of the Muslims in India?

Azad wrote:

If therefore the conference had not broken down because of Jinnah's opposition, the result would have been that Muslims who constituted only about 25 per cent of the total population of India would have had seven representatives in a council of fourteen. This is evidence of the generosity of the Congress and also throws in lurid light the stupidity of the Muslim League. The League was supposed to be the guardian of Muslim interests and yet it was because of its opposition that the Muslims of India were denied a substantial share in the government of undivided India.⁸

Journalist Durga Das met Jinnah in Shimla and noted that Patel had been right to suspect a British hand in the League's rejection. He wrote:

Why, in the hour of the League's triumph, having won parity with the Congress, should Jinnah have dragged it back from the threshold of power? On the face of it, his recalcitrance seemed pointless. But his real aim was known only to a few insiders. He was expected to announce his final decision on the viceroy's proposals to the press at his hotel lounge. A few moments earlier, he had, however, received a message from the 'cell' of British civil servants in Shimla, which was in tune with the diehards in London that if Jinnah stepped out of the talks he would be rewarded with Pakistan.

Durga Das wrote that he actually met Jinnah at this point in time and the Muslim League leader was convinced that he had been promised Pakistan.

As Jinnah emerged from his meeting with the press and entered his lift to go upstairs to his suite, I joined him. I asked him why he had spurned the Wavell plan when he had won his point of parity for the League with the Congress. His reply stunned me for a moment: 'Am I a fool to accept this when I am offered Pakistan on a platter?' After painstaking enquiries, I learned from high official and political sources that a member of the viceroy's executive council had sent a secret message to Jinnah through the League contacts he had formed.⁹

As Mushirul Hasan has written, '[T]he colonial government's conciliatory policy towards the Muslim League bore fruit during the second world war, and stiffened Mohammad Ali Jinnah's resolve to achieve his Muslim homeland.'¹⁰

The League, Jinnah and his colleagues believed, was the only thing that would protect Muslims from a Hindu Raj after Independence. No matter how many times Gandhi explained that, 'India is indivisible. There can be no swaraj without Hindu-Muslim unity. Jinnah objects to the expression

Ram Rajya, by which I mean not Hindu Raj but divine raj, insaf raj,¹¹ where justice will prevail between man and man,'¹² it would not be enough.

But the results of the 1946 council elections that followed would render false the Congress's claims of holistically representing Muslims. Both the Congress and the Muslim League went to the polls with Muslim party presidents—Azad with the Congress and Jinnah with the League.

Unfortunately for the Congress, the electorate did not quite get the message that the party was trying to send. When the results were tallied, the League had, in essence, swept the Muslim vote. It had won a third of the electoral seats being contested across India and emerged the undisputed winner in Punjab, Sindh and Bengal—all the areas, in fact, that would go on to constitute Pakistan.

The non-Muslim vote was solidly with the Congress, which won 56 seats in the Central Assembly and 930 in the provinces, but the League obtained all 30 Muslim seats in the Central Assembly and 427 out of the 507 seats in the provinces. The also-ran party of 1937 was, in 1946, Congress's principal challenger and unquestionably the qaum's voice.¹³

How had Jinnah managed this transformation? 'Communal problem has become most complicated. There is not a single indication that it will be solved. Nobody wants India to be partitioned. But a bulk of Muslims are misled,' Patel noted darkly in September 1945.¹⁴

He was mistaken. Jinnah's victory had come from astute strategic preparation and groundwork during a time when almost all the top Congress leadership were in prison.

The League's success with the Muslim vote in Punjab is the most illustrative example of how Jinnah built his party from the ground up. The League faced a formidable opponent in the multi-ethnic Unionist Party (Punjab) led by stalwarts Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan and Sir Chhotu Ram. Together they had woven an intricate follower base comprising Hindus and Muslims, the Jat and Gujjar communities, traders and agriculturists, and had even won the support of the pirs or the influential Sufi Muslim clergy of the region who were respected by both Muslims and Hindus.

By 1942, however, Sikandar Hayat Khan was dead. Chhotu Ram died in 1945. And with them died the Jinnah–Sikandar Pact which, though controversial, had provided some sort of balance in the ties between the two parties in the Punjab.

Jinnah had briefly allied himself with the Unionist Party in 1937, in order to gain Punjabi backing for the Muslim League's position at the all-India level. But in 1944 the Unionists and Muslim League had split in the Punjab, in part over the League's support for the concept of Pakistan. This had left the League with relatively little support in the Punjab Assembly. It was thus essential to Jinnah's all-India position, as well as to his call for Pakistan, that he establish in the 1946 elections a claim for the League to speak for Punjab's Muslims.¹⁵

The war was an additional propaganda tool—many had suffered great deprivation during the war, and many needed to be told that someone could be blamed for it.

The Punjab election campaign of 1946 in fact revolved around a welter of issues deployed by the Muslim League to mobilize opposition to the Unionists. As Ian Talbot has argued, the League made extensive use of economic grievances that had developed during World War II, including rationing, shortages, bureaucratic high-handedness, and a government food policy that controlled prices that rural producers could get for their grain. The grievances of soldiers demobilized in 1945 also provided the League with arguments to use against a Unionist Ministry that had been in power throughout the war.¹⁶

The field was now open for Jinnah and his workers. It would not be an easy goal. They had to win rural Punjab as most of the Muslim seats (75 out of 85) were based there. But this had been the heartland of the Unionist Party since its formation in 1923. The party had the loyalty of not only the rich landowners and many of the people who worked on those lands, but also influential spiritual leaders, the local pirs, who controlled the Sufi and other communities in the region. In 1937, the League lacked strong networks and grassroots-level organization in the countryside and many towns, and it fared even worse because Jinnah had failed to tie up Unionist Party support in mid-1936. But that changed by 1946. It had spread far and wide. Since the summer of 1944, the League had been running extensive campaigns notching up many 2 anna grassroots members. By the end of 1945, the

Muslim League had intensified its efforts, even winning support from several Unionist Party assembly members. For instance, in districts like Jhang and Sheikhupura, all the Unionist Party members moved to the Muslim League. While the Unionist Party did fight back and retain some of its bases, the League was able to make inroads even into the pir networks which brought it precious grassroots votes that it had not received in the past. In some places, it was the elites who did not want the workers to get organized under a League banner.

In such areas as the Rawalpindi District where its organizational activity was intense, this was activated more by the hope that it would force the Unionist Party's landlord supporters to reconsider their attitude to its overtures than in the belief that success could be achieved thus by passing the traditional political structure in the countryside. The League's ambivalent attitude towards its grassroots development was manifested in the attitude of the Nawab of Mamdot [the largest landowner in Punjab and president of the Muslim League in Punjab] who refused to allow the establishment of primary League branches on his Ferozepore Estate.¹⁷

Many of the top landlords of the area had joined the League by 1946 including members of influential families like the Hayats, the Noons and the Daultanas from which the Unionist Party had traditionally drawn its leadership.

They wielded immense social and economic power in their home districts and amongst their biraderi throughout the province. As such their loss constituted a crippling blow for the Unionist Party from which it was never able fully to recover. It had also to face the setback of having lost the support of many of the province's leading pirs and sajjada nashins.¹⁸ The Unionist Party's success in the 1937 elections had been based on the joint support of the leading landlords and pirs.¹⁹

But this had been lost in many areas by 1946.

Leading pir families such as those of the pirs of Jalapur, Jahanian Shah, Rajoa and Shah Jiwana which had represented the Unionist Party since 1923 were supporting the League. So, also, were such pirs as Pir Taunsa and Pir Golra who had previously been less politically active but had nevertheless always provided the Unionist Party with valuable tacit support. Pirs played an important part in the League's success because of their immense spiritual and temporal sway over their numerous followers in the villages. The League achieved its greatest electoral success in such districts as Multan, Jhang, Jhelum and Karnal, where it had obtained the support of the leading pirs.²⁰

By the time the League started campaigning in Punjab, the dream of Pakistan had been articulated clearly—though, as we will see, it had a somewhat cloudier territorial imagination.

In the last decade before 1947, the Muslim League mobilized a range of symbols that appealed to the ‘national’ ideal, including the flag, an anthem, and the mobilizing of Muslim League National Guards. Ian Talbot has argued persuasively about how the Muslim League National Guards adopted trappings symbolically associated with the state, helping thus to define the Muslim League, like a state, as ‘both the expression and guarantor of the cultural identity of the Indian Muslims’.²¹

Rituals like flag hoisting were meant to give to the ordinary Muslim supporter of Pakistan a sense of reality, of contour to an idea that did not exist on the ground.

[Ian Talbot] describes the symbolism of the public flag hoisting session at one of the Muslim League’s annual sessions [at Patna] as intended to affirm the Muslim League’s claim on the loyalties of individual Muslims as a result of the Pakistan ‘national’ ideology. ‘Those who saluted the flag,’ [Talbot] suggests, ‘demonstrated their “citizenship” of Pakistan, although the Muslim state had yet to achieve its fulfillment.’²²

The support of the pirs brought a contradictory dynamic to the promise of Pakistan. The problem of course was on the point of geography. Sufism and the pir-domes were all tied to definitive ideas of location—it was at the dargahs or shrines where the spiritual power of the pirs resided. They could not be moved and it was unclear how many would be a part of Pakistan, if and when the promised land was ever carved out.

Sufi authority in India was intimately associated with its localized manifestations; indeed, the influence of Sufism was rooted precisely in the placement of Sufis at the intersection of the particular and the universal. While deriving barakat [blessedness] from sacred ancestry and from their evocation of the pristine community of the Prophet and his successors, the actual exercise of most Sufi influence in India was preeminently local, linked specifically to the particularities of genealogy, and often bound to particular localities through the blessing attached to Sufi tombs. Sufi authority in fact dramatized the ways in which participation in a larger moral community also entailed, inevitably, the mediation of the local and the particular.²³

Of course, the Sufi shrines had people coming to them from vast distances. And word about them had also been spread in printed form and through oral tales but

[T]he very structure of Sufi authority suggested the ways that territory gained blessedness through the operation of sacred genealogy and through the distribution of sites of charisma that transcended any fixed territorial boundaries. There is little way to make sense of Sufi support for Pakistan if we were to imagine that Sufis foresaw Pakistan in terms of the partition of India's territory. How, after all, could Pakpattan be more blessed than Ajmer, or Golra more blessed than Gulbarga?²⁴

As Sardar Patel succinctly put it in September 1945, ‘Today the League propagates that in Congress Hindus dominate. Muslim League is shouting for Pakistan. Nobody is told what Pakistan is. It [the League] cries for the moon.’²⁵

But during the elections of 1946, Jinnah successfully subsumed all these contradictions with the deft management of communities on the ground and picked up all the vote banks in Punjab that had been left rudderless after the deaths of the tallest leaders in the Unionist Party. To the landlords and the pirs, the Muslim League added many of the 8,00,000 men that Punjab had supplied towards the war and who were struggling to find their feet after the war was over. There was everything, then, in the promises of Jinnah: feudal ties, economic promises and a powerful overarching religious lure. As an example of the kind of diversity that Jinnah deployed, consider that on one hand the League held up the Quran as an identity tool to define itself as the sole protector or representative of Muslims, and on the other ‘the high-water mark in the development of the League’s economic critique of the Unionists came with the publication of a provincial Muslim League manifesto in late 1944 whose wording was strongly influenced by the Punjab Communists’.²⁶

Sardar Patel had a fair idea about what the results of the elections might be. On 21 December 1945, he wrote to Maulana Azad, pointing out how badly the Congress was messing up in Punjab.

I have already sent a cheque of Rs. 50,000 but I am afraid we are wasting good money for nothing and the Congress reputation in the end will suffer badly. I am enclosing herewith

a press cutting from which you will see what type of candidates are being put up by the Ahrar Party²⁷ in the Punjab for whom they want our help. From this cutting you will see that immediately the League candidates' nominations were declared invalid, the Ahrar candidates, who remained on the scene and whose nominations were declared valid, joined the Muslim League. It is very sad that such candidates are chosen to oppose the League.²⁸

Patel rues in this note that because the campaign had been very badly handled, the Congress now faced a serious defeat.

In any case it is very unwise that we should be mixed in such a shady transaction [...] I am afraid we have mishandled the whole Punjab situation [...] I do not wish to blame anybody but I do feel that if we continue to handle affairs in the same fashion, we will suffer a serious defeat in spite of huge expenditure and good deal of time and energy being spent after it.²⁹

That Patel's concerns were justified is clear from the propaganda the Muslim League used in Punjab to construct the rhetoric of a moral imagery of Pakistan which was often not against Hindus. Instead, the moral necessity of Pakistan was rooted rhetorically in opposition to a very different Other—the spectre of internal dissension and disorder among Muslims themselves. Far more than the danger of Hindu domination, a vision of divided, false and misguided Muslim loyalties stalked the rhetoric of these election posters. Indeed, the existence of internal division gave the rhetorical fear of Hindu domination its real edge. It was, in fact, the reality of internal divisions among Muslims that gave the demand for Pakistan, a symbol of a united moral community, its most powerful resonance. The discussion of this dissension and disorder took several forms. On one level, divisions among Muslims were overtly political and epitomized by the League's opponents in its election contests. Whether in direct appeals from Jinnah, or otherwise, election posters attacked the policies and positions of the Muslim groups opposing the Muslim League in the Punjab—most notably the Ahrar, the Khaksars, the Muslim members of the Congress, and, of course, the Unionist Party. The structure of separate electorates, of course, encouraged the League to focus its most pointed rhetoric on these Muslim competitors. But League attacks on these parties focused not just

on their competing policies but on the more fundamental threat they posed to the unity of the Muslim community. Election flyers repeated nothing more frequently than that the Muslim League was the sole representative political organization of India's Muslims. In the Muslim League's rhetoric, support for this claim and support for Pakistan were in fact inseparable. Only a 100 per cent League election victory, one flyer said, would allow Jinnah, 'our behtarin wakil [best advocate, or lawyer] to negotiate Pakistan'.³⁰

It is not that the Congress did badly in the 1946 Punjab polls. It soaked up a substantial portion of the Hindu vote from the Unionists as the League swept the Muslim vote. When the results of the 1946 elections came, the results were starkly split. The Congress had won the overwhelming Hindu vote, and the League, Muslim.

What got decimated, also, was the Congress's aim to project itself as the party for all Indians. The only silver lining in this scenario was that the Congress and its allies had won in the mostly Muslim North-West Frontier Province.

Patel had a dim view of Jinnah, and advised Gandhi not to initiate talks with the leader of the Muslim League even though the Aga Khan had personally requested the Sardar to do so.

I said: We, i.e., the Congress, would not like to initiate talks with him [Jinnah] for he abuses us in season and out of season; and, in fact, he does not genuinely wish for a settlement. To this, he [the Aga Khan] said: Jinnah is now in a better mood. I rejoined: I utterly disbelieve it. As we have decided not to have any truck with him, he might be making such a show in order to tempt us.³¹

Despite the animosity between them, Patel and Jinnah would work together, in a sense, soon. When the naval revolt took place, both asked the Hindus and Muslims among the soldiers who had mutinied to lay down arms and surrender—which the naval men did, but not before 256 people were killed. Even during the revolt, Patel and Nehru differed with the mutineers seeking help from the radical socialists and communists. Aruna Asaf Ali, an ardent revolutionary, suggested that Nehru would be the best person to resolve the

situation but Patel wrote to Nehru saying that he should not intervene. In the end, both Patel and Nehru condemned the violence, but there was little doubt that, unlike Nehru who was far more sympathetic, Patel had little patience for such (what he believed to be) futile actions. In this, recent historians believe, Patel was probably wrong. The revolt by the Royal Indian Navy ‘convinced the British that the sword arm of the Raj could no longer be relied upon to protect it.’³² British fears were also stoked by Americans who were worried that such a revolt had clear signs of communist inputs.³³ Patel had painstakingly built a countrywide movement based on Gandhian non-violence and feared that this sort of thing would destroy the moral and structural framework of the movement, giving the British just the opportunity they wanted to delay independence.³⁴ The Sardar laid the blame for the violence straight at Aruna Asaf Ali’s door, writing to Gandhi, ‘Aruna has thrown a spark and is fanning the flames.’³⁵ His dispute with Azad which had continued through the elections had also reached a pinnacle in early 1946. He wrote to Gandhi in February, saying, ‘I am finding it hard to carry on with Maulana. He is behaving as a despot [. . .] So, for me the things are becoming unbearable. Time has come for frank talk.’³⁶

Meanwhile in England the government had changed hands, from Churchill’s Tory party to Attlee’s Labour Party and, as Durga Das noted, Jinnah’s hope of getting Pakistan easily grew shaky. ‘But he still had allies in the British and Muslim members of the civil service, and he told me he counted on Nehru to give him the opening he needed to attain his goal,’ he wrote.³⁷

A different kind of opening came soon enough for Jinnah and the Congress. Britain, under Attlee, declared that India had a right to elect for freedom. Attlee declared:

The tide of nationalism was running very fast in India and that it was the time for clear and definite action [. . .] We are mindful of the rights of minorities and the minorities should be able to live free from fear. On the other hand, we cannot allow a minority to place their veto on the advance of the majority.³⁸

Jinnah immediately protested saying that the Muslims were not a minority but a ‘nation’.³⁹

In March 1946, a three-member Cabinet Mission Plan Committee arrived in Delhi. The committee was led by Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the secretary of state for India. The other members were First Lord of the Admiralty A.V. Alexander and the much-maligned Sir Stafford Cripps, whom we have met before. Cripps was back for yet another shot at resolving the India crisis. Cripps said at the start of the dialogue that the committee had no plans of its own, no ready-made solution: ‘We really have no scheme either on paper or in our heads, so its non-disclosure means nothing except that it is not there, and I hope that will be quite clear to everyone.’⁴⁰

The Cabinet Mission Plan trio, with their three-tiered plan, tried many ways, some most creative, to find a middle path between the Congress and the League—though an exasperated Gandhi once told them to just back one side and get on with it!

One of the questions was—what would a future constitution of an independent India look like? ‘What the Congress had in mind was a federal government with a limited number of compulsory federal subjects such as defence, communications and foreign affairs, and autonomous provinces in which would vest residuary powers’⁴¹ but Gandhi and Jinnah could not agree on the nature of the proposed Pakistan. At the same time Gandhi refused to accept the two-nation theory. The Muslims of India were all converts, ‘they were all descendants of Indian-born people’, so where, asked Gandhi, was the question of two nations? The idea of Pakistan based on this reasoning, according to him, was an ‘untruth’.⁴² To keep the country together, Gandhi was even ready to let Jinnah lead the first government of free India.

Jinnah demurred. In his vision there had never been an India. It had always been an aggregation of states, he said, which had been per force brought together as one entity by the British.⁴³ And even then, the local princes ruled their provinces while maintaining their allegiance to the British.

The differences in India [Jinnah argued] were far greater than those between European countries and were of a vital and fundamental character. Even Ireland provided no parallel. The Muslims had a different conception of life from the Hindus. They admired different qualities in their heroes; they had a different culture based on Arabic and Persian instead of Sanskrit origins. Their social customs were entirely different.⁴⁴

The effort to keep India together needed a ‘steel frame’, claimed Jinnah, which had been provided by the British until then, but where would this frame come from when they left? Therefore, according to him, ‘there was no other solution but the division of India. There were in India two totally different and deeply rooted civilizations side by side and the only solution was to have two “steel frames”, one in Hindustan and one in Pakistan.’⁴⁵

The conflict had spread not only among the distinct groups but also within the Congress. In April 1946, writer D.N. Banerjee complained about Nehru in a letter to Patel.

With great sorrow and anguish, I beg to invite your kind attention to the statement which Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru made [. . .] in an exclusive interview to Reuter’s [sic] correspondent in New Delhi. This statement by a person of Panditji’s position has really alarmed us here. Read between the lines, the statement is bound to encourage, as has actually been the case here, the partitionists in India in their intransigence. Panditji has practically accepted the principle of partition and given away the case for United India.⁴⁶

In May 1946, all the debating parties moved to Shimla to take yet another stab at untangling what had become an intractable problem. Was it possible to find some sort of middle path which would allow for independent India to have a government that was in charge of foreign affairs, defence and communications, and two sets of provinces, one predominantly Muslim, and the other, Hindu?

The act of agreeing to meet on this proposal does not suggest that they were anywhere close to reaching a solution.

Needless to say, the central government in this scheme of things would have had very restrictive functions, and many nation-building activities, and many matters of inter-provincial co-ordination, would have fallen outside its scope. In spite of this big flaw, the scheme had to be accepted by Nehru and other Congress leaders only because there was no other alternative. A strong centre was anathema to Muslim League.⁴⁷

Talk of a central government that only controlled foreign trade, defence and communications was in the air, leaving the states maximum amount of freedom in a federal structure. But Nehru had grave misgivings about such an idea.

Nehru believed that the so-called three subjects would inevitably bring in many other subjects in their train. Putting his own gloss on the topics assigned to the centre under the above plan, Nehru wondered, while speaking at the All India Congress Committee which met at Bombay on July 6 and 7, 1946, as to how foreign affairs could be carried on without foreign trade. He thus asserted: ‘It is obvious so far as I am concerned that foreign affairs include foreign trade. It is quite absurd to talk of foreign affairs without foreign trade, foreign economic policy and exchange etc.⁴⁸

This sort of interlinkage was true even for communications and defence, Nehru argued. Defence and communications overlapped all kinds of industries. The central government was to raise revenue but the crucial powers of taxation were unclear in the Cabinet Mission Plan. In Nehru’s vision, a strong central government was a prerequisite for India’s future growth and development and the ambiguity of the Cabinet Mission Plan annoyed him.

At a press conference held in Bombay on July 10, 1946, Nehru made it clear that he was not satisfied with the arrangements suggested by the Cabinet Mission that the future central government in India should have only defence, communications, external affairs and finance and nothing else.⁴⁹

Patel too was highly sceptical about the Cabinet Mission Plan and its proposals, as indeed he was about Jinnah’s motivations. In a letter written in April 1946 to Nalinaksha Sanyal, he said,

I do not think that the Muslim League or any group of people in the League are in the mood to have a just and proper settlement of the communal question. The League people will do nothing or will be able to do nothing against the will of its leader whose declared policy is to follow all the tactics of the German Fuhrer.⁵⁰

Right before the conference in Shimla, Patel is found alleviating the fears of someone who had written to him suggesting that the Congressmen might just capitulate under League pressure.

No decisions in this conference can be taken by votes, and therefore, it is absurd to think of Hindu-Muslim proportion or to imagine that any concession is made to the Muslim League in this matter . . . and to think that Hindus are Gandhites [sic], and therefore, they may tolerate whatever injustice may be done to them is absurd. Gandhiji does not tolerate any injustice nor does he teach the Hindus or anybody else to do so. His whole policy of life is to resist evil and if the Hindus are Gandhiites, they would certainly resist evil or injustice from any quarter.⁵¹

Others were echoing the thoughts. When Patel was in Shimla, the eminent barrister Sir Chimanlal Setalwad wrote to him from Bombay, ‘The trend of the negotiations, as appearing in the Cabinet Mission so far published, is disquieting. To have a weak and emasculated Centre with only defence, customs and communications and vest the residuary powers in the provinces is extremely undesirable.’⁵²

Patel replied:

Allow me to inform you that my views are entirely in accord with your [sic] and you may rest assured that nothing will be accepted merely to secure the immediate elimination of British Power from India which would endanger the future security and well-being of the country. As far as the Congress is concerned, it will not be a consenting party to the creation of a weak or loose Centre or to any arrangement of dividing India into religious groups and handing over the present provinces of Bengal and Punjab, much less Assam, to the so-called Pakistan area.⁵³

In the end, it was Cripps who devised a plan that pleased everyone—and no one—at the same time, and ensured that the country would, in fact, have to be divided.

