Chapter 2

AN UNCERTAIN BEGINNING

By the rules of the Indian National Congress (the Congress Party), Vallabhbhai Patel should have been the party's president at the time of independence. If that had been so, he might well have been India's first prime minister. However, in August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, not Patel, became prime minister.

Patel and Nehru differed greatly in their economic and social philosophies and in their approaches to the use of government authority and power. Patel, however, lived to see only the first three years of post-independence India. As deputy prime minister and home (interior) minister, he left a lasting legacy. Even during those few years, he and Nehru fought bitterly on the priorities for India's political and economic future. If Patel had become India's first prime minister or if he had lived longer as Nehru's deputy, post-independence India would have taken a very different shape.

Two Leaders—Two Worlds

Patel was born to a peasant family in October 1875 and was raised in a modest two-story home. As a young man, he observed that fame and fortune came easily to barristers educated in England. As he later explained, "I studied very earnestly" and "resolved firmly to save sufficient money for a visit to England."[1] Patel became a British-trained lawyer

and, upon returning to India, established a very successful criminal law practice.

Patel made his initial mark in politics in the first half of 1928, when he led peasants in Bardoli, an administrative area in the current state of Gujarat, in their fight against the British government's onerous demands for land revenue. Despite its peaceful nature, the contest with the powerful British Raj became, in the popular imagination, the "battle of Bardoli." Patel's protest won the battle of Bardoli against British might, a victory for which Bardoli's people conferred on him the title "Sardar," chief or general. Vallabhbhai Patel has ever since been known as Sardar Patel.[2]

Nehru was born in November 1889 to one of India's most prominent families. His father, Motilal Nehru, was a wealthy lawyer and senior Congress Party leader. Anand Bhavan, the stately Nehru family home in Allahabad, now houses a historic museum and a planetarium. Jawaharlal studied at Harrow, the elite British public school, before attending the University of Cambridge. He qualified as a barrister in England, although he barely ever entered a courtroom. In August 1942, after Gandhi launched the Quit India movement, the British threw all Indian leaders in jail. Interned at the Ahmednagar Fort, Nehru grew a rose garden and played badminton with other prisoners. In a five-month period between April and September 1944, Nehru wrote his magnificent and timeless history *The Discovery of India.*

Patel was as much a man of action as Nehru was a historian and philosopher. As Gandhi pithily observed, "