His plan had a central government in charge of defence, foreign affairs and communication, and the provision for the provinces, which controlled all other matters autonomously, to form ‘groups’. This naturally made way for the creation of two major groups—Hindu and Muslim—filled with all kinds of internal contradictions (Where would Assam go? Did the North-West Frontier Province have to go with the Muslim group?), which indicated that the proposal was destined to fail. But for now, both the Congress and the Muslim League could claim victory. The Congress was pleased that there was no mention of partition, and the League that, for all practical purposes, the creation of the Muslim group gave them Pakistan.

‘The idea of Pakistan has been reservedly condemned and rejected,’⁵⁴ wrote Patel in May 1946. In June, 1946, he was validating the expulsion of a Muslim member of the Congress on grounds that he supported the division of the country: ‘The Congress stands for Hindu-Muslim unity and that policy has always been advocated by the Congress. What Mian Saheb wanted was that Congress should accept the Muslim League’s demand of Pakistan and it was impossible for the Congress to do so.’⁵⁵

In the end, it was Sardar Patel’s shrewd acceptance, on behalf of the Congress, of one version of the Cabinet Mission Plan ahead of the League which prevented Viceroy Wavell from inviting Jinnah to form the interim government, much to Jinnah’s outraged astonishment. Examining the various, murky, versions of what transpired during that summer in Shimla is to see an elaborate charade, a multi-tiered game of double-cross where each side is trying to outplay the other. So much so that the viceroy Lord Wavell at one point felt that the Cabinet Mission Plan Committee was essentially betraying the Congress!

In a note for the Cabinet Mission, dated June 25, he alluded to the alteration in the Declaration to be signed by the Members of the Constituent Assembly and said, ‘It seems to me therefore that the reassurance apparently given to Mr. Gandhi last night may subsequently lead to an accusation of bad faith on our part.’⁵⁶

Thankfully, Gandhi had a Patel who had anticipated this kind of bad faith from the British and indeed the League. But after all the intrigue, the British, the Congress and the League did come to some sort of an accord—even though only begrudgingly on Jinnah’s part.

The question for the Congress now was who would lead any interim government that might be formed—who would be nominated as the prime minister of India?

It would have to be the man who would be the next president of the Congress and there were several contenders. Azad who had hoped for another term as Congress president—though his prison sentence and the war had extended his term already for six years. J.B. Kripalani was in the fray. The most overwhelming support, however, was for Patel—twelve of

the fifteen state-level Congress committees had voted for him. Also, in spite of all his heroics for the party, he had had only one year-long stint as Congress president. He was clearly the most deserving. Wrote Durga Das:

Patel was the head of the Congress Parliamentary Board and the provincial Committees had expressed their preference for him as Azad's successor. But Gandhi felt Nehru would be a better instrument to deal with Englishmen as they would talk in a 'common idiom' (a remarkable testimony to this view was afforded by Lord Mountbatten in November 1968 while delivering the Nehru Memorial Lecture in Cambridge. Mountbatten said, 'I found myself more attracted by Nehru than anyone else. Having been educated at Harrow and Trinity and having lived so many of his formative years in England I found communication with him particularly easy and pleasant').⁵⁷

The story does not end here. Years later, the journalist approached Kripalani to ask why he—himself a candidate for the post—thought Gandhi chose Nehru. Kripalani answered:

Like all saints and holy people Gandhi wanted 'significant men' among his adherents. A legend had grown round the sacrifices made by the Nehrus for national freedom and Gandhi, therefore, preferred them [. . .] I knew Gandhi wanted Jawaharlal to be president for a year, and I made a proposal myself saying 'some Delhi fellows want Jawaharlal's name'. I circulated it to the members of the [Congress] Working Committee to get their endorsement.⁵⁸

Kripalani would live to regret this.

I played this mischief. I am to blame. Patel never forgave me for that. He was a man of will and decision. You saw his face. It grew year by year in power and determination. After fifty years, a face reveals a man's full character.⁵⁹

Kripalani's assessment of Patel as well as Gandhi's opinion about Patel and Nehru was correct. Durga Das verified Gandhi's choice of Nehru instead of Patel later in 1946 by asking Gandhi directly. The Mahatma replied:

Jawahar is the only Englishman in my camp [. . .] Jawahar will not take second place. He is better known abroad than Sardar and will make India play a role in international affairs. Sardar will look after the country's affairs. They will be like two oxen yoked to the government cart. One will need the other and both will pull together.⁶⁰

As we have noted earlier, there came a moment in that fateful summer of 1946 when Gandhi gave Nehru a chance to do (what at the very least symbolically might have been) the right thing—make way for Patel to become the Congress president because in a democratic, all-India party, the will of the constituent state members ought to be respected. And overwhelmingly the provincial Congress committees had chosen Patel. The Mahatma's suggestion was met with silence by Nehru. Gandhi then did what he had done again and again with Patel—he asked Patel to sacrifice. And the Sardar did, once more, unquestioningly.⁶¹

Patel was seventy-one years old. Stepping away from the race at that point, he knew he would never be Congress president (again) or prime minister of India.

At least one historian has analysed that of the several reasons (including respect for Gandhi, a natural lack of cut-throat ambition, and an innate spirit of sacrifice) for Patel stepping down without a murmur, a significant one was the thought that, if denied the pole position, Nehru would refuse to cooperate, and in fact might turn to open rebellion ‘which would bitterly divide India’.⁶²

The denial of Patel is one of the open secrets of the Indian freedom movement. Even though it has been documented, so little has been discussed about Patel and his life in seventy years of independent Indian history that this incident has never been adequately analysed or highlighted.

All sorts of pertinent and tough questions arise from these conversations and comments. These can no longer be evaded just by saying, Oh, Patel was too old or too ill. He was, indeed, old and he was ill, but the same elderly, ailing man proceeded to calmly, and with unflagging energy, traverse the length and breadth of India to stitch together the union by bringing the princely states into the geography of the newly independent country. Clearly then, he had all the capabilities and the stamina needed to become Congress president another time, if not the first prime minister of independent India. Clearly, the *option* existed. Any honest reading of history must, at the very least, admit that. That it was not taken is a different matter, and there could be (and are) myriad justifications for that but to

argue that the option itself just did not exist is disingenuous and does disservice to any real contemplation of the complex history of India's struggle for independence.

Patel possessed both the courage of renunciation and dignity not to leverage the threat that he felt Nehru might throw if refused—that of moving into an opposition role to the Congress. With majority support from the provincial Congress committees, there is no doubt that he would have managed a considerable following. But that had never been his way.

There was at least one person, one of Patel's closest colleagues, though, who thought side-lining the Sardar was a major mistake. Referring to the time when he suggested Nehru's name for Congress president in 1946, Azad wrote in his biography,

I have regretted no action of mine so much as the decision to withdraw from the presidentship of the Congress at this critical juncture. It was a mistake which I can describe in Gandhiji's words as one of Himalayan dimension. My second mistake was that when I decided not to stand myself I did not support Sardar Patel. We differed on many issues but I am convinced that if he had succeeded me as Congress president he would have seen that the Cabinet Mission Plan was successfully implemented. But it is unclear what shape or form this implementation would take.⁶³

The other point to raise here is about the role of class in the freedom movement. What does it say about a country, ostensibly fighting to free itself from the yoke of colonialism, where an elite education received in England (which, by the way, Patel too had) and the ability to appear like an Englishman are considered chief qualities in the first prime minister of the independent nation?

Nehru, by the way, confirmed that Gandhi was right about the younger man's Englishman-ness when he told Canadian-born economist John Kenneth Galbraith, 'You realise, Galbraith, I am the last Englishman to rule India.'⁶⁴ Galbraith of course also famously said, without a hint for irony, nor a tear for the more than two million people who had died in the Bengal famine, that 'I have no doubt whatever that if you had to have an imperial master, it better be England. It was the good fortune of all the countries that have been part of the British empire.'⁶⁵

It is for you to decide what to make of such Anglophilic and whether it was indeed suitable for independent India to break away from colonial rule only to be ruled by another, ‘the last’, ‘Englishman’. But for now, in our story, it might be enough to say only that there is no reason to believe Patel could not have become the Congress president in 1946 and subsequently the first prime minister of India, and if indeed he had taken office, no one would have suggested that India was, once again, at the very moment of its freedom, being ruled by an Englishman.

It is important to appreciate that Nehru’s prime ministership cannot merely be judged by the incidents and utterances noted above. A full analysis of the Nehruvian era has been attempted many times, and it is, in a sense, still a work in progress as new generations, and new research, throw up diverse ways of understanding the first years of independent India. However, for the scope of this book, the incidents ought not to be ignored, and should be considered in detail, and with care, when revisiting the way India won her freedom and the dramatis personae who brought about that momentous occasion. Once again, it is important to reiterate here that in spite of even this incident, a fundamental level of affection and respect remained between all three men. One palpable reason for this is of course that if you really think about it, these men had spent a very large part of their adult life mostly in each other’s company. Each one’s family life was dysfunctional at best—though Nehru did manage to have a deeply engaging relationship with his daughter. The relationship that they shared was the most important and definitive in their lives, and like many very difficult relationships, it stood the test of tough times and internecine betrayal.

Let us go back now to what Azad was saying—if Patel had succeeded him as Congress president, he would have ensured that the Cabinet Mission Plan was implemented successfully.

So, what happened to that plan?

Put simply, one public statement by Nehru soon after becoming Congress president destroyed the plan. In a statement issued after a meeting of the AICC, Nehru declared that

[T]he Congress idea of independence is certainly different from that of what the Muslim League and the Viceroy think [. . .] We agreed to go into the Constituent Assembly. We agreed to nothing else. True, we agreed to certain procedures for going into it. But we are absolutely free to act.⁶⁶

Absolutely free to act? But that is exactly what the Congress had agreed not to do. In fact, it had agreed to act only with painstakingly negotiated delicacy, tact and cooperation so that the country could remain undivided and non-violent, and still be free and governable.

Nehru's words had immediate impact on the already seething Jinnah. This, as the latter correctly pointed out, was not what had been agreed upon, and it essentially took away all the autonomy and balance between Hindu and Muslim interests that had been delicately negotiated to get the agreement of the Cabinet Mission Plan. When the British government dithered over his request for intervention, an outraged Jinnah declared that the Muslim League would take the only course left to it to ensure the formation of Pakistan. It would inflame a Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946.

On 19 July 1946, Jinnah announced:

What we have done today is the most historic act in our history. Never have we in the whole history of the League done anything except by the constitutional methods and constitutionalism. We have been attacked on two fronts—the British front and the Hindu front. Today we have said goodbye to constitutions and constitutional methods. Throughout the painful negotiations, the two parties with whom we bargained held a pistol at us; one with power and machine-guns behind it, and the other with non-cooperation and the threat to launch mass civil disobedience. This situation must be met. We also have a pistol.⁶⁷

In his speech Jinnah quoted the Persian poet Firdausi (who wrote Persia's great epic, the *Shahnama*), 'If you seek peace, we do not want war. But if you want war, we will accept it unhesitatingly.'⁶⁸

In fact, there is cause to believe, from the viceroy Lord Wavell's papers, for instance, that Jinnah never gave up on Pakistan even while accepting the Cabinet Mission Plan and had always wanted a five-year clause after which the partition would take place. At least one of Jinnah's close colleagues has argued (M.A.H. Ispahani in his 1967 book *Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah As I Knew*

Him) that ‘Jinnah began regretting having accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan within hours of doing so.’⁶⁹

In a letter from July 1946, Patel wrote about Nehru:

Though the president [Nehru] has been elected for the fourth time, he often acts with childlike innocence, which puts us all in great difficulties. We are passing through a critical period and our life’s work may either yield successful results or our hopes may all be dashed to pieces by sheer foolishness on our part [. . .] He has done many things recently which have caused us great embarrassment. His action in Kashmir, his interference in the Sikh election to the Constituent Assembly, his press conference immediately after the AICC are all acts of emotional insanity and it puts tremendous strain on us to set matters right.⁷⁰

For all of Nehru’s misadventures, Patel, with unique generosity, still expressed a certain exasperated affection for the younger man who had deprived him of the highest political prize, in the same letter.

In spite of all his innocent indiscretions, he has unparalleled enthusiasm and a burning passion for freedom which make him restless and drive him to a pitch of impatience where he forgets himself. All his actions are governed by a supreme consideration of reaching the cherished goal with electric speed. His mind has been exhausted with overwork and strain. He feels lonely and he acts emotionally and we have to bear with him in the circumstances.⁷¹

This letter is a glimpse into the complicated nature of the relationship between these men, especially Gandhi, Nehru and Patel, but also among many others in the freedom movement. Their ties, dense and delicate, are neither easy to comprehend, nor simple to analyse. No doubt there was enormous affection between them but there were also mighty tensions—anger, competition, frustration, enragement and even betrayal, but also striking sacrifice and renunciation at critical moments. Some, like Sardar Patel, were more selfless than others but at every step there is a deep understanding that a higher cause binds these men together. Without the greater ideal of freedom, men of such diverse and dazzling intellect who disagreed with each other constantly could perhaps never have stayed together on one platform—but they did, joined together by their common

commitment to a cause that was greater than their ambitions and emotions, their lives, even.

What happened next was, in a sense, the start of a new era of terror and violence in the national movement, but before we head to August 1946, it is important to understand what Patel means when he laments Nehru's actions in Kashmir. These actions would have ramifications not only for Patel and the Indian freedom movement, but also for the immediate history of India after Independence, and their echoes continue in the state of Jammu and Kashmir to this day.

In the prologue to the first volume (of ten) of his edited papers of Sardar Patel Durga Das wrote,

Kashmir is the only region of India which has a connected history dating back to the earliest times. Kalhana, its first historian, composed Rajatarangini [River of Kings] in Sanskrit verse in the 12th century AD [CE]. On account of the paucity of historical material relating to the Hindu period of India as a whole, this book has long attracted the attention of historians, European and Indian. Other writers took up the narrative where Kalhana left off and completed it up to the conquest of the Kashmir Valley by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1586.⁷²

Some of this void is being corrected today. Shonaleeka Kaul, historian and professor at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, says,

It has, for example, been maintained that because of her surrounding high mountain topography, the Valley of Kashmir was historically isolated from the rest of India and therefore developed a cultural insularity and uniqueness. It has also been assumed retroactively that Kashmiri culture, including the tradition of history-writing, was influenced by West Asia and Central Asia. However, all the cultural markers diagnostic of identity and mobility in early Kashmir from at least the 5th century BCE onwards for another two millennia—material culture, textual representations, foreign accounts, inscriptions, coins, language, art, religion, philosophy—attest overwhelmingly to Kashmir's Indic and Sanskritic identity and character.⁷³

Kaul wrote that Kashmiri culture also had deep connections with nearby regions like

Patna, Nalanda, Gaya, Banaras, Allahabad, Mathura, Malwa, Gauda [Bengal], till Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the far south. Here was cultural transmission and communication of astonishing reach! Kashmiris looked to these places for politics, trade,

education, asylum, employment, art, religion, philosophy, fashion [!], and pilgrimage, while people from different parts of India travelled to and settled in Kashmir for the same reasons. So massive and crucial was Kashmir's participation and presence in Indic affairs that by the second half of the first millennium CE, she had come to spearhead virtually all intellectual and cultural movements in the Indian subcontinent with trademark erudition and brilliance.⁷⁴

After the conquest of Akbar, his successors built striking gardens and chinar groves and palaces in Kashmir which became their summer abode. In 1750, the Afghan warlord Ahmed Shah Abdali invaded Kashmir. Upon being appealed to by the people of Kashmir, the Sikh ruler of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, sent his general Raja Gulab Singh who defeated the Afghan governor of Kashmir and, in time, founded the Dogra dynasty with Gulab Singh as the maharaja of Kashmir.

The winds of the Indian freedom struggle reached Kashmir in 1930 and threw up a young leader Muslim leader, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah. Abdullah formed a new party, the Muslim Conference, which began campaigning for democracy in the Himalayan state. The agitation of a Muslim party which sought greater representation in the Hindu king-ruled state government led to riots between Hindus and Muslims in 1931 with significant casualties among Hindus who were a minority in the state, especially in the valley of Kashmir.

By 1934, Kashmir had its own Praja Sabha—like some other princely states—and 6 per cent of the population, including women, got the right to vote. By the end of the decade, primarily with Abdullah's push, the Muslim Conference had become the National Conference to include 'all such people who desire to participate in this political struggle [...] irrespective of their caste, creed and religion'.⁷⁵ This resolution was carried even though a few prominent members of the Conference, including some who would move in the future to Pakistan, opposed it.

By 1942, despite Jinnah's attempts to woo him, Abdullah and his National Conference were firmly in the Congress camp with personal relationships with Nehru, Azad and others. In fact, Nehru, Azad and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan had attended a pro-democracy, anti-maharaja agitation

organized in May 1946 by the National Conference where Abdullah introduced a new slogan: Quit Kashmir. This immediately riled Jinnah who accused the agitation of ‘creating disorderly conditions in the state’.⁷⁶ This is one of the first times the Congress, especially Nehru, collided with Jinnah on Kashmir—it was, of course, merely the beginning of hostilities.

By this time, troubles between the Hindus and Muslims in the valley were already coming to a head with the Hindus supporting the maharaja and his administration, and the Muslims, led by Abdullah, opposing it.

Even though the state government banned his entry into Kashmir, in June 1946 Nehru returned to the state, the place where his family had originated from and with which he felt a special connection.

Even before going to the Himalayan state, Nehru gave a statement in Delhi on 26 May 1946 where he also claimed that a mosque had been attacked by the maharaja’s government.

If the rulers [of princely states] remain, they can only do so by the goodwill and desire of their own people and not by compulsion of external or any other authority. Sovereignty will have to reside in the people and what follows will thus necessarily be according to the wishes of the people [...] What happened in Kashmir clearly demonstrates the desire of the state authorities to avail themselves of any pretext to crush the popular movement.⁷⁷

Nehru also used this note to express his support for Sheikh Abdullah as a key leader in Kashmir.

Everyone who knows Kashmir knows also the position of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah there. He is the Shere-e-Kashmir,⁷⁸ beloved by the people in the remotest valleys of Kashmir. [...] He has been and is one of my most valued colleagues in the states peoples’ movement, whose advice has been sought in all important matters. Does anybody think that we are going to desert him or his comrades in Kashmir because the state authorities have got a few guns at their disposal?⁷⁹

It was, naturally, a rhetorical question—at least on Nehru’s part.

On 4 June, the All-State Kashmiri Pandit Conference, the Hindu body, telegrammed Sardar Patel:

The statements of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru concerning Kashmir affairs being entirely unverified and tendentious are universally condemned and resented by Hindus of Kashmir. By encouraging Sheikh Abdullah's fascist and communal programme he is doing greatest disservice to the people of Kashmir. His unwarranted and wrong statements about facts and demolishing mosque inflame Muslims against Hindus. Sheikh Abdullah's agitation supported by Pandit Jawaharlal against our beloved Maharaja will be resisted to the last drop of our blood. Kindly intervene.⁸⁰

It is unclear whether Nehru was right or wrong about the mosque attack but this is exactly the sort of thing Patel would have wanted to avoid on the brink of independence.

Also, on 4 June, the All-India Hindu Mahasabha led by Syama Prasad Mukherjee gave a press statement where they claimed Mukherjee had received a series of telegrams from Kashmir telling him that 'Mr. Abdullah's organised attempts [...] are deliberately calculated to drag Kashmir state ultimately into the north-western Pakistan zone'.⁸¹

On 7 June 1946 came reports that Nehru was planning to go to Kashmir again.

On 8 June 1946, Patel told the General Council of the All India States Peoples' Conference (whose president Nehru was) that he completely agreed with Nehru that 'sovereignty should vest in the people and not with individual rulers'.⁸² But, he added, 'we are not to make any settlement with individual states, but with the entire princely order at one time. There are so many of them and they cannot be tackled individually.'⁸³ The Congress could not afford to open two fronts of conflict at the same time, argued the Sardar—against the British, and the princely states and their rulers. Independence would have to come first and then they would tackle the rulers.

Which is exactly what he would later achieve.

But that summer Nehru was in no mood to listen to Patel.

On 8 June, Nehru declared: 'I have been trying to find out the truth of what happened [in Kashmir] [...] Obviously there will be no peace in Kashmir if trials and convictions of popular leaders continue.'⁸⁴

On 16 June 1946, Patel was trying to allay the fears of a Kashmiri Pandit leader. In a letter to Pandit Jiyalal Kaul Jalali, he wrote,

After all, he is also a Hindu and that a Kashmiri Hindu, and he is one of our foremost patriots and one of the greatest leaders of modern India. He is, as all human beings are, liable to err. But all his actions are governed by considerations of highest patriotism.

Therefore, you need not be afraid of him or his actions.⁸⁵

On 25 June 1946, in response to a letter from the All Ceylon Netaji Valibar Sangam offering ‘any sacrifice’ to counter the arrest of a Congress leader (Nehru) in Kashmir and ‘crush the arrogant autocratic spirit of the Kashmir government’, Patel wrote a missive pregnant with sardonic meaning.

You presume to know more about the Kashmir affair from such a long distance than we here know on the spot [. . .] The question of [the] arrest of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was also a doubtful affair and we were arranging for his return back immediately. This has already been done and your anxiety is out of place. About your advice to the Congress to take immediate steps to crush the arrogant and autocratic spirit of the Kashmir government, I can only say that the whole [Congress] Working Committee is in session all the while and the committee has thought fit to express no opinion on it nor has Pandit Nehru thought fit to consult the working committee about this affair. He has taken action individually as president of the All-India States Peoples’ Conference on his own responsibility.⁸⁶

On 17 June, Nehru telegrammed the maharaja of Kashmir asking for permission to visit the state. He was turned down but he decided to go anyway.

On 20 June, Nehru was arrested in Kashmir and detained in the state circuit house where he was given a choice of remaining there or immediately returning to British India.

On 22 June, Nehru left Uri in Kashmir and went to the Chakala Airport at Rawalpindi in Karachi to return to Delhi.

Back home, Nehru, Patel and the rest of the Congress leadership faced the threat of the Muslim League’s upcoming Direct Action Day and the question of creating an interim government towards making the Constituent Assembly for an independent India.

In the creation of an interim government, too, there was a direct collision of ideas between Nehru and Patel. The interim government would be headed by the viceroy but Nehru demanded that it be explicitly agreed upon that the viceroy would merely be the figurehead with little real power.

Nehru, as the Mahatma had observed, was always reluctant to take second place.

Word was sent by the British Raj to Patel saying that if Nehru insisted on such an explicit clause, which the British government considered a breach of the agreement formed in Shimla, the entire process would stall. As it is Nehru's comments had pushed the League to plan mass violence, and now this new petulance threatened to derail the delicate negotiations for freedom.

Patel, who was already writing agonizingly about 'the present day hypocrisy, tomfoolery and mad race for power politics',⁸⁷ pondered over the matter and assured the British government that he would prevail upon the Congress Working Committee to accept the government's proposal without Nehru's caveat about the viceroy's role—and he did, successfully.⁸⁸ When Nehru became the head of the interim government, even though Azad wanted the post of Congress president again, Patel ensured that it went to Kripalani.

Days before the interim government of twelve members headed by Nehru was formed in early September 1946, Calcutta erupted in flames. Till the end, Patel and Nehru tried to stop Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946. It was Jinnah's show of strength for his one determined goal: Pakistan. It was meant to show the British and the Congress the depth of emotion the League could generate on the idea of Pakistan, and its street power. On 2 August 1946, Patel invited the League for talks, saying, 'Give up this approach. Much can be done by love; but nothing by holding a pistol to our heads. You cannot get your object by threats. The Congress is not afraid.'⁸⁹ Nehru not only wrote to Jinnah asking for cooperation on 13 August but also met him on 15 August at the latter's house in Bombay to offer a truce provided the Muslim League agreed to let the Congress nominate one Muslim member to the government. Jinnah remained adamant—the League, and only the League, could represent, and nominate, Muslims.

The Muslim League Premier in Bengal at the time was a popular man called Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy who had a fondness for silk suits and champagne, and had made 'millions of rupees by selling grain meant for the

famished in the black market⁹⁰ during the famine in Bengal in 1942 when Winston Churchill's policies killed more than 2 million people.

Suhrawardy had removed most of the police from the streets of Calcutta before the League mobs arrived. The British too had confined their troops to the barracks. When the three-day butchery was over, official figures alleged 5000 dead and 15,000 wounded. Unofficially, more than 16,000 people had been massacred.

Riots had broken out in India before, but this episode, in a sense, marked the beginning of the violence leading up to, and during, the partition of the country, which would claim more than a million lives.

Sixteen August 1946 was a Black Day not only for Calcutta but for the whole of India. The turn that events had taken made it almost impossible to expect a peaceful solution by agreement between the Congress and the Muslim League. This was one of the greatest tragedies of Indian history and I have to say with the deepest regret that a large part of the responsibility for this development rests with Jawaharlal. His unfortunate statement that the Congress would be free to modify the Cabinet Mission Plan reopened the whole question of political and communal settlement. Mr. Jinnah took full advantage of his mistake and withdrew from the League's early acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan.⁹¹

Soon afterwards, the League became part of the government, curiously in circumstances where the Congress had a Muslim member (Asaf Ali) and the League a Dalit member, Jogendra Nath Mandal.

Among the portfolios, the League wanted the home ministry—which Patel absolutely refused to part with, going to the extent of making it clear that he would resign if the ministry was given to the League.

As a compromise, Jinnah's man Liaquat Ali became the finance minister and presented the budget of the interim government in February 1947. Liaquat Ali's decisions caused further conflict between the two parties. But the violence between the Congress and the League, and between Hindus and Muslims, that was spreading was not merely because of economics—the fundamental political differences remained extreme, and had by now created an atmosphere of vicious communal hatred on the ground. Massacre after massacre was taking place—at Noakhali in Bengal, across Bihar, in Garhmukteshwar in the United Provinces. Gandhi went on a walking tour

of Noakhali to stop the riots while Nehru, Patel and Liaquat Ali travelled to Bihar to douse the flames.

Meanwhile things were heating up in the princely states too. In July, Maharaja Hari Singh of Kashmir wrote to Nehru that if he were to visit Kashmir again, he ‘should confine yourself to work relating to the defence of Mr. Abdullah. For your information I would add that orders are in force in certain parts of the state, including Srinagar, banning demonstrations, meetings and gatherings of more than five persons.’⁹² Soon afterwards the nawab of Bhopal wrote to Patel asking if he was indeed going to Kashmir soon. And if yes, ‘may I as a friend again request you to defer your departure? I am sure by further discussion and exchange of views we can reach amicable solution of this unfortunate problem which could be fair and honourable to both parties concerned.’⁹³

In July, the maharaja of Kashmir also put out a public announcement.

Kashmir is renowned for its beauty throughout the world, and I least of would wish to deny any person free access to it. But if we are convinced that such access in any case will lead inevitably to strife, disorder and consequent bloodshed amongst my people, it is our bounden duty to take all steps necessary to avert such consequences and this duty we will continue to discharge at all costs.⁹⁴

The diwan of Kashmir, Ramchandra Kak, told Patel in August after the Calcutta killings, ‘The vast majority of the people are with us in regard to our intention to suppress lawlessness and gangsterism. Calcutta furnishes a lurid example of the ghastly potentialities of lawlessness.’⁹⁵

Within the government, it was not just members of the Muslim League and the Congress who were disagreeing but even the top two Congressmen, Patel and Nehru, did not see eye to eye on many subjects. It irritated Patel that Nehru, often threatened that the Congressmen would resign; this government was the final step to freedom and Patel hated any talk of quitting. Nehru disliked Patel’s forceful speeches, especially when the Sardar warned that ‘poison would produce poison and the sword would ultimately have to be met by the sword’.⁹⁶ Gandhi, always the bridge between them, had to intervene.

As Andrew Kennedy wrote, ‘Although both Nehru and Patel were ultimately exhausted by Jinnah’s intransigence, Patel came to see cooperation with the Muslim League as a lost cause well before Nehru did. The pessimism he expressed as early as May 1946—three months before Direct Action Day—is particularly noteworthy.’⁹⁷ He was simply not convinced that the Congress would be able to change the Muslim League’s mind. ‘Given how events turned out, one might argue that Patel was simply more shrewd [...] Yet Nehru could hardly be accused of seeing Jinnah through rose-tinted glasses.’⁹⁸

The British government had agreed to handover India to Indians, to some sort of central government, or a patchwork quilt of provincial governments, maybe a combination of both, by, latest, July 1948. But it had also assured that any part of the country that did not want to join the new union of India would not be forced to do so. Which meant that all the princely states mostly just sat and waited. As did the Muslim League—for Pakistan.

To see the transfer of power through this last leg, a new viceroy arrived, replacing Lord Wavell—Lord Mountbatten, known to everyone as Dickie. And he brought his wife Edwina. Mountbatten had complained in 1943 that Calcutta was ‘overcrowded, famine-ridden and full of objectionable troubles with which I do not wish to be associated’.⁹⁹ Presumably he found Delhi a little better.

Towards the end of 1946 and in early 1947, Patel had a series of conversations with a man called Vappala Pangunni Menon. Menon was a civil servant in British India who had worked with the last three viceroys of India. In 1946 he was the main political adviser to the viceroy and, after Independence, became the constitutional adviser to the governor general of India.

Menon’s conversations with Patel are a turning point in Indian history because of their contribution to framing the epochal dispute of modern India: the Partition of India. It is through these conversations that Patel grew even more convinced that the choice was clear—endless civil war and continuing British rule in India or a clearly divided India and Pakistan, peaceful and independent of foreign rule.

Menon told Patel that in his opinion the three-tiered structure of governing India derived from the Cabinet Mission Plan ‘was an illusion [..] unwieldy and difficult to work with’.¹⁰⁰ Jinnah, argued Menon, had no intention of giving up his demand for Pakistan, especially since he had the support of powerful people in the British establishment and even among the British leadership in the army in India. ‘My personal view was that it was better that the country should be divided, rather than it should gravitate towards civil war,’ he said.¹⁰¹

Instead, the bureaucrat laid out a handover of power from the British government to two separate central governments, one each of India and Pakistan, under dominion status initially. Menon cited many practical reasons for the Congress leadership to accept this solution that they had always rejected.

Firstly, it would ensure a peaceful transfer of power. Secondly, such acceptance would be warmly welcomed by Britain, and the Congress would by this single act have gained its friendship and goodwill. The third concerned the future administration of the country. The civil services at the higher levels were manned by Britishers, and if India insisted on independence there was no question but that the British element had it in their power to create endless trouble at the time of the transfer of power.¹⁰²

Especially, pointed out Menon, and indeed this was an argument Patel understood only too well after the revolt of the naval cadre, even if the new independent Indian government could somehow manage the civil service, it would definitely need hand-holding in transitioning the armed forces where almost all top-ranking officers were British. A new set of leaders would have to be produced for the Indian armed forces, and in the meantime, if the newly independent country faced conflict, a possibility that would have escaped neither Menon nor Patel, it would have to make do with an army that was woefully short of leadership. Menon also argued that it would be a soft landing for the princes who would find it easier to transition to dominion status.¹⁰³

Of the last point, Patel had little doubt. He had already been negotiating with the princes, and reports had been pouring in about troubles. One letter received on 29 November 1946 noted, ‘Reality is that rulers of some states

of Rajputana and Madhya Pradesh [. . .] want to retain their power and for that they want to adopt communalism, class war and division.'¹⁰⁴ In the case of the Maharaja Pratap Singh of Baroda, the letter added,

[B]ecause of false conception that injustice has been done to him, if he becomes victim of those reactionary forces, then the people of Baroda and other states shall have to give strong fight [. . .] My intention of writing this letter to you is to convince Pratap Singh when he meets you, if he has any misconception in his mind, to act which is beneficial to people.¹⁰⁵

Clearly Patel was convinced by the authenticity of this information because also illustrative is a letter Patel himself wrote on 2 December 1946 to Sir Brojendar Mitter, the diwan or prime minister of Baroda. In it he said,

The Princes' Chamber [the body representing all the rulers of different kingdoms in India] is in alliance with the Muslim League. It is no secret that the secretariat of the Princes' Chamber is for all practical purposes controlled by the Muslim League [. . .] It is a matter of surprise to us that the League should hold so much influence on the Princes' Chamber when the chamber is composed of a vast majority of Hindu princes.¹⁰⁶

In light of such anxieties, Patel, who was then home minister of the interim government, a position he had refused to cede to the Muslim League, saw the logic in Menon's arguments.

These two men, Patel and Menon, had much in common. Both had risen from humble backgrounds—Menon was the son of a schoolmaster, born in what is now Kerala. He had risen through the ranks, quite like Patel, working variously as a tobacco company and railway clerk before entering the civil service at the bottom and then steadily climbing to its very pinnacle. By 1941, he had been made a Companion of the Indian Empire, part of the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire, an order of chivalry instituted by Queen Victoria in 1878. In 1946, he was made a Companion of the Star of India of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India started by Queen Victoria in 1861.

He had, in short, arrived.

Menon, as evidenced by his arguments to Patel, was a pragmatist. He was trying to convince perhaps the most obdurate of Congress leaders that he

should change his mind about the future of the country, the land he had given his whole life to free from colonialism. That too a leader who even on 5 December 1946 was ridiculing Jinnah's two-nation theory saying that it would amount to 'the fact that the father may belong to one nation and his offspring to another.'¹⁰⁷

But it was perhaps the practicality of Menon's proposition that appealed to the realist in Patel. It is argued sometimes today that Patel 'was ready to give away Pakistan [and Kashmir]'.¹⁰⁸ This is childishly simplistic. If anything, Patel was being remarkably clairvoyant—by acknowledging the argument for Pakistan, he would in fact be preventing a civil war that would take perhaps months, if not years, to end. Even with the acceptance of Pakistan, the exchange of populations killed around one million people in sectarian violence pitting Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs against one another. One need only look at the massacre of Direct Action Day in August 1946 to understand how much worse a civil war between Hindus and Muslims, had the Congress refused to accept the demand for Pakistan, would have been.

Patel, then, was one of the first Congress leaders, indeed one of the first leaders of India's freedom movement, to acknowledge at least the possibility of the separation of the country.

There is also evidence that by the middle of December 1946, the negotiations with the British and League had brought Patel to the brink of despair. A letter he wrote to Sir Stafford Cripps on 15 December 1946 gives the full extent of his mental state of acute anguish.

We have full appreciation of your difficulties there. But I must frankly confess that there is little understanding of our difficulties here [...] violence is a game at which both parties can play and the mild Hindu also, when driven to desperation, can retaliate as brutally as a fanatic Muslim [...] [E]very action of his [the viceroy] since the Great Calcutta Killing has been in the direction of encouraging the Muslim League and putting pressure on us towards appeasement [...] Your interpretation [of the Cabinet Mission Plan] means that the Bengal Muslims can draft the constitution of Assam.¹⁰⁹

In this note, Patel tells Cripps his proposal would never be accepted by the masses.

Do you think that such a monstrous proposition can be accepted by the Hindus of Assam, particularly after the sad experience of wholesale forcible conversions, arson, looting, rape and forcible marriages? You have no idea of the resentment and anger caused by your emphasis on this interpretation. If you think Assam can be coerced to accept the domination of Bengal, the sooner you rid of the disillusion the better [...] You know that Gandhiji at the age of 77 is spending all his energy in the devastated Hindu homes in eastern Bengal and trying to recover the lost girls, bring back those forcibly converted.¹¹⁰

Patel said he, though, worried constantly that Gandhi would not be successful, in fact that the Mahatma would end his life struggling against impossible conditions.

But he is working against heavy odds, I have great apprehension that he will end his life there in this fruitless mission. He is surrounded by a very hostile atmosphere. In the event of his death there in these circumstances, what will happen no one can say. I shudder to think of the consequences. But the anger and resentment of the whole of India will not only be against the Muslims but also against the British.¹¹¹

In all fairness, it must be pointed out here that while the Sardar was worrying about a fanatic Muslim attack on Gandhi—and rightfully so in the circumstances in which Gandhi was working—it should be asked if he did not spend enough time fretting about such an attack from the Hindu side. Extremism had been growing among the Hindus too and it would finally be a Hindu extremist who murdered Gandhi. The fundamentalist leanings of some among the mild Hindus, who Patel warned in this letter could turn fanatic, were already in the process of being developed.

He [Jinnah] swears by Pakistan, and everything conceded to him is to be used as a lever to work to that end. You wish that we should agree to help him in his mad dream. I am sorry to write to you in this strain, but I feel sad over the whole affair. You know when Gandhiji was strongly against our settlement I threw my weight in favour of it. You have created a very unpleasant situation for me. All of us here feel that there has been a betrayal. The solution has now been made more difficult, nay, almost impossible.¹¹²

Patel had not forgotten that the viceroy Lord Wavell had given the Muslim League five ministerial berths even after the mass murder of Direct Action Day. And so when Sir Norman Smith, the head intelligence of the British Raj, suggested greater generosity Patel cuttingly replied, ‘If you think that

generosity will placate the Muslim Oliver Twist, then you do not understand either the Muslim mind or the situation.’¹¹³

Considering the dark and despondent mood in which Patel heard Menon’s arguments, it is perhaps unsurprising that he was more open to considering such a proposal than he would have been even a few months earlier.

With Lord Mountbatten’s consent, Menon pitched his ideas to Nehru as well, who did not seem to object to the plan. But in between all this, a different plan approved by the British cabinet came from London. This plan which seemed to break India into multiple packets was immediately rejected, first by Nehru and then the Congress leadership. An appalled Nehru wrote to Viceroy Mountbatten, ‘Not only do they [the new plans] menace India but also they endanger the future relations between Britain and India. Instead of producing any sense of certainty, security and stability, they would encourage disruptive tendencies everywhere, chaos and weakness. They would particularly endanger important strategic areas.’¹¹⁴ This new plan violated every fundamental agreement upon which the Cabinet Mission Plan was based—most importantly the bedrock of a united India. The Congress leadership rejected this new plan, foreseeing that

[T]he inevitable consequences of the proposals would be to invite the Balkanization of India; to provoke certain civil conflict and add to violence and disorder; to cause a further breakdown of central authority, which alone could prevent the growing chaos, and to demoralise the army, the police and the central services. The proposal that each of the successor states should conclude independent treaties, presumably also with His Majesty’s Government, was likely to create many Ulsters¹¹⁵ in India, which would be looked upon as so many British bases on Indian soil and would create an almost unbridgeable gulf between National India and British India.¹¹⁶

The January 1947 edition of *Time* magazine carried a photograph of Patel on the cover—at the time the only person apart from Gandhi and Nehru to be featured thus, sealing international recognition of his role as the undisputed third vital pillar of the Indian freedom movement. This also flies in the face of Gandhi’s earlier assertion that Patel was not well known internationally. He may not have been as well networked as Nehru but he

was certainly renowned enough for *Time* to write that Patel represented ‘what cohesive power free India has. This cinder-eyed schemer is not the best, worst, wisest or most typical of India’s leaders but he is the easiest to understand and on him more than any man except Gandhi, depends India’s chance of surviving the gathering storms.’¹¹⁷ Patel would probably have taken that as a compliment. In a world so bereft of understanding, his level-headedness and lucid comprehension could only be an asset. It is important to note that, along with the piece on Patel, *Time* added a map of India titled ‘Pieces of Hate’, referring to the many fissures in the country, fissures only the Sardar could seal together.

Meanwhile, illustrating the unbridgeable gulfs that were already exploding, Punjab was going up in flames as Sikhs fought Muslims, apart from Hindus and Muslims fighting with each other, all with their private armies.¹¹⁸

In early February 1947, Patel was writing to Gandhi that ‘difficulties are mounting from all sides’.¹¹⁹ At the end of that month, he was telling the Mahatma that his own health too was failing, ‘one muscle of heart has become weak, and swelling is seen on it. Intestine stops working [...] tongue stops functioning’.¹²⁰ His health issues were soon forgotten, overtaken by his concern over the constabulary being divided on Hindu-Muslim lines. In a letter on 14 March 1947, he warned, ‘Muslim constables are being urged to demand separate formations, I understand that the proposal is being actively canvassed by the Muslim League circles and the lead in this matter is being given by the president of the Muslim League.’¹²¹ On 24 March, he wrote to Gandhi about the situation in Punjab:

More than 50,000 people must have lost their lives. Still there are no signs of improvement in the situation [...] The situation in the Hajara district is most alarming. It is the fortress of the League and its word is like a writ there. [...] Both Hindus and Sikhs have been the victim of this wrath. But the Sikhs have suffered more. People fought with bravery. Many women jumped into wells and embraced death. [...] Punjab is still restive. Now the military is posted there. Hence an uneasy peace is visible on the surface. But it is unimaginable when it will burst out again. Its spark may reach up to Delhi.¹²²

By early April, a resigned Patel was writing, ‘Gandhiji asked us to unite but today Hindus and Muslims are so much at a distance with each other which was not there at any other time.’¹²³

Trouble was spreading not only between the Muslim League and the Congress but in the princely states as well, leaving them in flux. News came to Patel at the end of March that the diwan of Junagadh was importing arms from Sindh to annex neighbouring Kathiawar and the rulers of Kathiawar were requesting help from the state of Baroda.¹²⁴ In April, Patel was warning the rulers of the princely states,

Many kings think that it is better to wait and watch. Not to do anything in hurry. I request those kings to join us now [...] Right things should be done at appropriate time [...]

Many kings think of collecting arms and consolidate power. But today India is not what it was when Englishmen arrived here.¹²⁵

In another letter in mid-1947, Patel put down his thoughts on the condition of India’s princely rulers, ‘Just like a man suffering from paralysis cannot lift his leg, similarly kings who have been slaves for centuries, are not able to stand erect; so there is no question of walking. But the present time won’t allow them to sit quietly.’¹²⁶

As Patel saw it, there seemed to be no choice but to divide Punjab, and Bengal, into Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority portions.

But one man was still not convinced—Mahatma Gandhi.

According to a secret document from a meeting held on 29 March 1947, Viceroy Mountbatten had a meeting with his staff where he detailed that

If a decision could be made quickly, it might well be possible to establish some form of dominion status in India, which could run experimentally until June 1948. This might consist of a ‘dominion’ of Pakistan; a ‘dominion’ or ‘dominions’ of the Indian states [it was known that the Muslims and the majority of the princes would be willing to remain within the Commonwealth]; and a ‘dominion’ of the rest of British India. All these would be autonomous units, but with certain subjects, such as defence, foreign, affairs, finance, food and communications, reserved to some form of central government.¹²⁷

But this could not be an indefinite solution, and what Mountbatten had in mind was that, ‘in such circumstances he would reserve the right to decide,

in about April 1948, whether to recommend handing over power after June 1948 to a Central government, or whether to let the union of the autonomous units lapse.’¹²⁸

It was also on 28 March 1947 that we find Team Mountbatten making a spirited case for an independent India remaining a part of the British Commonwealth.

India’s external trade is largely financed through London; she depends largely upon the United Kingdom for insurance and shipping. A high proportion of her import and export trade is with us and other countries in the Commonwealth [...] India’s economy for some 20 years to come will be affected by her large holding of Sterling Balances [...] It is probable that something like 60% of the total imports and exports of India pass through British-owned or British-managed enterprises in India.¹²⁹

At the end of March in 1947, barely five months before India gained independence, Gandhi made his final proposal to the viceroy Lord Mountbatten on preventing the division of the country. He suggested that the interim government be dismissed, an invitation be extended to Jinnah to form and lead the first government of independent India, and the Muslim League leader be allowed to continue to pursue his dream of creating Pakistan if he promised not to use force to achieve that goal.

A most fascinating letter of the British dilemma at Gandhi’s offer to hand over the reins of government to Jinnah exists in the Mountbatten Papers. The meeting, on 5 April 1947, was held between the viceroy’s staff who were convinced that

Mr Gandhi’s scheme was not workable. It would put the viceroy in an impossible position; Mr Jinnah’s government would be completely at the mercy of the Congress majority; every single legislative or political measure would be brought up to the viceroy for decision and every action the viceroy took after the initial stages would be misrepresented.¹³⁰

And even with that risk, they are unconvinced that the Mahatma could get the Congress to agree with him. ‘Gandhi’s influence with the rank and file of the Congress party was very considerable but he had more difficulty with

the leaders, particularly Sardar Patel. Moreover, Mr Gandhi could not stay in Delhi and thus in control of the situation all the time.’¹³¹

Jinnah had rejected this proposal as unworkable, the team discusses, and would reject it again. They conclude in agreement with the viceroy, who at this point said that ‘Gandhi’s scheme was undoubtedly mad except for the fact of Mr Gandhi’s amazing personal influence which might induce Congress to accept it. A main danger in his opinion was that Mr Gandhi might die—then the scheme would completely break down.’¹³²

As the viceroy and his team foresaw, the apostles of the Mahatma would not follow him in this plan. It was rejected by Patel, Nehru, Azad, in fact everyone except Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. In another prescient meeting on 7 April 1947, Mountbatten would predict something else that would devastatingly come true. He said he did not believe that

Mr Jinnah had thought of the most elementary mechanics whereat Pakistan was to run. All the Indian leaders whom he had met were very ignorant of the mechanics of administration and underestimated the difficulties. They were likely to devise a much shorter programme than events would prove it possible to adhere to. Things would take much longer to settle than anticipated.¹³³

In the same month, interestingly, Mountbatten was noted as telling his staff that

- a. He had not yet made up his mind on the issue of partition.
- b. He had made up his mind that if he became convinced that partition was in the best interests of India and decided on it, the same principle would have to apply to the doubtful provinces—the Punjab and Bengal.

Thus nothing would shake him in the decision that the solution would have to be either a moth-eaten Pakistan or united India.

- c. If he did eventually decide on a form of Pakistan it would not be for him to say whether it would be necessary for the Indian army forces to be divided.¹³⁴

The details of any such division, Mountbatten suggested to the Muslim League leader, would have to figured out by the Indian leaders, and there was no question of any division until June 1948 as that would compromise law and order.¹³⁵

But Mountbatten's meetings with Jinnah in April 1947 did not end well. Later papers of the period show the viceroy despairing that he had done everything possible to convince Jinnah about the merits of a united and strong India ('India could be immensely powerful and in the front rank of world powers'¹³⁶), he had argued that Pakistan's creation had not been thought through, and it did not have economic merit, but Jinnah had ignored every argument. Mountbatten felt that the Muslim League leader had no counter argument except that he was determined to get Pakistan: 'He gave the impression that he was not listening. He was impossible to argue with. Jinnah was a psychopathic case. He was, whatever was said, intent on his Pakistan which could surely only result in doing the Muslims irreparable damage.'¹³⁷

Of one thing the viceroy became certain after his meetings with Jinnah:

If any effort was made to try and impose the Cabinet Mission plan, the Muslim League would resort to arms. He [Mountbatten] added that until he had met Mr Jinnah he had not thought it possible that a man with such a complete lack of sense of responsibility could hold the power which he did.¹³⁸

The predominant feature of Jinnah, Mountbatten and his staff grew to believe, 'was his loathing and contempt of the Hindus. He apparently thought that all Hindus were sub-human creatures with whom it was impossible for the Muslims to live.'¹³⁹ It was Viceroy Mountbatten, at least in the notes of his meetings, who said that he suggested to Jinnah that Hindus and Muslims had no choice but to live together in some way or another.

It is clear from these notes that Mountbatten was, more often than not, batting for the India, i.e., the Congress side. It was in the Congress that he had his friends, the closest among whom was Nehru. It is unclear how much of this bias affected his interaction with Jinnah but it might be fair to surmise that it would have had an impact.

It was in April 1947 that the infamous Plan Balkan was brought to the viceroy.

[It] contemplated leaving to each province the choice of its own future and would almost certainly result in a form of truncated Pakistan and the eventual abolition of a centre, although it would be necessary to retain a centre for some time after June 1948, at least to deal with defence until the armed forces were divided.¹⁴⁰

Under Plan Balkan, Mountbatten thought he could

[B]roadcast a preamble showing how negotiations had progressed since his arrival. He would make clear that he had tried throughout to look at the whole problem objectively. He would say that he had always believed that an [sic] united India was the ideal answer, preferably with a central government similar to that at present in power, and with safeguards for the minorities.¹⁴¹

It was, in essence, a plan for the British to slip out of India, leaving it in chaos.

He [Mountbatten] would point out that he had devoted a long time to trying to obtain acceptance of a plan for an [sic] united India but that in the end he had found that it would be impossible to impose such a plan without a recrudescence of bloodshed, leading perhaps to civil war. He had therefore decided that the only answer was to leave the decision in the hands of the people themselves and to give the provinces freedom to decide on their own future with the option of joining one or more groups.¹⁴²

Whatever the decision, the viceroy also wanted the world to know immediately and pass the responsibility of the fate of India to Indian hands and not British.

There should be no hint that the British were deciding on India's future. Their one object was to demit power as the Indians themselves wanted. The world must be informed that the choice was in the hands of the people of India. His Excellency the Viceroy added that he believed that both Pandit Nehru and Mr Jinnah were most susceptible to world opinion.¹⁴³

(If these opinions sound sharp, it must be remembered that the viceroy's team constantly made such cutting observations. For instance, also in April 1947, Mountbatten was handed a paper containing a series of hilarious and insightful quick takeaways about Indian industrialists by his aide Lieutenant Colonel V.F. Erskine Crum.

G.D. Birla was ‘perhaps the wealthiest man in India [. . .] would have liked to be the finance minister [. . .] Undoubtedly finance the Congress [. . .] a power behind the throne.’¹⁴⁴

Seth Dalmia: ‘Runs (very inefficiently) large cement and other works [. . .] Last year he acquired THE TIMES OF INDIA (Bombay), Indian National Airways (British concern) and an enormous quantity of surplus US vehicles. Everyone wondered where the money came from, and he would not relish an enquiry.’¹⁴⁵

The Muslim business family, the Ispahanis, ‘arose in a welter of profiteering, inefficiency, and corruption’¹⁴⁶ and funded the Muslim League.

Sir Padampat Singhania: ‘Typical Marwari. Textile, jute mills, iron works, aluminium, all run inefficiently. Main idea to get rich quick.’¹⁴⁷

The only person this note had good things to say about without caveat was J.R.D. Tata: ‘Very capable, well read, and something of an idealist’, but even about him it added, ‘Dislikes the Birla group.’¹⁴⁸

On his part, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was feeling pressured not only by the incessant and rising communal tension between Hindus and Muslims but also the insistent threat of violence stoked by communists. In one of his speeches he talked about the battle for land and predicted a struggle over small land parcels, one that India faces even today, and foresaw a large Indian diaspora engaged in productive activity. There was already, in 1947, said Patel, heavy pressure of population on the land. So, on 15 April 1947, he suggested to his audience that they should not fight for small pieces of land. The *Bombay Chronicle* reported that

[T]here were new fields and pastures in the wide world which they should explore and bring under the plough. The Britishers lived in a tiny island but were able to build up an empire. Free India did not want to exploit others or build empires but we could migrate to places where there was less pressure of population. They should get training to increase the fertility of the soil.¹⁴⁹

In the same speech Patel talks about the threat of communists pitting ‘landless labour against small cultivators [. . .] The cities might be torn by the activities by the Communists and the communalists.’¹⁵⁰

On 7 April, at Bombay Chowpatty, in a plea addressed to communists, but perhaps speaking to many discontented elements, Patel entreated, ‘My life’s work is about to be over. Britain is going out. That was our aim; that was our dream. It is about to come true. Do not spoil it.’¹⁵¹ But just making a plea, or even a veiled threat, would be enough for the Sardar. In May 1947, the Indian National Trade Union Congress was launched to keep labourers and workers out of communist influence.¹⁵²

Till the end of April 1947, Sardar Patel was still telling the viceroy and his team that the Congress was willing to consider ‘that Congress were ready to accept the Cabinet Mission plan even now with no reservations’¹⁵³ and that there ‘was no question of forcing or trying to persuade people to convert to the Hindu religion’.¹⁵⁴ By May 1947, Patel had accepted that the partition of India was inevitable. Also, in May, mischief-making had started in all sorts of places. One character we have met before reappears: the nawab of Mamdot who, even as a Muslim League leader, refused to allow grassroots organization of the party on his lands, but now

[H]e was under the influence of some younger men, who were in a fanatical mood. They evidently thought that if the Muslim League could take power, they would be able to withdraw the proceedings which were being taken against Muslims and to use the police force, which was seventy per cent Muslim, to suppress the Sikhs.¹⁵⁵

When the viceroy asked about him to one of his staffers, they replied that the nawab was ‘a very stupid man’.¹⁵⁶ As an aside, it is worth noting that on 11 May 1947, there is an interesting conversation between Nehru and Mountbatten where Nehru argues that the fate of Balochistan should be decided via a plebiscite among its 30,000 people and not by a bunch of feudal rulers.¹⁵⁷

It is important to understand here that as long as he possibly could have, Patel spoke for an independent, united India. In speech after speech, he urged communal harmony. But by the middle of 1947, after all the consultations with Menon, and seeing the obduracy of the Muslim League, and the constant bloodletting between the communities that had started well before any division of the country, Patel’s practical mind took a concrete

decision—if the choice was civil war or a divided country where both sides would live and let live, then he preferred the latter. We also must remember that the Sardar had not only seen the violent clash of ideologies but also the nasty practical difficulties of working with the League in a government. Azad points out that after ensuring that he retained the home ministry, ‘Sardar Patel discovered that [...] he could not create the post of a chaprasi¹⁵⁸ without [Finance Minister from the Muslim League] Liaquat Ali’s concurrence.’¹⁵⁹ By June 1947, the division of assets between India and Pakistan was being discussed, including the division of the army:

On the basis of the strength of the navy, the army and the air force in the two dominions. So far as the army is concerned, the final division of the bodies would roughly turn out to be 70:30 in the Indian Dominion and Pakistan respectively, and the division of assets might be in that proportion.¹⁶⁰

There still remained the problem of assets like ‘the gun carriage factory at Jubbulpore [Jabalpur], or the Ishapore rifle factory or the small arms ammunition factory at Kirkee’¹⁶¹ and a solution to dividing them would have to be found.

It must be mentioned here that going through the Mountbatten Papers it is clear that already by this time the viceroy was assisting India, and Sardar Patel, in ensuring a union of India could be created. In a meeting on 11 July 1947, in a meeting with Jinnah, Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Liaquat Ali Khan and his team, Mountbatten said that

He had made it abundantly clear to His Highness the Maharaja of Patiala, S. Baldev Singh, Master Tara Singh and all other Sikh leaders with whom he had had interviews, the consequences of any attempt to offer active resistance. No responsible government would tolerate for a moment such action, which would be met by the immediate employment of the regular armed forces of India. In view of the superiority in aeroplanes, tanks, artillery, etc, that the armed forces enjoy, such action would inevitably result in very severe losses being inflicted on those who would only be armed with rifles and out of date weapons.¹⁶²

A similar warning and advice was given to the raja of Faridkot when the ruler spoke of an independent Sikh state. Mountbatten crushed this idea and ‘held out no hope of supporting a separate Sikh State’.¹⁶³

Also from this time, it is clear that the exchange of Kashmir for Hyderabad was on the table. When Nehru asked the viceroy and his team what would happen if Hyderabad chose to be part of India, Menon gave him the simple answer that it would be a situation very similar to Kashmir—presumably that a people's vote would decide.¹⁶⁴ Also by July as Patel and Menon got to work on the princely states, Viceroy Mountbatten expressed his satisfaction that 'Sardar Patel had been put in charge of this new [states] department—a man whose greatest quality was that of realism.'¹⁶⁵

To use a word that has been increasingly politicized in India, but one that even Rajmohan Gandhi cannot avoid in context to Patel's opinion about Gandhi's final proposal of letting Jinnah lead a League government, the Sardar hated 'appeasement'.¹⁶⁶ I mention an earlier biographer's use of this word to show that it is impossible to avoid it in telling the Patel story. It is critical to remember that in 1942 when Gandhi had suggested a government led by the League and Jinnah, Patel was amenable to the idea. But a lot had happened since then.

In 1947, he could not get himself to agree to a craven collapse before the threats of Jinnah. He also realized, as home minister, that giving in to the threat of physical violence from the Muslim League would make the Congress vulnerable to such threats from a wide variety of sources, not least the many princely states and the communists.

Azad recognized that Jinnah's intransigence had led Patel to breaking point.

[I]n fighting for Pakistan, he [Jinnah] had overreached himself. His action so annoyed and irritated Sardar Patel that the Sardar was now a believer in partition. The Sardar's was the responsibility for giving finance to the Muslim League. He, therefore, resented his helplessness before Liaqat Ali more than anyone else. When Lord Mountbatten suggested that partition might offer a solution to the present difficulty, he found ready acceptance to the idea in Sardar Patel's mind.¹⁶⁷

In the Constituent Assembly, which worked to create the constitution of independent India over three years from December 1946 to January 1950, Patel was the chairman of the Advisory Committee on Minorities, apart

from being part of the steering committee and other important groupings. ‘He pacified the fears of the minorities with constitutional safeguards,’¹⁶⁸ in the face of severe objections from many of his closest aides who opposed the right to propagate religion.

Patel advocated it and succeeded in having it included in Article 25 of the constitution. He even got the constitution to guarantee to minorities the right to conserve their ‘distinct language, script or culture’ and ‘to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice’ under Article(s) 29 and 30. Some of the other secular/federal features of the Constitution which Hindu communalists disliked, viz. absence of a common civil code and even Article 370 giving special status to Jammu & Kashmir, also had the blessings of Sardar Patel.¹⁶⁹

Patel’s approach to the communal question had started with blindly following Gandhi’s advice but by 1947, he had developed an uncompromising attitude. He would not allow discrimination or violence and would not compromise on the subject. His primary goal was to keep India safe and if that meant giving the Muslim League some Muslim-majority territories and then severing ties with them, so be it. He never wanted partition and would have done anything to prevent it but by 1947, having observed massacre after massacre, Patel grew convinced that Jinnah’s threat of civil war was real and to supplicate before Jinnah and try and keep him in the fold under any circumstances, as Gandhi suggested, was not a tenable or sustainable position. He was a practical man and pragmatically he did not think it was in the nation’s best interests for the Congress to prostrate itself before Jinnah.

It is important to mention here as an aside, on the topic of minorities, that in the Constituent Assembly, ‘not only did Patel see to it that Ambedkar was appointed law minister but ensured his completing the tenure despite Jawaharlal Nehru’s wish to drop him at one point’.¹⁷⁰

It is the Constituent Assembly that set up a committee which included Sardar Patel to reach a resolution with the myriad princes of India, but as we have seen, Patel was on the job in various small but pertinent ways long before December 1946. As chairman of the advisory committee of the Constituent Assembly which created the interim report on what kind of

fundamental and minority rights the newly independent nation would adopt, his role became even more crucial.

It was Patel who presented the first draft of the reasonable restrictions rule on 30 April 1947. This evolved to include rights like the protection of minorities and other groups and tribes. Patel was aiming at equality in society, always a key concern for him, and had hoped that after a decade of such protection tribals would no longer need such protection and the word tribe itself would be irrelevant.

It is not befitting India's civilisation to provide for tribes. It means something and it is there because, for two hundred years, attempts have been made by foreign rulers to keep them in groups apart with their customs and other things in order that the foreigners' rule may be smooth. The rulers did not want that there should be any change. Thus, it is that we still have the curse of untouchability, the curse of the tribes, the curse of vested interests and many other curses besides. We are endeavouring to give them all fundamental rights. It should be our endeavour to remove these curses.¹⁷¹

He made important interventions about who should be a citizen of India too.

It is important to remember that the provision about citizenship will be scrutinised all over the world. They are watching what we are doing. This is a simple problem. We must always have a few foreigners coming here [...] If by the accident of birth, someone comes and stays here, subject to the proviso which we have enacted, we can control double citizenship by our legislation.¹⁷²

In a country plagued with issues of access and discrimination, Patel insisted that the clause for non-discrimination should ensure full access to every citizen to all public places like bathing ghats, wells, tanks and roads. This was a fundamental right. But during this discussion there was also a proposal to add a clause of non-discrimination against political creed, as in no one could discriminate against any member of a political party based on their political beliefs. But Patel, who spoke passionately for non-discrimination and full access to everybody, did not agree on this last point. He said, '[I]t is an absurd idea to provide for non-discrimination as regards a political creed. Political creed may be of any kind. There may be some political creeds highly objectionable. Some may not be deserving of discrimination, but may actually be deserving of suppression.'¹⁷³

Patel also passionately advocated the abolition of untouchability. ‘[I]f untouchability is provided for in the fundamental rights as an offence, all necessary adjustments will be made in the law that may be passed by the Legislature.’¹⁷⁴ It is pertinent to note here that while untouchability was abolished, the interjection of Promatha Ranjan Thakur, a Namasudra caste (traditionally ‘untouchable’) legislator from Bengal, turned out to be true. Thakur said,

I do not understand how you can abolish untouchability without abolishing the very caste system. Untouchability is nothing but the symptom of the disease, namely, the caste system [...] I think the House should consider this point seriously. Unless we can do away with the caste system altogether there is no use tinkering with the problem of untouchability superficially.¹⁷⁵

Thakur did not raise an amendment and this point was clearly not well debated or accepted. In the time to come, he was of course proved right.

Patel also pushed through an abolition of royal titles in a hierarchy-bound country. He said, ‘many titles have been surrendered during the last year or two and the titles have lost their value’.¹⁷⁶ This provision to abolish titles was also needed, the Sardar argued, to prevent political parties from having ‘authority to give any inducements or to corrupt people in order to build up their party or to obtain or derive strength by unfair means.’¹⁷⁷

Vallabhbhai Patel was firm that now that India had been broken into two, the question of separate electorates had no place in the country.

Those who want that kind of thing have a place in Pakistan, not here [...] Here, we are building a nation and we are laying the foundations of One Nation, and those who choose to divide again and sow the seeds of disruption will have no place, no quarter, here, and I must say that plainly enough.¹⁷⁸

The idea of reservations for minorities kept cropping up but by 1949 there was agreement that the exception would only be made for scheduled castes. Patel’s idea was to remove the concept of a minority and to build a society where all Indians are considered as Indians alone. He said:

It is not our intention to commit the minorities to a particular position in a hurry. It is in the interest of all to lay down real and genuine foundations of a secular state, then nothing

is better for the minorities than to trust the good-sense and sense of fairness of the majority, and to place confidence in them. So, also it is for us who happen to be in a majority to think about what the minorities feel, and how we in their position would feel if we were treated in the manner in which they are treated.¹⁷⁹

But he also argued that in the long run, it would be best for the country to remove the distinction between majority and minority and focus on everyone being just Indian.¹⁸⁰

The historic report on fundamental rights enshrined ideas that every citizen, above twenty-one years, would have the right to vote at any election, voting would be free and secret, that the state would not allow any discrimination against any citizen on access to trading establishment including public restaurants and hotels, use of any public utility including wells, tanks and roads, bar anyone from any occupation or trade and provide equal opportunity for all without regard to religion, race, caste or sex. It abolished untouchability in any form and said that ‘the imposition of any disability on that account shall be an offence’. Not only did it ban traffic in human beings and ‘involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime duly convicted’, it also declared that ‘no child below the age of fourteen shall be engaged to work in any factory, mine or any hazardous employment’.¹⁸¹

On 13 December 1946 Jawaharlal Nehru moved the Objectives Resolution detailing the principles of the constitution which finally became the preamble to the constitution. M.R. Jayakar¹⁸² moved an amendment to the resolution suggesting that

[W]ith a view to securing, in the shaping of such a Constitution, the co-operation of the Muslim League and the Indian States, and thereby intensifying the firmness of this resolve, this Assembly postpones the further consideration of this question to a later date, to enable the representatives of these two bodies to participate, if they so choose, in the deliberations of this Assembly.¹⁸³

Patel intervened to point out that the concessions suggested in the debate appeared to be ‘in addition to or over and above the statement made in the White Paper’. He then pointed out that not only were they not accepted but the assembly was not going to accept any addition or alteration to the

Cabinet Mission Statement of 16 May 1946. He received profuse applause.¹⁸⁴

Patel's contribution in creating the framework of human rights in India has received little attention. Quite like he is the neglected third vital pillar of India's freedom movement, in the case of constitution-building too, he is the rarely applauded third critical leader, along with Ambedkar and Nehru, who gave the new nation its moral and ethical bedrock.

By May 1947, Patel had no doubt that Menon's suggested course of action was the only way left to create a sustainable, independent India. In that plan, even though some parts of India would have to be given away to Pakistan, most of it remained intact. If a plan of every state choosing their own path was accepted, the so-called Plan Balkan,¹⁸⁵ nothing of India would remain and the Balkanization would most likely create a situation of never-ending conflict.

The Rajputs of Kashmir or Jodhpur were keen to keep their states as [were] the Nawabs of Bhopal or Hyderabad. Voices on the extreme wings of the Akali movement had been raised in favour of an independent Sikh state—Khalistan. Trapped between the League's Pakistan and a withering [in that region] Congress, the Pathans of the Frontier sought independence in preference to merger with Pakistan.¹⁸⁶

Similar fires were being stoked in the east with a character we have met before, Suhrawardy.

Suhrawardy set up a momentum for an independent Bengal, an idea which Jinnah did not mind because it meant another part of India was lost to Gandhi and Nehru. He told Suhrawardy that he would prefer Balkanization of India after he got his Pakistan in the north-west; Suhrawardy could keep his Bengal.¹⁸⁷

(There was one man who kept Patel and Nehru abreast of such nefarious plans—Syama Prasad Mukherjee, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha. Mukherjee wrote to Patel in May 1947,

We are naturally very anxious about the final developments. Sarat Babu [Sarat Bose] is doing enormous mischief by trying to negotiate with Suhrawardy on the basis of sovereign Bengal. He has no support whatsoever from the Hindus and he dare not address

one single public meeting. I hope you will not allow this idea of sovereign Bengal to be considered serious by anybody.¹⁸⁸

Replied Patel: ‘You can depend on us to deal with the situation effectively and befittingly.’¹⁸⁹)

However, all this had to happen quickly—Jinnah was dying. The man who had made it a habit of smoking around fifty Craven “A” cigarettes a day, and any number of Cuban cigars, had been told by his doctor in May 1946 that he had only two years to live. As it turned out, Dr J.A.L. Patel’s diagnosis was remarkably accurate—Jinnah died in 1948. Though his illness was a secret—Lord Mountbatten would have been speaking for many in the Congress when he later remarked that had he known that Jinnah was so ill, he would have delayed Independence hoping the Muslim League leader’s death would avert Pakistan—Jinnah knew that he had to rush. By mid-1947 he had only a year to live. Jinnah’s state of mind in these years was probably best described by Alexander, a member of the Cabinet Mission Plan:

I have never seen a man with such a mind twisting and turning to avoid as far as possible direct answers. I came to the conclusion that he is playing this game, which is one of life and death for millions of people, very largely from the point of view of scoring a triumph in a legal negotiation by first making large demands and secondly insisting that he should make no offer reducing that demand but should wait for the other side always to say how much they would advance towards granting the demand.¹⁹⁰

Now that Nehru and Patel were in agreement that the only choice left to them was to accept partition to avoid a much greater disaster, they faced a monumental task. Explaining this to their guru. As always, Patel took on the responsibility of trying to convince the Mahatma that there really was no other choice.¹⁹¹

Faced with joint resistance from Patel and Nehru, Mountbatten abandoned Plan Balkan. From now there would be only one course of action—the division of India according to the ideas thrashed out by Menon and Patel, and independence from British rule.

A line would be drawn through Punjab and Bengal creating Pakistan.

In discussions spread over three days at the end of May and early June 1947, Patel ultimately prevailed upon Gandhi not to stand in the way of the final plan to attain independence for India. It must be reiterated that Gandhi did not, till the end, acquiesce to the idea of dividing the country but at least he came around to the fact that he should not actively attempt to prevent it.

In the middle of June, the Congress voted on the plan—153 for, 29 against, with a few abstentions.¹⁹²

Kripalani explained why the Congress leadership had no choice but to leave the Gandhian way.

I have seen a well where women with their children, 107 in all, threw themselves to save their honour. In another place, a place of worship, fifty young women were killed by their menfolk for the same reason [. . .] These ghastly experiences have no doubt affected my approach to the question. Some members have accused us [the Congress leadership] that we have taken this decision out of fear. I must admit the truth of this charge, but not in the sense in which it is made.¹⁹³

He was afraid too, but his fear had an altogether different, broader context.

The fear is not for the lives lost or of the widow's wail or the orphan's cry or of the many houses burned. The fear is that if we go on like this, retaliating and heaping indignities on each other, we shall progressively reduce ourselves to a state of cannibalism and worse. In every fresh communal fight, the most brutal and degraded acts of the previous fight become the norm.¹⁹⁴

More than ever, he felt a Gandhian loathing for this violence.

I have been with Gandhiji for the last thirty years. I joined him in Champaran. I have never swayed in my loyalty to him. It is not a personal but a political loyalty. Even when I differed with him I have considered his political instinct to be more correct than my elaborately reasoned attitudes. Today also I feel that he with his supreme fearlessness is correct and my stand defective.¹⁹⁵

Independence was around the corner but for Gandhi it would be a 'spiritual tragedy'.¹⁹⁶ Mountbatten, on his part, insisted that instead of people calling it the Mountbatten Plan, they should call it the Gandhi Plan.¹⁹⁷

In June at the Congress meeting, Gandhi had told his disciples that he was now helpless before their combined will. 'Well, I have not that strength

today or else I would declare rebellion single-handed.’¹⁹⁸

In July, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee sent a telegram to Viceroy Mountbatten:

My dear Dickie, I am very conscious that I put you in to bat on a very sticky wicket to pull the game out of the fire. Few people would have taken it on and few, if any, could have pulled the game round as you have.¹⁹⁹

On 16 June at the Congress meeting, when Patel stood up to defend the final plan including partition, he refused to accept that this plan was an outcome of fear. But he argued that if this plan was rejected

[T]he Congress would be the laughing stock of the world. Here was a chance for India to attain her independence. Was she going to throw it away? It would be incorrect to say—first let the British go away, then all questions could be solved. How were they to be solved and what would happen afterwards?²⁰⁰

It is unclear how many saw the irony in the Sardar’s words because it was he who used to most vehemently argue exactly that—let the British first leave (even if that meant handing power to the Muslim League) and the rest would be sorted out after. Now that the British were about to leave, Patel’s position had altered vastly.

But the Sardar would have sensed that some might be listening to him in disbelief, so he gave his reasoning.

His [Patel’s] nine months in office had completely disillusioned him [. . .] He had noticed that Muslim officials, right from the top down to the *chaprasis*, except for a few honourable exceptions, were all for the Muslim League. There should be no mistake about it. Mutual recriminations and allegations were the order of the day.²⁰¹

The British had earlier said that they would leave by June 1948. Now they were going by August 1947. Freedom was coming, said the Sardar. Now was the time to seize it.

The resolution was passed but it was perhaps the only resolution passed in complete silence in the history of the Congress party till that day.²⁰²

The person left out in all this was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Frontier Gandhi. Khan was with Gandhi till the end in opposing partition. He even

wanted an option of independence for the North-West Frontier Province, if partition could not be avoided. In the end, there was a referendum.

Curiously, the July 1947 referendum got 2,89,244 for Pakistan, 2874 for India, and following the example of Bacha Khan and his supporters, 2,80,000 did not vote.

One cannot help but wonder if the history of the subcontinent would not have turned out to be very different had Khan, instead of mourning, rallied his forces and got everyone to vote for India.



ELEVEN

‘THIS MUST, MUST AND MUST BE DONE.’

‘My dear Sardar Saheb,’ began the secret letter dated 17 June 1947, from Anantrai Pattani, the diwan of the princely state of Bhavnagar.

Jata Shankar Pathak [presumably the diwan’s spy] came today from Rajkot to Abu. He gave me the following information [. . .] There was a gathering of rulers in Kathiawar with Jam Saheb as leader. The Resident and the Political Agent are out to balkanize India and advised the rulers accordingly. The argument is that if Travancore can declare independence, the Kathiawar states, being maritime states, can do likewise. The advantage is that they can rule without interference from Delhi and develop their ports and they need not depend upon India for anything.¹

Well into 1947, the princely states were frantically pitching options where they would remain independent. On 26 March 1947, the diwan of the kingdom of Travancore was asking Lord Mountbatten ‘whether His Majesty’s government would accept Travancore as a dominion. He felt that not only Travancore, but a number of other states might apply for admission to the Commonwealth.’² The viceroy replied that he ‘was not prepared to discuss this question.’³

So, Pattani is right when he talks in his letter about secret meetings and plots between the princely states. This was a time of great intrigue across the country, held, picturesquely, as great intrigues often are, in filigreed palaces. The interesting thing to note is that while Viceroy Mountbatten was

trying to coax the princely states into a cohesive union and discouraging ideas of separation, some of the intrigue, as this letter mentions, in the kingdoms seemed to be with the blessings of British residents, or representatives of the British government in those kingdoms.

A secret meeting was held under the presidency of the Resident. It was decided that a Union of Kathiawar should be formed covering the whole peninsula and that it would declare sovereign independence subject to the right of Junagadh to declare separate independence or to join Pakistan. In case Junagadh departed, it would enter into an offensive and defensive treaty with the Union of Kathiawar and they would resist Baroda's claim to tribute, Jam Saheb would be the president of the union and seven states should constitute a council to govern the peninsula.⁴

The seven states that were mentioned were Jamnagar, Bhavnagar, Gondal, Porbandar, Morvi, Dhrangadhra and Junagadh.

The constitution of the union is under way. The Resident is helping and Jam Saheb has promised to put up a crore of rupees in furtherance of the scheme. Baroda was severely repudiated for joining the Constituent Assembly and all the states decided to repudiate Baroda's claim to tribute. Pathak asked Major Hailey, the Political Agent, why Baroda should not get its tribute. Hailey said that the tribute was more than a hundred years old and when Britain was resigning sovereignty, Baroda's sovereignty fell with it. Whatever logic may be, there it is!⁵

(If you are befuddled at how Baroda could be severely repudiated, then it might be worth recalling that the princes thought of themselves as the states they ruled and referred to one another, and were often referred to by others, by the name of the state—so for instance, Baroda could be telephoning Jodhpur to say something which meant the ruler of Baroda had called the ruler of Jodhpur.)

This logic in the letter meant nothing to Patel. He had already lost the battle against partition. But he was determined not to lose any more of the country—especially since he had agreed to Pakistan under extreme duress, and then only to stop the Balkanization of India. He would not, now, allow that breaking up to unfold. Not on his watch.

A letter he received on 1 July 1947 from Indian civil servant C.S. Venkatachar, another decorated bureaucrat of the British empire, proves that

the diwan's information was correct—the British were encouraging the states to break away. But, not unlike Menon, Venkatachar too was, at that time, working to thwart the devious and divisive plans of his British masters. In his letter, he tells Patel about a proposal to transfer to the native princes the 200-strong, highly trained Crown Representative's Police Force and Railway Police (800 highly trained men in Rajputana alone) which had been raised and maintained on taxes from British-held India since 1938. Though Venkatachar does not spell it out, the inference is very clear—the British were transferring arms and forces to the rulers to ensure they could resist being subsumed into the republic of India. As we have seen above, even the nawab of Bhopal inquired about arms purchases in his conversation with Lord Mountbatten. Venkatachar wrote:

What is now being proposed to be done is to hand over this highly organised Police Force to some of the Indian States. There are serious objections to this course. The entire Police Force should pass on to the control of the Government of India; and, in my opinion, it should come under the administrative control of [the] Home Department. Secondly, the States are certainly not entitled to get all the arms and equipment which the [Police] Force has. It is most dangerous to hand over what really amounts to a small private army to a group of small States.⁶

By the time he received this letter, Patel had already created a special department to take care of the amalgamation of the princely states with Menon as his deputy (Nehru's nominee could not find a place in the committee due to Patel's refusal to accommodate him⁷).

On 5 July 1947, Patel told the rulers of the princely states,

[H]istory has taught us a lesson that our country was divided into small states and we could not unite and repulse foreign attack and foreigners consolidated their rule here. Our internal quarrels, envy and enmity have contributed to our defeats at the time of foreign invasion. Let us not repeat the mistake and get caught in the net of slavery.⁸

In all fairness, there was a promise that Patel made repeatedly as he coaxed the princely states to shed their independence which was never fulfilled. He promised that,

Natives states have accepted [the] fundamental principle that they will join the Indian Union with regard to foreign affairs, defence, post and telegraph and transport. We do not demand anything more. These three subjects are such that the welfare of the country lie in these subjects. If in other matters they want to be independent, we will respect their wishes [...] we would scrupulously respect their autonomous existence.⁹

From the states, an early entrant into the Constituent Assembly was Baroda. Diwan Brojendra Lal Mitter told the assembly,

A hundred and fifty years of unitary British rule has resulted in a measure of uniformity in British India but in the states there is still a great variety. Some states are as advanced as British India, where the people are associated with the administration. Some are absolute monarchies. Some are feudal and some are primitive. All these have to be fitted into the Indian constitution, because our 93 million of population are included in the Indian total of 400 million. We do not want to disturb the main design [...] We want unity in diversity.¹⁰

In his speech, Mitter asked for time and patience—the princely states had had a long history and tradition and abrupt change would take some time for them. ‘I appeal to our British Indian colleagues to exercise a little patience with us. We want to march along with them but the pace has to be regulated without impending the forward move.’¹¹

Some states like Bikaner were more reconciled to this change than others. On 24 March 1947, the maharaja of Bikaner told Mountbatten that several states, including his, were moving closer to joining the union of India. But there was one caveat. The maharaja of Bikaner too thought the states needed more time.

The Maharajah also gave an account of the lines along which it was planned that the states should develop. It was proposed, within the next 3 to 5 years, to introduce democratic government and constitutional sovereignty—though the right of the ruler directly to control the armed forces would be retained.¹²

The viceroy gave him the same reply he had been giving to many others—after June 1948, he could not make any promises for any British authority presence, of any kind, in India. Earlier the nawab of Bhopal had asked the viceroy the same thing—receiving the same answer—and while complaining about divisions among the princes, bitching out the maharaja

of Patiala as a ‘Sikh in the Congress pocket’, wanting to know if he could buy arms from Britain, and all the while denying that he was looking to strike a deal with Jinnah!¹³

‘We consider ourselves as parts of India, although some outsiders had raised walls between us. But these unnatural walls are crumbling today, and we hope that within a short time India would be absolutely one single unit,’¹⁴ Jai Narayan Vyas of Jodhpur, who led regional peoples movements in the area, and would later become the prime minister of Jodhpur in 1948, said in the Constituent Assembly debates on 28 April 1947.

That was all very well, but not every prime minister of every princely state thought like that, and nor did their rulers. The British, too, coveted the property of some rulers. For instance, among the Mountbatten Papers kept in the University of Southampton, I discovered a letter dated 1 February 1945 that mentioned a building called The Anchorage on Apollo Bunder in Bombay which was owned by the maharaja of Mysore but was being eyed by British authorities. The property was ‘on the sea front near the Taj Mahal Hotel, and could be used as a hostel or mess for about 45 officers. It is near the centre of service activities, and is in use for a small part of the year only. It seems to have been asked for first in September 1943, for use as an officers’ leave hostel.’¹⁵ The secretary to the viceroy had repeatedly written to the maharaja about it but without success. The letter goes on to make further argument about why this building is so necessary: as housing for women’s services in the army and the navy

[T]o avoid having to house them in unsuitable boarding houses and cheap hotels. The Anchorage could best be used as a women’s services officers hostel and club. At the moment, the ground floor is empty; the first floor is occupied by a Colonel Shumshure Rana from Nepal, who uses it during the races; the second is occupied by the Ranee [Rani] of Jasdan; and the top floor is being repainted, perhaps for guests from Udaipur.¹⁶

A few months later, and after letters to and from Lord Wavell and ‘Commander’ Lord Mountbatten, the maharaja seems to have been ‘persuaded’ to donate his house towards the war effort. The last letter in the series from Mountbatten thanks the maharaja and mentions that he is, ahem,

‘taking action’¹⁷ about ‘the Star of India and the Order of the Indian Empire’—no doubt gifts to show British appreciation for the maharaja’s contribution.

Many states were aghast at the turmoil that befell them. In many cases their incredulity at the change coming to their door was partly caused by their isolation from the freedom movement, or wilful blindness. Even in March 1946, in a meeting with Lord Mountbatten, Maharaja Sadul Singh of Bikaner had two demands—that his title be elevated to General [he was at that time Major General] and the gun-salute of his state be increased.¹⁸

Some rulers were caught in the crossfire of partition that was devastating their states. One tragic example is Patiala.

In the Patiala state, the Muslims who constituted one-third of its population was [sic] virtually wiped out or expelled [. . .] the state of Faridkot distributed over 1,000 firearms to the Sikhs in the state and [ensured] that every Sikh household had been adequately fortified. The report said that the ruler had done this in the belief that the exit of the British would be followed by chaos in the region, during the course of which the lands of weaker neighbours could be grabbed. In the city, on August 15th, 500 rioters including police and troops in uniform attacked Mohalla Kucha Rangrazaan and killed 1,000 Muslims.¹⁹

Nearly 23,000 Muslims took refuge in Bahadurgarh Fort. Overall nearly 14,000 Muslims were killed. Muslim numbers swelled in the camps: at Dera Bassi camp: 15,000, at Sirhind: 60,000, at Samana: 10,000, at Talwandi: 10,000 and at Nauli: 40,000. Out of a total Muslim population of 4,36,539, nearly 1,88,000 Muslims shifted to the refugee camps. In between all this, there was, even at that time, the menace of rumours and false news.

On August 22nd, city Muslim League President of Ludhiana reported that at Doraha Railway Station, UP [United Provinces]–Bombay Express had been detained on August 21st by Sikhs. About one thousand Muslims were attacked and butchered with swords and bhalas. But when enquiries were made by the state it was found that these allegations proved false and baseless, and were made to ferment communal bitterness. Again, city Muslim League President of Bhatinda reported that in Tappa Mandi, a general massacre of Muslims had taken place and in Patiala five Muslims had been murdered at the Railway Station on August 25th.²⁰

Driven to the edge by the killings and furious at the false news, the maharaja of Patiala complained that reports of massacres from his territory were highly exaggerated.

The Maharaja added that every effort was being made to protect the life and property of Muslims but that the endeavours were greatly handicapped by gruesome stories of Muslim atrocities on minorities in West Punjab brought by refugees. To protect the Muslims, the State deployed army to travel with the trains running between Ambala and Bhatinda. In September, the Patiala State Government issued a press communiqué. It said that communal disturbances broke out in certain parts of Patiala state and city proper, where the situation took a turn for the worse.²¹

In between, with armed Sikhs attacking trains carrying Muslims and the state military firing at rioters, things lurched from bad to worse. The maharaja had to issue an order banning the assembly of more than five people with arms and ammunition and that anyone violating the order should be shot.²²

In 1939, the maharaja of Patiala had warned the prajamandal or citizens committee:

My ancestors have won the state by the sword and I plan to keep it by the sword. I do not recognise any organisation to represent my people or to speak on their behalf. I am their sole and only representative. No organisation such as Prajamandal can be allowed to exist within the state. If you want to do Congress work, get out of the State. The Congress can terrify the British Government but if it ever tries to interfere in my state it will find me a terrible resister. I cannot tolerate any flag other than my own to be flown within my boundaries.²³

The maharaja's threat of violence against the prajamandal is a sharp example of the kind of violence that the Congress Party had to face in many princely states while pushing the cause of democratic public organizations. Attacks on Patel and Gandhi, mentioned earlier in this book, were by-products of such hatred.

You stop your Prajamandal activities, otherwise I shall resort to such repression that your generations to come will not forget it. When I see some of my dear subjects drifting away into another fold it touches the very core of my heart. I advise you to get out of the Mandal and stop all kind of agitation; or else, remember, I am a military man; my talk is blunt and my bullet straight.²⁴

But by 1944, no amount of straight-talking or even bullets seemed to be able to control the violence in his state. By November 1947, the maharaja of Patiala wrote to Patel in despair that he had received information that a small band of Sikhs were guarding precious volumes of the Guru Granth Sahib in Multan at great risk to their lives. Could they be saved? He described what had happened to the Sikhs as a ‘holocaust’. He complained that propaganda against the Sikhs had spread to America and Britain and that he feared attacks on Sikhs there too.²⁵ Patel wrote to Nehru asking if he would take it up in his next meeting with Liaquat Ali Khan and assured the maharaja that he would do all he could to counter the propaganda.

In Orissa (now Odisha), from the time of the Quit India Movement, the demand for a more equitable society had been growing. In 1944, a prominent Odia intellectual gave words to the anger of the people in a song called *Kie Sala Saifan* (Who is the Devil):

We are born as human beings
But lack any self-respect
They can take liberties with our women folk
And for them we are scoundrels!
Through rain and heat we toil for them
Providing them with shelter
We invite darkness into our homes
While lighting their world!
We lay the table for their children
While our young ones die of starvation
They are their ‘Majesties’ their ‘Excellencies’ and their ‘Highnesses’.²⁶

Not only was there feudalism, regionalism, casteism and religious divide but there was also a class conflict in play during this volatile period.

‘If anything, this points to how the Quit India movement had shaken intellectuals like Kalindi Charan, making them focus on the class dimension.’²⁷

By 1946, the endgame was near in Orissa.

As for the princely states, this last phase saw a popular upsurge sweeping through them. What is noticeable is a close collaboration between these feudal chiefs and the retreating colonial power. The first indication of this was the restoration of the chiefs of Nilgiri and

Dhenkanal. The feudal chiefs, pampered by the colonial bureaucracy, began to examine the possibilities of staying out of the Indian union. This drive led to two meetings—one of the Orissan and Chattisgarh chiefs at Puri under the aegis of the resident, Eastern States and the political agent and the other, of Oriyan chiefs at Bhawanipatana.²⁸

In an atmosphere vitiated with communal tension, the chiefs put together a militia of Muslims, Pathans and Gorkhas and tried to break the local prajamandal for democracy. The target was to shift political power to the hands of chieftains after the British left. The prajamandals fought back by organizing people against the rulers to demand for democracy.

This phase witnessed a major achievement of the Prajamandal movement—Nilgiri being the first princely state to merge with the Indian union. The response of the Congress to the Prajamandal struggle in this phase reflects how it prevaricated—shifting from uncertainty and a reluctance to alienate the princes, to harnessing the powerful anti-feudal struggles in order to integrate these feudal bastions with Orissa.²⁹

As the old feudal systems were challenged one by one and the old colonial power structure started to retreat, the political force clearly became the Congress Party and its leaders.

In Bhopal, Nawab Hamidullah Khan had been showing some initial resistance to the idea that his state would not be independent and made a passionate defence of the virtues of princely rule. In one of his last speeches on the subject in April 1947, the nawab declared,

I am clear in my mind that the most progressive among Rulers have done more to advance the sum total of the happiness of the people entrusted to their care than has been secured in many places by following the mere outward forms and machinery of democratic governance [...] In the vast majority of cases the tenor of peoples' lives [in the states] has been peaceful, contented and unruffled, and their loyalty to the rulers has generally been unquestioned [...] Such loyalty and affection cannot be bought or coerced.³⁰

It would be the combination of Patel and Menon who would frustrate the ambitions of the nawab of Bhopal by picking up one by one all the nawab's potential allies in Rajasthan as we shall see.

This had been the nawab's stance before the Cabinet Mission Plan team too where he had argued that 'the Indian [princely] states wanted to

continue their existence with the maximum degree of sovereignty'.³¹

Munshi believed that Jinnah was trying to create a buffer of technically independent but allied states cutting across Jodhpur, Udaipur, Indore, Bhopal and Baroda, and was instigating the rulers. In fact, for some time, the ruler of Bhopal even toyed with the idea of joining Pakistan, even though his state was far away from the borders of Pakistan and his subjects overwhelmingly Hindu.

Over a series of meetings and lunches, ruthlessly using plenty of sticks, some carrots and enormous patience, Patel, Menon and Mountbatten (despite the fact that the viceroy's own private secretary and adviser on the princely states matter Sir Conrad Corfield often seemed to be working against the arguments of trio) brought the princes on board to the union of India one by one. For every accommodating ruler like the maharaja of Bikaner or the maharaja of Patiala, there were men like the maharaja of Indore who had to be cajoled into not complicating matters by appointing a European diwan. In the kingdom of Rewa, Sardar Patel had to intervene between the ruler and his son to bring about a settlement; some like the raja of Bilaspur wanted to know if there would be British assistance forthcoming if a state decided not to ally with either the dominion of India or of Pakistan; and the state of Travancore declared that it would be independent and even appointed its own trade representative in Pakistan. Each ruler, including those of problematic states like Junagadh, Kashmir and Hyderabad, had to be dealt with in their own way.

An interesting document that helps us understand the flurry of these deliberations is the diary of Maniben Patel.

It begins as early as 25 January 1947 when Anantrai Pattani, the diwan of Bhavnagar, pops up in the diary.

29 January: the ruler of Gwalior.

30 January: the ruler of Patiala.

28 February: the minister from Travancore.

1 March: the dewan of Gwalior.

26 March: the raja of Kasimpur and the nawab of Palanpur.

10 April: a meeting on the princely state of Rewa

24 April: the dewan of Kapurthala³²

As the date of Independence, 15 August, approached, these meetings became more frequent. On 30 April, Patel met the diwans of both Jodhpur and Jaipur. He met the maharaja of Patiala on 5 May and the ruler of Jodhpur, his son and the diwan of the state the following day. The Jam Saheb or ruler of Kutch came by straight from the airport with his queen. The list is endless.

The British, under Lord Mountbatten, put the situation starkly to the rulers—from 15 August 1947, none of the overarching protections and duties that Her Majesty’s government provided and which helped the rulers keep peace among themselves and inside their kingdoms would exist.

The statement that the Sardar and Menon drafted for the rulers had the simple suggestion—choose a side (*sotto voce* India) or ‘bear in mind that the alternative to cooperation in the general interest is anarchy and chaos’.³³

On 25 July 1947, Viceroy Mountbatten spoke to the princes in an extempore speech and ‘was the apogee of persuasion’.³⁴ He gave the states a firm choice—submit to either dominion in terms of defence policy, external affairs and communications since these could not feasibly be handled by individual rulers. While the kings could choose any dominion, they had to understand the limitations of geography and work within it—most of the states naturally fell within the geographical parameters of India. Of course, there was the question of whether more of the population was Hindu or Muslim but at this stage that did not perhaps need any more reiteration. Beyond this, the states would have a lot of natural freedom, but the decision had to be made by 15 August 1947. ‘You cannot run away from the dominion government which is your neighbour [any more than] you can run away from the subjects for whose welfare you are responsible.’³⁵ By this time, Lord Mountbatten knew that he would be staying on as the first governor general of India but, much to the dismay of the viceroy, Jinnah had not extended the same offer with regard to Pakistan. Effortless marketer that he was, Mountbatten knew which side his bread was buttered and he delivered. In his exhortations to the princes, Viceroy Mountbatten never failed to remind them that if the rulers refused to sign, it would greatly disappoint his cousin King George VI since the two new countries were

going to be dominions of His Majesty's empire, and causally suggested that perhaps the rulers of the princely states could choose independence when India became a republic.³⁶ It was the most curious mishmash of half-truths and blatant lies in service of a political entity that did not yet exist. But the men were convinced of its underlying logic—there was no way to ensure the sustainability of independent India without stitching together this union.

Every state and ruler had to sign a common accession deed so that there was uniformity, not hundreds of agreements with different nuances and wording floating around. To get this done, Patel even agreed to do that very rare thing for his nature—smile. He is said to have greeted the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar and his queen with a smile when they visited him in Delhi. This is the same ruler who was suspected of trying to have Patel murdered during independence activism in his kingdom.³⁷

There were others also who played their parts in pushing the rulers towards accession. Munshi wrote to the maharana of Udaipur in April 1947:

First Patiala, Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Gwalior, Rewa, Baroda, the Deccan States and Cochin, or at any rate most of them [perhaps Munshi did not even know how many were actually coming, but he threw in the names anyway!], are coming in on the 28th, and it would be a great mistake not to send at least as a gesture of goodwill [a classic foot in the door strategy]. Second, from now to June, there is going to be a tremendous upheaval in the country. Men as well as capital are trying to find some well-protected Indian state where they can find an asylum during the coming turbulent times. If you do not take advantage of this one year and put Udaipur on the map of India, the state will be left behind completely.³⁸

C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, the diwan of Travancore, was a particularly trenchant beast constantly coming up with reasons why his state should be the exception. For instance, he asked if joining the union would mean the state having to give up its revenues from customs, imports and duties to a future central government? That, he protested, would surely not benefit the state. Menon explained to him that, at least as of that point, there was no such suggestion, and turned swiftly to emotional blackmail, warning Aiyar of threats of communist uprisings and takeovers with no centre or strong Sardar to protect him and his maharaja. Wouldn't it be sad, Menon told

Aiyar, if history remembered him not as someone who played a constructive role in this crucial hour but incessantly laid out hurdles?³⁹

On 25 July 1947, Aiyar carried to his home state the document of accession to be signed from Delhi. When he landed he was physically attacked and wounded, which spurred Patel to make a public appeal to the local citizens activist groups and the state unit of the Congress to maintain peace. Even before Aiyar could recover, the maharaja of Travancore conveyed his consent. Travancore was in the bag.

Hanwant Singh, the maharaja of Jodhpur, pulled out a gun and threatened to kill Menon when asked to sign the document. Singh, along with the maharaja of Jaisalmer, had been in talks with the League and Jinnah. To ensure that they signed on to Pakistan, Jinnah placed a blank paper before them and asked them to fill in whatever terms they wanted. At this point, the clearly rattled ruler of Jaisalmer, no doubt concerned about his subjects, blurted out that he would sign but if there ever was a fight between Hindus and Muslims, he would not support Muslims. This threw the entire party off guard and the signing was postponed.⁴⁰ During this time, the maharaja of Jaisalmer had realized that not one of his powerful aristocrats would have supported his decision to accede to Pakistan. He had no choice but to move to the Indian side. The idea of a Rajasthan bloc joining Pakistan also fell apart when one of the senior-most rajas, the maharana of Udaipur, refused to deal with Jinnah saying, ‘My choice was made by my ancestors. If they had faltered, they would have left us a kingdom as large as Hyderabad. They did not; neither shall I. I am with India.’⁴¹ The hope of a unified group of Rajasthani states joining Pakistan would be problematic without Udaipur in between which linked Indore and Bhopal to the east and Jodhpur to the west.

Meanwhile, Mountbatten and Menon met Hanwant Singh of Jodhpur to convince him. After many conversations, during which Singh told Menon that if Jinnah could give him carte blanche, why couldn’t the Indian side, the maharaja finally relented and signed. But, as soon as Mountbatten stepped out of the room, he pulled out a gun and pointed it at Menon’s head.

The civil servant kept his calm and told the king that killing him would not cancel the accession.⁴²

Interestingly, soon after Independence, in 1952, Hanwant Singh created his own party and seemed like he would win by a landslide until his plane crashed, killing him and his young wife Zubeida.

One by one, everyone, from the rulers of Bharatpur to the Gaekwads of Baroda signed on. The king of Indore went silent, and then suddenly sent in the signed papers to Menon and Patel. On 12 August 1947, the raja of Dewas, Yashwant Rao Pawar, wrote to Patel to explain his delay in signing on.

May I, at this juncture, make a personal appeal to you not misconstrue or misunderstand the attitude of those of us who have held out so far. The question of accession was of far reaching importance; and, naturally, the princes had their own personal and dynastic apprehensions. They had to safeguard the autonomy of their states, and, at the same time, contribute to the unification of the country.⁴³

Pawar said the princes were being torn in different directions trying to keep up their legacy and participate in the freedom wave of the country.

With their age-old traditions pulling them one way and their duty to the mother country the other way, they were hard put to find an honourable way out to safeguard their traditions and to help by making their contribution towards strengthening the dominion [. . .] I am positive and can assure you that the hesitancy to take the decision was not due to any unpatriotic intentions or ulterior motives nor with the intention of preventing our beloved Bharatvarsha from achieving its freedom [. . .] I would earnestly request you to forget the controversies of the past.⁴⁴

On 13 August, Patel wrote to Gandhi expressing concern over the latter's being in Calcutta where violence was a constant hum. He then went on to say,

Mostly all Hindu kings have joined the Indian Union. Among the Muslim kings, Rampur, Palampur and other small states have joined the Indian Union. Now only Bhopal, Nizam [of Hyderabad] and Kashmir remain. Bhopal has no other [way] to go than to join. Hyderabad will take some time. But we have to see what Kashmir decides. In Kathiawar, only Junagadh is yet to join.⁴⁵

The nawab of Bhopal, whom Mountbatten described as his second-best friend in India (after Nehru), was offered special treatment to get him to accede: He would sign but that news had to be kept secret for ten days, during which time he could, if he wanted, change his mind. The nawab signed on 15 August and the papers remained with Mountbatten for ten days. Naturally the nawab did not reconsider his decision, and on 25 August the papers went to Patel.

When it was over, the nawab of Bhopal wrote to Patel:

I do not disguise the fact that while the struggle was on, I used every means in my power to preserve the independence and neutrality of my state. Now that I have conceded defeat, I hope that you will find that I can be as staunch a friend as I have been an inveterate opponent. I now wish to tell you that so long as you maintain your present firm stand against the disruptive forces in the country and continue to be a friend of the states as you have shown you are, you will find in me a loyal and faithful friend.⁴⁶

Patel replied:

Quite candidly, I do not look upon the accession of your state to the Indian Dominion as either a victory for us or a defeat for you. It is only right and propriety which have triumphed in the end and, in that triumph, you and I have played our respective roles. You deserve full credit for having recognised the soundness of the position and for the courage, the honesty and the boldness for having given up your earlier stand which according to us was entirely antagonistic to the interests as much of India as your own state.⁴⁷

On 14 August, Mountbatten wrote to Patel,

It was indeed fortunate that a statesman of your vision and realism should have been associated with all the discussions [...] and delicate negotiations with the states [...] I always felt that we should become friends, and I believe history will prove that the friendship played a very vital part in obtaining a peaceful and speedy transfer of power to a Dominion of India which, with the states, will be greater than British India was by itself.⁴⁸

That day, at the stroke of the midnight hour, in Jawaharlal Nehru's memorable words, India became independent. For Gandhi it was a pyrrhic victory but for the men he had groomed so assiduously, their time had finally come.

‘The duty is too sacred to be profaned by selfish scrambles, internecine dissensions, and narrow prejudices; the responsibilities are too great to be slighted by obstructive tactics or prejudiced by subversive activities,’ said Patel in his Independence Day message.⁴⁹

Of course, he knew only too well all the scrambling that had occurred, and perhaps had an inkling that some of the nastiest internecine dissensions were right around the corner. The least of which was the physical division of what belonged to India, and what to Pakistan. Here is, from the Mountbatten Papers, the depressing way in which the army was divided: ‘Plans should be made forthwith for the immediate movement to the Pakistan area of all Muslim majority units that may be outside that area, and similarly for the movement to India of all exclusively non-Muslim or non-Muslim majority units at present in the Pakistan area.’⁵⁰ This was only the first phase.

The next stage would be to comb out the units themselves with a view to eliminating non-Pakistan personnel by transfer to the armed forces of the new India and vice versa. These transfers must be on a voluntary basis and this may mean, for example, that Hindu and Sikh personnel from Pakistan may elect to serve in the armed forces of the new India, and Muslim personnel from the new India may elect to serve in the Pakistan forces.⁵¹

Let’s start with the issue of the lines demarcating what was India, and what Pakistan. Sir Cyril Radcliffe had drawn the lines in thirty-six days. Radcliffe ‘who had never been further east than Gibraltar’⁵² used whatever documents and maps were available with the British government in Delhi to make his divisions, mostly using calculations that had been first made by the former viceroy Lord Wavell. A lot of Radcliffe’s work was intended, in a sense, to be of a somewhat temporary nature, which the two states would subsequently alter, adjust and modify to ensure peace.⁵³

Radcliffe’s Award was ready on 12 August, well in time for the transfer of power in Pakistan on the fourteenth. But in a remarkable last-minute about-turn, Mountbatten suddenly developed cold feet about publishing it. He brought his influence to bear upon Radcliffe, who agreed reluctantly to post-date the Award for the thirteenth, by which time Mountbatten had already left for Karachi, and ultimately the Award was only published on 17 August.⁵⁴

But the repercussions could only be delayed, not mitigated. The fires, already ablaze in the Punjab, now became a maelstrom. Radcliffe had once imagined that he could give a sliver of Ferozepur district with a nominal Muslim majority to Pakistan as a trade-off for giving Gurdaspur and part of Lahore to India.

This extraordinary proposal would have left a forty-mile-long spur or salient Pakistani territory sticking out into the heart of the Sikh community. Like Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, it would have been an extremely vulnerable geographical anomaly, which ran the risk of being bisected at its western end in the event of military hostilities. Moreover, it was an obvious and provocative challenge to Sikh security. Ironically it was news of this planned but ultimately rejected boundary line that was to spark communal massacres [...] It was certainly true that in general the Radcliffe Line favoured India.⁵⁵

This of course was a situation that angered the Muslim League. Jinnah was already unhappy about the size and shape of Pakistan and now he would be losing more territory. But the Sikh anger was a potent force which would have never allowed any other option.

In the eyes of Jinnah and Liaqat Ali Khan, not only was their homeland being partitioned, but even the fringes were being gobbled up by Congress. Yet in practice, it is hard to see how this could have been avoided, given the justifiable anger of the Sikh minority.⁵⁶

But the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple at Amritsar, had to be in Indian territory. Therefore, the demand for adjoining areas to also be in India grew. As the creation of Bangladesh two decades later proved, it would have been difficult for Pakistan to defend vulnerable bits of stray non-contiguous territory. Already in 1944, a prominent Sikh leader had warned, 'If Pakistan is foisted upon the Sikhs with the help of British bayonets, we will tear it into shreds as Guru Gobind Singh tore up the Mughal Empire.'⁵⁷

Even as the bloodletting began in Punjab, Patel wrote to Gandhi that

[P]eople have become lunatic [...] We have to try hard that [the] Punjab situation does not affect other parts of the country [...] Except Hyderabad, the problem of the native states is almost solved [...] Kashmir situation is as it is. When Punjab problem is there it is not advisable to do anything.⁵⁸

There was little the home minister could do except organize ever scarce relief materials.

But the foundations of secular united India were already crumbling in tiny Junagadh on the southwest tip of what is now Gujarat, surrounded by Indian land, with a small portion bordering the Arabian sea.

The state had no contiguity with Pakistan by land and its distance by sea, from [its] Port Veraval to Karachi [the nearest Pakistani port], was about 300 miles [482 kilometres approximately] and the population [according to the census of 1941] numbered 670,719 of whom over 80 per cent were Hindus.⁵⁹

Junagadh was also holy land for the Hindus as it is believed that it was in this region that Lord Krishna left his mortal body, and on the kingdom's land stood the ruins of the sacred temple of Somnath which had been looted numerous times by the Mahmud of Ghazni, a general of Allauddin Khilji; Mahmud Begada, the Sultan of Gujarat; the Portuguese, when they gained control of nearby Diu; and then under the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb. Each time it was rebuilt, a marauder destroyed it and looted its wealth.

Junagadh was ruled by the Rajput Chudasama dynasty until the mid-fifteenth century when it was conquered by Sultan Mahmud Begada of Ahmedabad. Subsequently, in the reign of Emperor Akbar, it supplicated to the Mughal court in Delhi. By the mid-eighteenth century though, Mughal power had started to wane and an enterprising soldier, Sherkhan Babi, uprooted the Mughal governor and founded his own dynasty. The nawab of Junagadh, Sir Mahabatkhana Rasulkhanji, was from the line of Babi.⁶⁰ That the nawab was crazy about dogs and, on some counts, had nearly 2000 pedigree dogs, is relatively well known, as is his penchant for spending vast amounts on the upkeep of his pets and the lavish weddings of the dogs. He was also the man who prevented the destruction of the Gir forest range—something for which he does not get enough credit—and who worked to preserve the home of the Asiatic lion. It might not be incorrect to say that the nawab was in a sense the saviour of the Gir lion. He was also fond of breeding and preserving the most valued desi breed of cows, the Gir cow.

In May 1947, Menon got word that the nawab had been speaking to the Muslim League. This was confirmed when no response came till 12 August 1947 and when reminded that the deadline for acceding was 14 August, Diwan Sir Shah Nawaz Bhutto curtly sent back a note saying the issue was being studied.

On 15 August 1947, the nawab declared that he had decided to join his state with Pakistan. At the end of August, Menon wrote to the high commissioner of Pakistan in India saying that were Pakistan to accept Junagadh's accession, defying all the criterion of a Hindu-majority population and lack of geographical context, it could cause problems between the two dominions.

Several messages went to and fro after this between the two dominions, including interventions by Lord Mountbatten, Lord Ismay and others.

Two letters from the nawab and his diwan to Jinnah were also intercepted. In one the diwan promised that 'no sacrifice is too great to preserve the prestige, honour and rule of Highness and to protect Islam'⁶¹, and in the other the nawab had written, 'The reports in the press must have given you an idea that Junagadh is showered with criticism all over. Thanks to Almighty, we are firm.'⁶²

The nawab did try to stand firm when the rulers of neighbouring princely states like Bhavnagar, Morvi, Gondal, Porbandar and Wankaner protested furiously that he was disturbing the balance of the whole region, by telling them:

The Indian Independence Act did not and does not require a ruler to consult his people before deciding on accession. I think we are making an unnecessary fetish of the argument of geographical contiguity. Even then, this is sufficiently provided by Junagadh's sea coast with several ports which can keep connection with Pakistan.⁶³

Menon travelled to Junagadh in September to speak directly to the nawab. When he reached the state, the diwan told him that the nawab was too ill to meet him, and even His Highness's son and heir apparent was much too busy in a cricket match for a meeting!⁶⁴

A few days later, with the crisis growing, the nawab also sent his own troops to overrun small district-states nearby, including a place called Babariawad. ‘Sardar’s view of the matter was that Junagadh’s action in sending troops to Babariawad and refusing to withdraw them was no less than an act of aggression which must be met by a show of strength.’⁶⁵ Lord Mountbatten, though, warned that if the act of India sending in forces triggered a war between the two dominions ‘such a war might be the end of Pakistan altogether, but it would also be the end of India for at least a generation to come’.⁶⁶

Soon news came that a hundred thousand Hindus had already fled Junagadh and their flight naturally had disturbed the peace in the Kathiawar region.

In September 1947, the Congress party in Kathiawar announced a provincial people’s government with a proclamation that the nawab had lost the allegiance of his subjects.

When talks with Pakistan went nowhere to resolve the situation, Patel sent an Indian force along with an administrator to takeover Babariawad.

By the end of October, the nawab had fled to Karachi, taking with him all the money in the treasury, his 2000 dogs and all his wives—actually that’s not correct, not all the wives. When one wife realized at the airport that she had forgotten to bring her child(!), the nawab left anyway, asking her to go to the Portuguese settlement of Diu.

Left to defend Junagadh, the diwan Sir Shah Nawaz Bhutto wrote to Jinnah on 27 October 1947, complaining that,

Our principal sources of revenue, railways and customs have gone to the bottom [. . .]
Though immediately after accession, His Highness and myself received hundreds of messages chiefly from Muslims congratulating us on the decision, today our brethren are indifferent and cold. Muslims of Kathiawar seem to have lost all enthusiasm for Pakistan.⁶⁷

In November 1947, as the nawab escaped and it seemed clear that the future of Junagadh would be with India, Patel said,

The Nawab of Junagadh left the state without a shot being fired. In fact, the trouble had been brought upon the Nawab's head by the wrong advice which he received from the people who were bent upon mischief and by the machinations of the Pakistan government. Pakistan had no business to meddle with Junagadh. When we accepted partition, we did so in the hope of a final settlement of a brotherly dispute. We felt that by satisfying the obstinate demand of a brother who was part of the joint family, we would bring peace to both of us and prosperity to all. But hardly had the partition been affected, when the Punjab disturbances engulfed us. Nevertheless, we took particular care to avoid any obstacles in the way of Pakistan's relationship with the states with which such relationship was quite natural. We did not attempt to seduce any of their states into our fold. But it was they who throughout made it a business to create difficulties and obstacles for us so often and as much as they could possibly do.⁶⁸

On 20 February 1948, a referendum was held in Junagadh. It was overseen by a senior judicial officer of the Indian Civil Service 'who was neither Hindu nor Muslim'⁶⁹ and out of 2,01,457 registered voters, 1,90,870 voted but only 91 chose Pakistan.

When Patel saw the dilapidated Somnath temple, he announced that the Indian government would assist in rebuilding the temple under Munshi's supervision, and in spite of Nehru's objections. When Junagadh was brought into the Indian Union, Patel told Munshi, 'So it is Jaya Somnath.'⁷⁰ But after Sardar's death Nehru told Munshi: 'I don't like you trying to restore Somnath. It is Hindu revivalism.'⁷¹ To which Munshi replied in a long letter where he argued that the Mahatma had agreed that the government of India should fund the restoration of Somnath too, and further, he added, 'I can assure you that the "Collective Sub-conscious" of India today is happier with the scheme of reconstruction of Somnath sponsored by the Government of India than with many other things that we have done and are doing.'⁷² It is unclear who mentioned the phrase 'Collective Sub-conscious' but it seems like it cropped up in the conversation between Munshi and Nehru. Nehru also told Rajendra Prasad not to go for the inauguration of the restored temple but Prasad ignored the advice, arguing that he would do the same for the opening of a church or a mosque. But the *Times of India* reported that even the speech of the president of India at the inauguration of the temple was blacked out by All India Radio.⁷³

Back in north India, corpses piled up higher and higher as Punjab and Delhi continued to burn. On 30 September, Patel made a personal appeal in Amritsar to Sikh leaders to help stop the relentless retaliatory butchery.

All of you know how dear are the Sikhs to me! I feel it is in the best interests of your community that the sooner we evacuated our refugees, the better would it be. I, therefore, appeal to you to break this vicious circle of attacks and retaliation. Would there be no response from the other side, the whole world would know whom to hold irrevocably guilty.⁷⁴

He reminded them of Jallianwala Bagh and how people from all faiths had come together to fight that injustice and demand freedom.

I remember how in this very city Amritsar, I had discussions, a few years ago, for raising a fitting memorial to the martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh and how it was at Lahore, for the first time, that Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims took the pledge of complete independence! It bleeds my heart to think that things have now come to such a pass that no Muslim can go about in Amritsar and no Hindu or Sikh can ever think of living in Lahore. The erection of a memorial to Jallianwala Bagh martyrs has become a painful memory.⁷⁵

But the savage violence that Patel was seeing around him had made those moments of hope a distant memory.

The butchery of innocent and defenceless men, women and children do not behove brave men. It is the war of the jungle and the hallmark of inhumanity and barbarism [. . .] I have come to you with a specific appeal and that is to pledge the safety of Muslim refugees crossing the city. It is hardly credible to us that we do not realise wherein our good lies. Muslim evacuees are going under agreed arrangements of exchange of population. They should really need no protection and they should be allowed to go in peace.⁷⁶

In this speech Patel speaks clearly and unambiguously against the propaganda that has turned different religious communities against one another.

Bitterness fed by the years of propaganda of hate has gone too deep to allow any Muslim to remain in East Punjab and any Hindu or Sikh to live in West Punjab. It is, therefore, in the interest of everyone that this exchange should be effected peacefully and smoothly [. . .] I appeal to you to act with prudence and foresight. You should allow free and unmolested passage to the Muslim refugees [. . .] Let there be a truce for three months in which both sides can exchange their refugees. This sort of truce is permitted even by laws of war.⁷⁷

The violence had debilitating ramifications even for the relations between Patel and his colleagues. When the question arose on who should get the homes vacated by Muslims leaving Delhi for Pakistan, Nehru and Azad wanted them to be reserved only for Muslims who had fled their homes but wanted to stay on India. An indignant Patel fought back—he argued that any refugee—Hindu, Muslim or Sikh—who was in dire need of a home should be given equal opportunity to avail one of these homes.⁷⁸

Amidst this chaos, Patel now turned his attention to an even tougher task: Hyderabad. It was a special state in every sense. For centuries its mines had produced the most fabulous diamonds, including the Kohinoor. With an area of 82,000 square miles (the size of present-day United Kingdom) and a population of 16 million (85 per cent Hindu) it was bigger than several European countries. Almost all top positions in government and society were dominated by Muslims. The Muslim ruler, Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan, was the highest-ranking ruler in India with a title only he was allowed—he was no ordinary His Highness or His Royal Highness. The Nizam was His Exalted Highness, and was entitled to a twenty-one-gun salute.

In 1937, *Time* magazine declared him the richest man on earth. Yet the Nizam lived in tattered clothes like a pauper. But, goes the story, perhaps apocryphal, when refused a Rolls Royce in London because of his shabby looks, he bought an entire fleet and used them to transport garbage in Hyderabad. As a paperweight he used the 185-carat Jacob Diamond, one of the most precious and largest diamonds in the world.

But even though he had his own currency, coins and stamps, his own bank had paid millions to buy British aircrafts and even a Royal Navy destroyer during the Second World War, and had the title of Faithful Ally to the British Crown, the British would not give him separate dominion status. This had been made clear to him as early as in 1925 by the then viceroy Lord Reading in a latter in response to the Nizam's suggestion that his kingdom was at par with the British Crown. It was not, Reading had said emphatically, and the Nizam was just another Indian prince. Nothing more.

Yet, human dreams die hard. The Nizam had made up his mind that he would become an independent state when the British left. He was also egged on by Syed Kasim Razvi, an extremist Muslim leader who led a fierce militia called the Razakars, and his own political party, the Islamist Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party. It was Razvi who had raged during the Junagadh controversy, ‘Why is Sardar [Patel] thundering about Hyderabad when he cannot even control little Junagadh?’⁷⁹

We must pause here for a brief look at the mindset of Razvi which is illuminatingly provided in the memoirs of Mohammed Hyder, the collector of Osmanabad during the 1948–49 period. He writes that though he did not have a ‘high opinion of Razvi’,⁸⁰ he knew the man to be ‘a dangerous enemy’.⁸¹ Hyder asked Razvi, ‘How could a Muslim minority, headed by a Muslim ruler, continue to dominate a vast and politically conscious Hindu majority in Hyderabad?’⁸² Razvi replied,

The Nizams have ruled Hyderabad for over two hundred years in an unbroken line. The system must have some good in it if it has lasted two hundred years [...] I see much to admire in Hindu social reform. I freely admit that they are more advanced educationally and more sophisticated politically, and better off economically [But] we rule, they own! It’s a good arrangement, and they know it [...] We Muslims rule, because we are more fit to rule!⁸³

When Junagadh surrendered, Patel, speaking in the state, retorted, ‘If Hyderabad does not see the writing on the wall, it goes the way Junagadh has gone!’⁸⁴

In July 1947, a delegation representing the Nizam met Viceroy Mountbatten, and was told that their ruler had no choice but to join one of the dominions, and seeing geography and the religion of his subjects, it would make most sense for him to consider joining India. But the delegation left Mountbatten with the sense that the Nizam might not budge, and if pushed, he might choose Pakistan.

Soon Patel was writing to Mountbatten:

I see no alternative but to insist on the Nizam’s accession to the Dominion of India [...] I have authentic information that the recent activities of the Ittehadul Muslimeen are designed almost to create a feeling of terror amongst non-Muslim population so that its

agitation in favour of the independence of Hyderabad with possible alliance with Pakistan should flourish. It is a militant organisation with an intensely communal appeal and there are indications that it receives active support from responsible Muslims.⁸⁵

In September 1947, Mountbatten would play a critical role in dashing the hopes and dousing the fear-mongering of Hyderabad's ruling class. When told in a meeting by the Nizam's representative Nawab Ali Yavar Jung that 'accession would lead to bloodshed. The non-Muslims in Hyderabad had been very loyal to the state. If they were divided into sections, at least 50% would be on the side of the Nizam',⁸⁶ Viceroy Mountbatten asked—what if the Muslims in the state, wealthier and more organized, and part of the ruling class, than the majority Hindus, started the violence? To which Jung said that this would only happen if accession was forced, and then the flames from Hyderabad would spread to every part of India where Muslims were present. Far from being startled by this scenario, Mountbatten brushed it aside by saying that 'very similar fears had been expressed concerning Rampur and Bhopal before those two states had acceded to India. In the event it had turned out that there had been no trouble at all in Bhopal; and that in Rampur had been very short lived.'⁸⁷

That the Sardar was once again right was proved on 25 August, when Sir Walter Monckton wrote to Mountbatten saying that he had resigned as the constitutional adviser to the Nizam of Hyderabad because he had been very violently assaulted by members of the Ittehadul Muslimeen. Monckton's resignation forced the Nizam to publicly condemn the attack but it gave a very real glimpse of what was going on in the state.⁸⁸

The Nizam's delegations demanded that a special instrument of association—as opposed to the regular document of accession—be created for him. Sardar Patel refused. The delegations said that if the Nizam acceded to India, then the Muslims of Hyderabad would not tolerate it and there would be massive violence.

By the end of 1947, the Nizam's position had hardened and he made several requests for existing Indian troops to leave Hyderabad and give up all cantonments of the Indian army in the region. Patel let the troops stay put.

In October 1947, Menon prepared a new draft of what would be acceptable to the Indian government for the Nizam to sign and gave it to the delegation which travelled back to the state to get the signature. Meanwhile the state of Hyderabad had ordered arms worth three million pounds from Czechoslovakia.⁸⁹

But after a couple of days of delays, on the afternoon of 27 October, the house where the delegation was staying was surrounded by thousands of Razakars who refused to let them return to Delhi. There is also evidence that Razvi probably knew that the tribesmen attack was about to start in Kashmir⁹⁰ but we will come to that in just a bit.

The old delegation was now replaced with a new team that included the police chief of Hyderabad. Once the delegation arrived in Delhi, negotiations were resumed. Patel and his men refused to budge, and when Razvi himself came to see the Sardar he was told that the Nizam had only two options—accession or referendum/plebiscite. Razvi announced that any plebiscite in Hyderabad could only be done through the sword.

In November 1947, a Standstill Agreement allowing for time for more negotiations was signed between the Nizam and the Indian government. But the story was far from over. Munshi was dispatched to Hyderabad as the representative of the Indian government. He discovered the Nizam and his officials in a tizzy over the swift reduction of Indian barracks from their state and a massive arming of the Hyderabad police and other security officials.

The Nizam also quickly violated the Standstill Agreement by banning the export of precious stones from Hyderabad to India and discontinuing Indian currency in the state. He had also loaned Pakistan Rs 20 crore in Government of India securities and set up a trade agent in Karachi.

Even as Menon protested these decisions, news came that the Razakars were going out of control. Razvi and his men were giving speeches saying that they would liberate Indian Muslims and that the Indian government was providing arms to the Hindus.

Menon wrote a long letter to Laik Ali, the president of the Nizam's executive council, pointing out the many violations of the Standstill

Agreement.

But by this time, the first quarter of 1948, the Muslim nobility of Hyderabad and the Razakars had declared war. Reports started coming in from neighbouring states of collusion between Razakars and militant communists, and were starting to spread across the region. This was the Indian home department's worst nightmare—a joining of forces between the Razakars hell-bent on their jihad and communists and their class revolution, could overwhelm Hyderabad and even neighbouring states, and challenge the security apparatus of India. Hyderabad radio was telling its listeners that an economic blockade against the state could not work as the state had enough supplies to last a few months during which world opinion would force India to backtrack. It also announced that India was too weak to take military action, and even if it did, not only were the Hyderabad forces armed and ready but also all Muslim countries would come to its aid, even the Pathans supposedly would flood India to help the Hyderabidis in battle. In his speeches, Razvi was urging the people of Hyderabad to go to war with the Quran in one hand and the sword in the other, suggesting that all Indian Muslims would rise and fight for Hyderabad and even hinting that the Nizam's flag would come up in Bengal as well. As Razvi's message spread, attacks on people increased. Nearly ten thousand Congressmen including the leader of the Congress party in Hyderabad were thrown in prison, and reports of attacks, not just on non-Muslims but also Muslims and even nuns and missionaries, multiplied.

(It must be noted as an aside here that even Jawaharlal Nehru, who had always had a soft spot for Left politics, finally expressed great revulsion for the Communist Party of India. Here is what he had to say about them in *The Discovery of India*:

[I]n India the Communist Party is completely divorced from, and is ignorant of, the national traditions that fill the minds of the people. It believes that communism necessarily implies a contempt for the past. So far as it is concerned, the history of the world began in November 1917, and everything that preceded this was preparatory and leading up to it.⁹¹

Nehru's diagnosis was spot on. He saw that in a country like India with a lot of poor people the propaganda of class war should have many takers but in fact it doesn't because, 'it [the Communist Party] has cut itself off from the springs of national sentiment and speaks in a language which finds no echo in the hearts of the people'.⁹² The Communist Party in India, Nehru sagaciously pointed out, has 'no real roots'.⁹³)

In September 1948, the prophecy of Dr J.A.L. Patel came true. The good doctor had told the founder of Pakistan that he had two years to live and on 11 September, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, with his palatial mansion still intact in Bombay, died in Karachi of tuberculosis that had turned into lung cancer. Always rake-thin, he weighed just over 36 kilograms at death.

With Jinnah's passing, the Nizam of Hyderabad lost his greatest backer.

On 13 September Indian armed forces under Major General Jayanto Nath Chaudhuri swept into Hyderabad. Operation Polo had begun.

The negotiations between the Nizam and Government of India broke down in the third week of June 1948. By the end of July 1948, the First Armoured Division had built up enough rations which a twenty-two thousand strong army would require over a period of sixty combat days, and petrol that would be needed to the army for twenty-two days. However, the operation was postponed owing to Army's commitment in Kashmir and monsoon rains.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a great pillar of support for the Nizam, died on the midnight of 11 September 1948. The Indian government took advantage of the situation and sent its troops into Hyderabad.⁹⁵

Even in this action, Patel and Nehru had divergent views. Nehru was firmly opposed to any military action in Hyderabad. As we will see near the end of this chapter in the context of differences between Nehru and Patel, the two had even fought bitterly about this.

Within 108 hours, the famed Hyderabad forces had surrendered. Around 800 people were killed. There were no Hindu–Muslim clashes anywhere in India. No Pathans had poured in. No uproar happened internationally.

There is a photograph that sums up the end of the Hyderabad crisis. It shows the Nizam of Hyderabad, palms folded in namaste, head slightly bowed, welcoming Sardar Patel at the Begumpet Airport which the Asaf

Jahis (the Nizam's family) had built. Patel is his usual, shawl-on-shoulder self. He is, however, smiling as he returns the Nizam's greeting.

The Sardar now had one last apple left to add to his basket. Kashmir.

Kashmir would be the toughest battle of them all for Patel because it unfolded even as his relationship with Nehru reached a level of friction where both men offered to leave the government.

A flurry of letters was exchanged between Patel, Nehru and the Mahatma about the clashes between them and especially about Nehru's use of N. Gopalaswami Ayyangar as his emissary in matters which Patel felt were the domain of his department. In December, Patel and Nehru quarrelled over Ayyangar's right to directly ask for 150 vehicles for Kashmir. Nehru wrote to Patel, 'All this was done at my instance and I do not propose to abdicate my function in regard to matters for which I consider myself responsible [Kashmir definitely being at the top of any such list of matters]'.⁹⁶ When trouble broke out in Ajmer, and Nehru sent Ayyangar again, Patel shot off a letter saying he was 'shocked'⁹⁷ and added:

[I]n these circumstances, the visit [of Ayyangar] could have had only one big significance in the eyes of the local public, namely, that it was to get an 'independent' account of the happenings as you were not quite satisfied either with the account I gave or with the local handling of the situation. The former interpretation would be almost tragic, while the latter would imply no confidence in an officer of standing [in Patel's assessment, a respected and capable civilian Shankar Prasad].⁹⁸

Nehru replied with an ultimatum which shows how much their relationship had deteriorated.

Am I to be constrained in taking any action in regard to inspection or visit or like matters which I consider necessary? That surely is an impossible position for me or any prime minister anywhere. Am I not to send a personal representation to any place either for a private inquiry or to convey a message? That would make me a prisoner without freedom to act in accordance with what I might consider the needs of the situation [...] I am myself very unhappy about the trend of events and the difficulties that have arisen between you and me. It seems that our approaches are different, however much we may respect each other, and the issues that have arisen have to be considered very carefully and objectively by all of us. If I am to continue as prime minister I cannot have my freedom restricted and I must have a certain liberty of direction. Otherwise it would be better for me to retire. I do not wish to take any hasty step, nor would you wish to take it.

We must, therefore, give full thought to the situation that has arisen, so that our decisions may be for the good of country we have sought to serve these many years. If, unfortunately, either you or I have to leave the government of India, let this be done with dignity and goodwill. On my part I would gladly resign and hand over the reins to you.⁹⁹

So it was that by the end 1947, Patel was preparing to leave the government, awaiting only Gandhi's final nod. He expected Gandhi would take Nehru's side, as the Mahatma had always done. It was, in Patel's mind, only a matter of days before he left the government.

Kashmir was not the only dispute. There were other equally acrimonious issues. There had been disputes between Patel and Nehru and Gandhi and even Mountbatten on the issue of sending Pakistan the Rs 55 crore due to it from its share of the treasury. Patel was of the firm belief that India should stick to what had been agreed at Partition—the money would be cleared but only after a final settlement on Kashmir. Since resolution was nowhere in sight, Patel insisted that the money not be cleared. Patel had good reason to put his foot down on the matter—even though he eventually lost the argument. As he explained on 12 January 1948:

The discussions [of settlement between India and Pakistan] held were not confined to mere partition issues, but covered Kashmir, refugees and other important evacuation matters as well [...] India has taken over the entire debt of undivided India and it depends on Pakistan's bona fides and goodwill to make equated payment by easy and long-term instalments of its debt to India after a four-year moratorium period [...] We cannot, therefore, afford to let conflicts endanger our credit and security [...] We were, therefore, fully justified in providing against Pakistan's possible continuance of aggressive actions in regard to Kashmir by postponing the implementation of the agreement.¹⁰⁰

When the Pakistanis accused India of arm-twisting them by holding back the money, Mountbatten went against Patel and told the Mahatma that this was neither wise nor honourable. Nehru agreed that withholding the money had been approved by the cabinet but he was not sure that it was legally sound. The Mahatma, already torn by the anguish of Partition, was devastated by what he perceived as injustice and started on a fast.

The money was sent to Pakistan but to Patel it seemed like the end of the road for him in government. He had promised to deliver a united Kathiawar

as a tribute to Gandhi who had been born in that region, and had already achieved that.

The differences between him and Nehru were cropping up at every step. Not least in the case of Kashmir, that one state so very close to Nehru's heart. The situation in Kashmir was the reverse of that in Hyderabad. Here there was a Muslim-majority population with many, if not most, of them unhappy with the maharaja. There was also a vocal and elite Hindu population which occupied most prominent posts in government and which supported the maharaja.

Kashmir was also polarizing because Nehru had been seen from the beginning as being partial to Sheikh Abdullah and his cause and in turn the Kashmiri Pandits (the Hindus) had repeatedly turned to Patel for assistance. The maharaja of Kashmir too had a better equation with Patel than he did with Nehru whom he had banned from entering Srinagar and had even briefly arrested (this, as we have seen, was before Nehru became prime minister).

From the beginning Kashmir was also clouded by the threat of violence from Pakistan. On 27 September 1947, Nehru wrote to Patel that he was worried about an infiltration into Kashmir:

It is obvious to me from the many reports that I have received that the situation there is a dangerous and deteriorating one [. . .] The approach of winter is going to cut off Kashmir from the rest of India [. . .] I understand that the Pakistan strategy is to infiltrate into Kashmir now and to take some big action as soon as Kashmir is more or less isolated because of the coming winter.¹⁰¹

Nehru suggested to Patel in this letter that there was only one solution to the impasse—the maharaja should free Abdullah and the leaders of the National Conference from prison, make peace with them and then jointly declare accession to India. Once the state acceded to India, Nehru reasoned, it would be difficult for Pakistan to invade it without going to war with India. Could Patel help, asks Nehru. The chances of the maharajas listening to Patel were higher.

Patel was clearly paying attention. On 2 October, Patel wrote to the maharaja to thank him for a general amnesty that the king had announced.

I have no doubt that this would rally around you the men who might otherwise have been a thorn in your side. I can assure Your Highness of my abiding sympathy with you in your difficulties; nor need I disguise the instinctive responsibility I feel in ensuring the safety and integrity of your state. I can, therefore, assure you that in everything that we do we shall pay the highest regard to the interests of your state. Sheikh Abdullah will be coming to Delhi shortly and we shall endeavour to reach a satisfactory solution of the difficulties which you have from that quarter.¹⁰²

There is a lot of contradictory opinion about Sardar Patel's attitude towards Kashmir. Some say the patriotic and determined Patel would have ensured that Kashmir in its entirety remained with India at any cost; others argue that the pragmatic Patel would have easily given away Kashmir to keep the peace, especially since, unlike Nehru, he did not have any familial affinity towards the Himalayan state. However, the fact is Patel was willing to do all it took to keep whatever territory he could for India—that the country was divided irked him till the end. The Junagadh fiasco also taught Patel a lesson about Pakistan's intentions and its support and encouragement for the nawab of Junagadh antagonized Patel. But it is not as if he was trying to take some petty revenge on Pakistan by being difficult on Kashmir.

In fact, as we saw from his letter in early October, he was hopeful of a peaceful tripartite solution between the maharaja, Sheikh Abdullah and the Congress. But as a man of abundant caution, Patel had, in preparation for the coming winter, already significantly boosted telecommunications between Srinagar and Delhi. In fact, it was Patel who pushed through the making of the Jammu–Pathankot road urgently within eight months between 1947 and 1948. 'Seventy special trains brought to Pathankot materials and men. Ten thousand workers came from long distances, and the entire workforce numbered over 40,000. It was a round-the-clock job. The 54-mile road and 11 miles of bridges and culverts were completed within Patel's stipulated period.'¹⁰³

Before Independence, Lord Mountbatten had tried to make a last-ditch attempt to help the maharaja make up his mind, even telling him that

[I]f he acceded to Pakistan, India would not take it amiss and that he had a firm assurance on this from Sardar Patel himself. Lord Mountbatten went further to say that in view of the composition of the population, it was particularly important to ascertain the wishes of the people. The maharaja appeared quite incapable of making up his mind and so Lord Mountbatten asked for a meeting with him and his prime minister on the last morning of his (Kashmir) visit. At the last moment, the Maharaja sent a message to say that he was confined to bed and begged to be excused.¹⁰⁴

To be fair to the maharaja, it was a complicated decision. If he joined Pakistan, not only would all the powerful Hindu Pandits revolt against him but so might many of Abdullah's people who had affinity to Nehru and thereby India. But if he chose India, the border areas were likely to catch fire.

However, before any of this could unfold, on 22 October 1947, around 5000 Afridi tribesmen in 300 heavily armed trucks ravaged through the Kashmir Valley, burning down the town of Muzaffarabad. The Muslim soldiers in the maharaja's troops left their post and joined the marauders and killed their Hindu Dogra Rajput commanding officer Lt Colonel Narain Singh who, ironically, had told the maharaja only a few days ago that he trusted his Muslim soldiers even more than the Dogra Hindu ones.¹⁰⁵

As the tribesmen moved towards Srinagar, they were stopped by 150 soldiers of the Kashmir state forces and the chief-of-staff Brigadier Rajinder Singh. This tiny group held 5000 tribesmen at bay for two days near Uri. Though Singh and his men all perished, they were able to burn down Uri bridge and delay the progress of the attackers.

News of the attack reached Delhi on 24 October and in the meeting the next day, Sardar Patel vigorously argued that support should immediately go to Kashmir whether the maharaja immediately acceded or not. Nehru wanted the ruler to join hands with Abdullah and figure out his defence, whereas Mountbatten advised caution. But, belying the recent idea that he wanted to give away Kashmir, Patel stood firm and insisted that help be sent right away and without any caveats. Menon and armaments were flown to the Valley.

On 26 October, a panicked maharaja wrote to Mountbatten, via Menon who had returned to the capital, saying that his state was being overrun and

Pakistan was hell-bent on taking over Kashmir by force.

The Pakistan radio even put out the story that a provisional government has been set up in Kashmir [. . .] With conditions obtaining at present in my state and the great emergency of the situation as it exists, I have no option but to ask for help from the Indian dominion. Naturally they cannot send the help asked for by me without my state acceding to the dominion of India. I have accordingly decided to do so, and I attach the Instrument of Accession for acceptance by your government.¹⁰⁶

In this letter the maharaja also mentioned that none of his Muslim subjects had joined the attackers who, it was learned later, were led by officers of the Pakistani Army, but this was not really true. From the first skirmish onwards, all the Muslim soldiers in the maharaja's army joined hands with the attackers. Hari Singh may have wanted to ignore it, and Sheikh Abdullah may have been a loyal friend of Nehru, but it would be difficult to deny the quantum of anger among the Muslim subjects against their ruler.

Upon Menon's return, there was another meeting on 26 October in Delhi which was attended by Sheikh Abdullah and the prime minister of Kashmir Mehr Chand Mahajan. As Nehru dithered on the feasibility of sending in the army—Abdullah demanded immediate help from India and Mahajan, even as a Hindu, proclaimed that if India would not help, the state would immediately turn to Pakistan—it was Patel who took charge. Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, Sheikh Abdullah's aide, noted the mood at that meeting,

Lord Mountbatten exhibited studied diffidence. Panditji [Nehru] presented a picture of acute anxiety and deep concern. Sardar listened, did not utter a word. He was a picture of calm equipoise. His silence was a strange contrast to a picture of defeatism and helplessness that otherwise pervaded in the meeting. Suddenly Sardar moved in his seat and immediately after his gruff and resolute voice attracted everybody. [The Sardar said] 'Look here Generals, Kashmir must be defended at all costs and come what may, resources or no resources [. . .] This must, must and must be done. Do whatever you like, but do it.'¹⁰⁷

Mohammad noted that after saying that Patel got up from his seat saying that the operation to save Kashmir would begin next morning. 'Defence of Kashmir thus was the result of Sardar's decisiveness and determined will to

implement the decision, whatever the odds.’¹⁰⁸ One caveat needs to be added: Had there been any vigorous opposition to this by anyone else in that room, the implementation might not have been as smooth.

Troops would be sent immediately to Kashmir but with two caveats from Mountbatten: not only would Hari Singh have to sign on to accession, India would also have to agree to organize a plebiscite at some later date. It was Patel who was standing at the aerodrome in Delhi when Menon brought back the Instrument of Accession and a letter from Maharaja Hari Singh from Jammu where the king was staying in his palace on 26 October 1947. The king was asleep when Menon found him. Hari Singh had told his aide-de-camp that if Menon arrived then all was well and Delhi would back him, and therefore he should not be woken up. But if Menon did not return with news from Delhi, then the aide should shoot the maharaja in his sleep.¹⁰⁹

The Indian Army’s defence of Kashmir began with first capturing the Srinagar airport. Jinnah wanted to strike back with the full force of the Pakistani army but both armies were under the unified charge of the Supreme Commander General Claude Auchinleck and still led by British commanding officers. Auchinleck flew to Lahore and told Jinnah that since the maharaja had acceded to India, India could send troops to Kashmir but no British officer would lead Pakistani troops officially to fight in Kashmir. Later Patel would rue to Rajendra Prasad in June 1949, ‘Kashmir too might have been solved but Jawaharlal did not let the troops go from Baramula to Domel [during the First Kashmir War of 1947–48]. He sent them towards Poonch.’¹¹⁰ One more officer has expressed a similar view: ‘[O]ur forces might have succeeded in evicting the invaders, if the Prime Minister had not held them in check and later ordered the ceasefire [. . .] obviously great pressures would have been brought upon him by the Governor General [Mountbatten]’, wrote General S.P.P. Thorat in his book.¹¹¹ According to Air Marshal Thomas Elmhirst, chairman of the chiefs-of-staff committee at that time, Sardar Patel told him, ‘If all the decisions rested on me, I think I would be in favour of extending this little affair in Kashmir to full-scale war with Pakistan [. . .] let us get it over once and for all, and settle down as a united continent.’¹¹²

Politically the truce between Hari Singh and Sheikh Abdullah soon ran into choppy waters—the fundamental friction ran too deep and it had strong communal undertones—and as Patel turned his attention towards the Hyderabad crisis, Nehru started to lead the charge in his beloved Kashmir. It is Nehru who decided, against Patel's wishes, and on Mountbatten's advice, to take the Kashmir issue to the United Nations Organization (as the UN was called at that time) and it was he who was taking the lead on it as is apparent from a letter Nehru wrote to Patel on 7 January 1948: 'During your absence the Kashmir situation, more especially in regard to the reference to the UNO, had developed and we have had to take a number of decisions.'¹¹³ Patel had not been in favour of taking the issue to the UNO but when Nehru took a decision, he supported it in public. This is a trait that appears many a time, whether for the national freedom movement or the first government afterwards; once a decision was taken, even if he had been against it, Patel managed to muster up some defence of it. In private, in a letter reply, though, he made his position clear: 'Perhaps any comment from me at this stage, when part of the delegation has already left [for the UNO] and arrangements for others have already been made, is unnecessary.'¹¹⁴

In an early 1948 speech that is often mentioned to show that Patel supported the decision to go to the UNO on Kashmir, the Sardar said, 'With regard to Kashmir we say it is better to have an open fight than to have disguised warfare. It was for this reason that we went to the UNO.'¹¹⁵

But there is a context to this. Note the lines before and after this line.

Lines before: 'We have to evacuate Hindus and Sikhs from the Sindh. For, despite all protection, they cannot remain there for a day [...] The situation is fraught with difficulties.'¹¹⁶

Lines after: 'If Kashmir is to be saved by sword, where is the scope for plebiscite? We shall not surrender an inch of Kashmir territory.'¹¹⁷

He is speaking in the context of a proposed plebiscite, which is something he does not want. He does not want to give an inch, and so in that context he is talking about going to the UNO. Now that Nehru has gone to the UNO, and still there is talk of plebiscite, he is making his overall

displeasure clear. In no way does this suggest he actively supported the decision to go to the UNO.

Both Patel and Nehru assumed that a plebiscite in Kashmir would be swift and in India's favour. In the tussle between Sheikh Abdullah and Maharaja Hari Singh, Nehru was inclined to believe Abdullah and Patel was open to giving the maharaja a fair hearing. It was Nehru who explained to Hari Singh in a letter in December 1947,

I know you do not like the idea of a plebiscite; but we cannot do away with it without harming our cause all over the world . . . From our point of view, that is India's, it is of the most vital importance that Kashmir should remain within the Indian Union. I need not go into reasons for this as they are obvious, quite apart from personal desires in the matter which are strong enough.¹¹⁸

But by the end of 1948, when it was clear that nothing was moving in the UNO, Patel voiced his opinion about going to the UNO decision even more harshly:

You have seen what price we are paying in Kashmir. We went to the United Nations in order to bring the dispute to an early end. For six months we were maligned all over the world by the representatives of Pakistan and by people who had never seen this country and who did not understand what the problem of India or Pakistan or Kashmir was [. . .] If we have to fight it out and if the Security Council is not able to do anything, then it should be called an insecurity council, a disturber of peace.¹¹⁹

Patel's great dream was a united India. Even in May 1946, he was writing to Munshi: 'We have successfully avoided a catastrophe which threatened our country. Since many years, for the first time, authoritative pronouncement in clear terms has been made against the possibility of Pakistan in any shape or form.'¹²⁰

What is he referring to?

He is referring to the Cabinet Mission Statement in 1946 which said, 'The setting up of a separate sovereign State of Pakistan on the lines claimed by the Muslim League would not solve the communal minority problem; nor can we see any justification for including within a sovereign

Pakistan those districts of Punjab and of Bengal and Assam in which the population is predominantly non-Muslim.’¹²¹

But this was not to be. So Patel focused on doing the next best thing — bringing together the union of India. This meant the fusing of British India with the more than 500 Indian ‘princely states’. It was considered an almost impossible task until Patel took on the job.

For a long time, Patel was ready to negotiate on Kashmir to save Hyderabad. He felt that Hyderabad, in the heart of India, was a much bigger threat to the union of India. Unlike Nehru who had family history and a particular love for Kashmir which he described as, ‘Like some supremely beautiful woman, whose beauty is almost impersonal and above human desire, such was Kashmir in all its feminine beauty of river and valley’, Patel had a much more earthy and pragmatic view and—as his masterly integration of princely states demonstrated—’ little time for capricious state leaders or their separatist tendencies.¹²² But Patel’s openness to negotiating Hyderabad for Kashmir would end by September 1947.

It changed with what happened in Junagadh. In Junagadh, the nawab secretly acceded to Pakistan, which Jinnah secretly accepted. And then, the nawab fled leaving his state in a lurch—and leaving behind one of his begums and some of his numerous dogs.

Even so, both Lord Mountbatten and Nehru wanted a plebiscite, while Sardar Patel was of the strong opinion that a plebiscite should not be held because the nawab had fled and the state was in disarray. But after a lot of coaxing he gave in and a plebiscite was held where overwhelmingly people voted to join the Indian union. Indian Civil Service Officer C.B. Nagarkar, who was neither Hindu nor Muslim, presided on the vote and only 91 people of more than 200,000 people voted to join Pakistan. All of this is well-documented by Menon.

When Patel saw that Jinnah had no qualms about trying to usurp a Hindu-majority state, which was against the basic principles on which the partition was being done, he grew more and more rigid about Kashmir and was determined to not give an inch of it away. Patel even told the Achyut

Patwardhan, the founder of the Socialist Party of India, that his solution to the Kashmir problem would be to send Sikh settlers to the Valley.¹²³

Even on Article 370 giving special status to Kashmir, Nehru and Patel differed.

This matter was handled by Gopalaswami Ayyangar in consultation with Sheikh Abdullah and [...] with the approval of Pandit Nehru. Although Nehru was himself away in the United States, at the time [when the Indian Parliament debated it], his approval had been taken in advance to the draft formula. But Sardar had not been consulted.¹²⁴

But, of course, it was Patel who had been left to convince the Congress party which was up in arms against it. Ambedkar declared that he would not draft it, telling Sheikh Abdullah,

You wish India should protect your borders, she should build roads in your area, she should supply you foodgrains, and Kashmir should get equal status as India. But Government of India should have only limited powers and Indian people should have no rights in Kashmir. To give consent to this proposal, would be a treacherous thing against the interests of India and I, as the Law Minister of India, will never do it.¹²⁵

It fell upon Patel to convince the party, which he achieved successfully but remained sceptical of Abdullah who questioned even the right of the Indian Parliament to consider it. He told Ayyangar,

Whenever Sheikh Sahib wishes to back out, he always confronts us with his duty to the people. Of course he owes no duty to India or to the Indian government, or even on a personal basis to you and the Prime Minister [Nehru] who have gone all out to accommodate him.¹²⁶

Durga Das once wrote, ‘Nehru was the idealist dreamer, Patel, the stern teacher with a cane hanging on the wall.’¹²⁷ Nowhere is this more apparent than their respective positions on Kashmir. It was because of this cane that India pulled off a task at which Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev exclaimed in 1956: ‘You Indians are remarkable people. How did you manage to liquidate the Princely States without liquidating the Princes?’¹²⁸

But the differences between the two men were so severe by January 1948 that Nehru was suggesting that they meet Gandhi to sort things out, and

Patel was writing to Gandhi and offering to resign. ‘You should quickly deliver me from this intolerable situation,’ Patel wrote to the Mahatma.¹²⁹

Meanwhile in the Valley, the Pakistani troops had been pushed back but not entirely outside the state. And it is in this limbo that the Valley remains even today.

After the cabinet cleared Pakistan’s pending Rs 55 crore, Gandhi spoke up to defend the Sardar against charges that Patel was against Muslims.

The Sardar had a bluntness of speech which sometimes unintentionally hurt, though his heart was expansive enough to accommodate all. I wonder if with a knowledge of this background anybody would dare to call my fast a condemnation of the policy of the home ministry? If there is such a person, I can only tell him that he would degrade and hurt himself, never the Sardar or me.¹³⁰

Showing his characteristic bluntness a day after Gandhi said this, Sardar Patel said in a speech to the Bombay Corporation,

We have just heard people shouting that Muslims should be removed from India. Those who do so have gone mad with anger [. . .] I am a frank man. I say bitter things to Hindus and Muslims alike. At the same time, I maintain, as I have said a number of times, that I am a friend of Muslims. If Muslims do not accept me as such, they also act as mad men.¹³¹

The madness was about to explode. Threats to Gandhi’s life came all the time, from extremist Muslims and hard-line Hindus. Gandhi had ended his fast after every group, from the Sikhs and the Muslims to the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had promised to do whatever they could at their individual levels to end communal strife, including emptying mosques occupied in India by non-Muslims.

On 20 January 1948, a grenade was thrown at Gandhi’s prayer meeting in Delhi. The attacker, Madan Lal Pahwa, was arrested but Gandhi appealed for his release. Patel had policemen placed in every room where Gandhi held meetings and in rooms all around. There was really never a time when the Mahatma was without security but, in spite of the Sardar’s insistence, Gandhi would not allow people coming to see him to be screened or body-checked.

On 30 January 1948, as Gandhi headed to a prayer meeting, Nathuram Godse, an ally of Pahwa, shot and killed the Mahatma.

The Sardar was shattered. Equally devastated was Nehru. An anguished Patel addressed a crowd on the evening of 30 January:

My heart is full of grief and sorrow! I don't know what to say to you! The occasion today is for grief and not anger. Anger is sure to make us forget the great teachings which Gandhiji preached all his life. We did not take his advice during his life and let it not be said that we did not follow him even after his death. That will be a great blot on our name.¹³²

The death of Gandhi sealed, at least temporarily, the rift between Patel and Nehru. Nehru wrote to Patel:

Now with Bapu's death, everything is changed and we have to face a different and more difficult world. The old controversies have ceased to have much significance and it seems to [me] that the urgent need of the hour is for all of us to function as closely and cooperatively as possible. Indeed, there is no other way [...] It is over a quarter of a century since we have been closely associated with each other and we have faced many storms and perils together. I can say with full honesty that my affection and regard for you have grown¹³³

An overwhelmed Patel returned the sentiment.

I am deeply touched, indeed overwhelmed, by the affection and warmth of your letter [...] We have been lifelong comrades in a common cause. The paramount interests of our country and our mutual love and regard, transcending such differences of outlook and temperaments as existed, have held us together. Both of us have stuck passionately to our respective points of view of methods of work; still we have always sustained a unity of heart¹³⁴

But their differences would remain, including those on the RSS, which was banned and whose leader M.S. Golwalkar was arrested after Gandhi's murder. Only in 1947, when someone wrote to Patel saying about the RSS, 'I have found that it is a well-knit and disciplined organisation . . . I feel that we should neither treat this organisation with contempt nor should it be suppressed at this stage¹³⁵', he agreed and wrote back,

I quite agree with you that we have to turn the enthusiasm and the discipline of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh into right channels. In fact, I have been advising them

accordingly. The last time I did so was last week in Jaipur. Of course, one has to be very careful because in present circumstances very few people are prepared to listen to reason.¹³⁶

But now that the investigation into the heinous crime that was Gandhi's assassination had begun, Patel was not ready to swiftly revoke the ban. Nehru looked upon the RSS with disdain but Patel considered the organization well-meaning, if a little too strident.

By the end of February 1948, Patel wrote to Nehru:

I have kept myself almost daily in touch with the progress of the investigation regarding Bapu's assassination case [...] It emerges clearly [...] that the RSS was not involved in it at all. It was a fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha.¹³⁷

The ban would finally be lifted in 1949 after nearly 80,000 RSS workers filled prisons demanding evidence or the release of Golwalkar and the lifting of the ban.¹³⁸ It is important to note that Patel was strongly critical of the RSS on several occasions and warned it against challenging the government of India¹³⁹ and he is on record as having said to the RSS in December 1948 that 'raising an army, whatever name it might be given, within the boundaries of India, would not be permitted [and that] the members of the RSS claimed to be defenders of Hinduism, but they must know that Hinduism would not be saved by rowdyism.'¹⁴⁰ In fact, he even advised RSS members to join the Congress. At the same time, it is worth noting that it was Sardar Patel who requested RSS leader Golwalkar to travel to Kashmir and meet Maharaja Hari Singh to get him to join India.¹⁴¹ Golwalkar went to Kashmir and met the maharaja in October 1947 to convince him and also suggest that he recruit more Hindus and Sikhs in his army.¹⁴²

This would not be the last major argument between Nehru and Patel. They had differed strongly on military action in Hyderabad. According to Munshi, who had been sent to Hyderabad as Agent General of India, 'Jawaharlal Nehru was averse to the line followed by the Sardar. At one stage, it was suggested to Sardar that I should be replaced by someone else at Hyderabad. Sardar would not think of it.'¹⁴³ Munshi alleged that Nehru

got every incident of atrocity committed by the Ittehadul Muslimeen verified independently, and he was disgusted by the mistrust.

Munshi also recorded a major incident between the Sardar and Nehru a day before Indian forces rolled into Hyderabad.

The discussion had barely begun when Jawaharlal Nehru flew into a rage and upbraided Sardar for his action and attitude towards Hyderabad [. . .] He concluded his outburst with the remark that in future he would himself attend to all matters relating to Hyderabad.

The vehemence of his attack, as well as its timing, shocked everyone present.¹⁴⁴

Through it all, Patel sat still. And then he stood up and left. Nothing changed. The Indian Army rolled into Hyderabad as planned. This incident shows Nehru in particularly uneasy light but the nuance to be added here is that he had earlier promised Mountbatten that India would not take any untoward (read military) action on Hyderabad. The thought of going back on his word would have worried and annoyed the new prime minister. But the massacres in the state had left Patel with no choice, and he had been clear that there was no option for Hyderabad but to accede to India. So, while Nehru was to a degree justified in his frustration, it was Patel who took the logical decision. As he had told Rajaji, who supported Nehru, on 13 September 1948 as Operation Polo started:

I don't want future generations to curse me that these people when they got an opportunity—did not do it and kept this ulcer in the heart of India. On one side Western Pakistan, on the other side Eastern Pakistan—their idea of Pan-Islamic block and to come to Delhi and establish the Mughal empire again. Once we enter Hyderabad [. . .] it is State Ministry's function. How long are you and Panditji [Nehru] going to bypass the States Ministry and carry on?¹⁴⁵

As it transpired, not for long. Later Patel wrote: ‘Hindus of Hyderabad became free after many years of bondage, and a big tumour was removed from the stomach of India.’¹⁴⁶

But Patel would not, in those last years, and especially after the death of Gandhi, always remain stoic in the face of Nehru’s provocation. Gandhi’s demise had only momentarily closed a widening rift between the two men. Even though Patel acknowledged Nehru as the leader publicly, especially

since Nehru was the prime minister, in matters relating to his department and the party, the Sardar was ready to inflict cutting blows.

Though he continued to grow more physically infirm, his spirits remained indomitable. In March 1948 when a plane carrying him from Delhi to Jaipur had to do an emergency landing—after one engine failed—near the village of Shahpur, Patel is believed to have cracked a joke as the aircraft was coming down.

His beseeching advice to the prime minister to not take the Kashmir issue to the United Nations was ignored—and Patel was scathing about this, famously calling the Security Council the ‘insecurity council’.¹⁴⁷

It was the Sardar who pointed out the ethnic cleansing of Hindus from East Pakistan. ‘If you are determined to turn out Hindus, you must part with sufficient land to enable us to settle them. We cannot take things lying down,’ he said in November 1948.¹⁴⁸ It is, of course, the Sardar who castigated the regional and linguistic divisions in India.

If we start behaving like fools can anybody help us? We have just got a smattering of national feeling. You go to Bengal; it is full of Bihar versus Bengal and Bengal versus Assam controversies. Think of what dangers lie in such disputes [...] For us, all should be one whether we are Maharashtrians, Bengalis, Gujaratis or Tamils. If you cannot build India on this pattern, you are doomed.¹⁴⁹

But this kind of regional dispute would creep up in unexpected places. In October 1948, Pattabhi Sitaramayya of Andhra Pradesh became Congress president beating Purushottam Das Tandon of the United Provinces. Sotto voce, Nehru supported Sitaramayya while Patel rooted for Tandon. Here again surfaced the familiar quarrel between the two men, for what did Nehru have against Tandon? That he was too involved in Hindu causes, including cow protection activism. For Patel this did not take away from Tandon’s natural diligence and sincerity, but for Nehru this was Hindu revivalism—which it was—and a deal-breaker.

Patel, though, would have his revenge soon. When India became a republic in 1950, the question of the first president arose. Nehru was determined to see Rajaji receive this honour, but with Patel’s support it was

Rajendra Prasad who became the first president of India. Once again, Nehru's objection with Prasad was that he was too involved in Hindu causes, and not secular enough. Later that year, in spite of a determined fight by Nehru ('Tandon's election would be bad for the Congress and the country and should be opposed'¹⁵⁰), Patel managed to instal Tandon as Congress president. Nehru had even suggested that he would leave the prime minister's chair if Tandon became Congress president—but in the end, he did no such thing.

It is often said in comparison between the two men, Patel and Nehru, that Nehru was a globalist, an internationalist, a man who had travelled across, and understood, the world. A natural world citizen. Whereas Patel was deeply bonded to India, to the country and its spirit, both philosophically and geographically. And yet, in the two main international disputes that India faced at that time, with Pakistan and potentially with China, it was Patel whose diagnosis was absolutely accurate.

In November 1950, barely a month before his death, Patel wrote two letters on China, Tibet (which China annexed in 1950) and India's north-eastern frontier which are acutely prescient.

The first letter, the shorter of the two, was addressed to Girija Shankar Bajpai, the secretary general in the external affairs ministry. In it Patel warned about everything from communist arms smuggling in the north-east to the impact of European missionaries on the hill tribes including the Nagas: 'their influence was, by no means, friendly to India and Indians'.¹⁵¹ On China he wrote, 'we cannot be friendly with China and must think in terms of defence against a determined, calculating, unscrupulous, ruthless, unprincipled and prejudiced combination of powers, of which the Chinese will be the spearhead.'¹⁵² It might be fair to say Patel did not buy into that infamous Nehruvian slogan 'Hindi-Chini, bhai-bhai.'

The second letter was addressed to Nehru and was written only days before Patel's death. He began by pointing out, correctly, that the Indian ambassador to China was being fooled and he was being fed the idea that the Chinese would solve the Tibetan issue through dialogue. No such thing would happen, predicted the Sardar, and said that 'there was a lack of

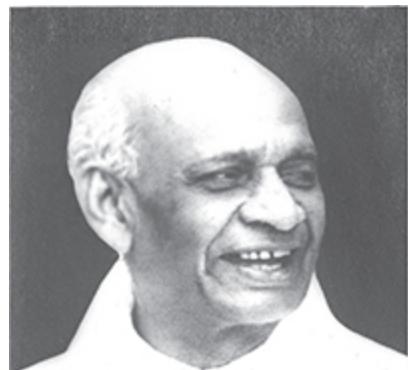
firmness and unnecessary apology'¹⁵³ in the attitude of the Indian ambassador to China towards his hosts.

Patel warned Nehru that the prime minister's strategy of championing the cause of China's entry into the United Nations was flawed and 'the Chinese do not regard as their friends'. ¹⁵⁴ Patel warned that Nehru's idea that the Himalayas were a natural barrier between India and China was wrong—not advice the prime minister wanted to hear in 1950.

The undefined state of the frontier and the existence on our side of a population with affinities to Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of potential trouble [. . .] Recent and bitter history also tells us that Communism is no shield against imperialism and Communists are as good or as bad imperialists as any other.¹⁵⁵

On 15 December 1950, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was dead. Already frail, his digestive system completely collapsed and a massive heart attack finally claimed him. The last thing that touched his lips was Ganga water mixed with honey. Munshi wrote that after Patel's death Nehru 'issued a direction to the Ministers and the Secretaries not to go to Bombay to attend the funeral. [If such an instruction was given, many disregarded it.] Jawaharlal also requested Dr. Rajendra Prasad not to go to Bombay; it was a strange request to which Rajendra Prasad did not accede.'¹⁵⁶ Nehru attended the funeral and spoke movingly of his feeling of emptiness.

Eulogies poured in from every side. Years after his death, when Verghese Kurien, the first organizer of dairy cooperatives in Gujarat who is also called the Father of India's White Revolution, met Maniben Patel, she told him that she had gone to meet Jawaharlal Nehru after her father's death to hand him a bag of money that people had donated in cash for the Congress party. He (Nehru) did not ask her where she was living or how she was making ends meet.



Portrait of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (date unknown)



Patel as a schoolboy



Patel's parental house at Nadiad



Patel leaving to study law in 1910



Vithalbhai and Vallabhbhai as barristers-at-law in 1913



Patel as a London-trained barrister-at-law (date unknown)



Patel as a member of the Youth League in Bombay (date unknown)



Patel and Mahatma Gandhi

(Source: 113, Kaka Nagar, Chief Editor and Member Secretary Sardar Patel Society)



Patel with Gandhi visiting Borsad during a plague epidemic



Patel with Swami Anand, Manilal Kothari and others in 1928



Patel after the success of the Bardoli satyagraha



Patel after the success of the Bardoli satyagraha; from this point he would be called 'Sardar'



Sardar Patel as president of the Karachi Congress session declaring, ‘There is no receding from the Lahore resolution of complete independence!’



Sardar Patel seeing off Mahatma Gandhi for the Round Table Conference in 1931



Sardar Patel at the Haripura Congress session with Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru



Sardar Patel with Subhas Chandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi and others at the Haripura Congress session



Sardar Patel being welcomed by Thakorsaheb at Rajkot (date unknown)



Sardar Patel with Maulana Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Shankar Rao Deo, J.B. Kripalani and Rajendra Prasad walking out of prison (date unknown—most likely in the mid-1940s)



Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu (date unknown)



Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad and Rajendra Prasad in conversation (date unknown)



Sardar Patel with Jawaharlal Nehru



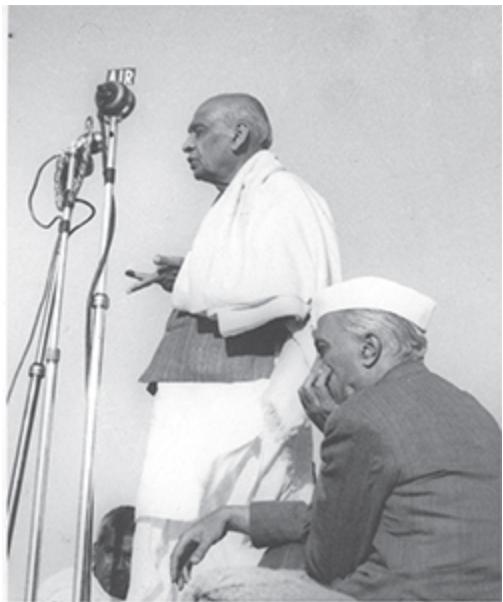
Sardar Patel going in a rickshaw to attend the leaders' conference in Shimla in 1940



Sardar Patel and Sardar Baldev Singh in conversation with Lady Mountbatten (date unknown)



Sardar Patel with the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar in New Delhi, 20 April 1948



Sardar Patel with Jawaharlal Nehru



Sardar Patel with Rajendra Prasad (date unknown)



Group photo of Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari, Maulana Azad and others
(date unknown)



Meeting between Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru



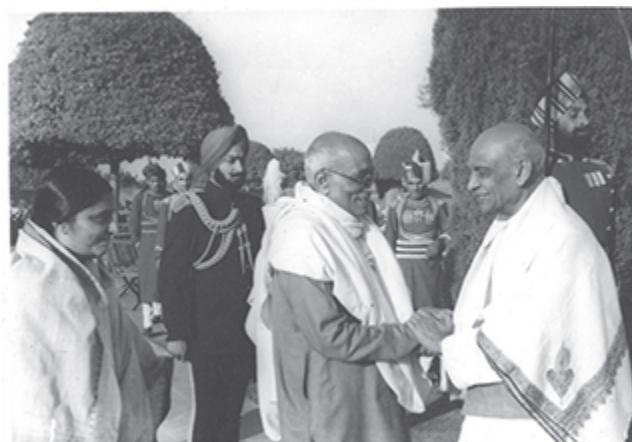
Sardar Patel in conversation with Lord Mountbatten



Sardar Patel saying goodbye to Lord and Lady Mountbatten in Mussourie (date unknown)



Sardar Patel shaking hands with a lady in a gathering. Maniben Patel and Lady Mountbatten are also seen in this picture. (date unknown)



Sardar Patel shaking hands with C. Rajagopalachari (date unknown)



The first cabinet after Independence with Lord Mountbatten



Sardar Patel holds talks with rulers of some southern princely states about their integration with independent India (date unknown)



Sardar Patel sitting with Sheikh Abdullah and Maniben Patel on 4 November 1947. Maniben is sitting with her back to the camera.



Sardar Patel shaking hands with General Cariappa (date unknown)



The dead body of Sardar Patel being placed in a car. Jawaharlal Nehru and Maniben Patel are also seen in this picture, 1950.

Notes

Introduction: The Adjective Patelian

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Chapter 11: ‘This must, must and must be done.’

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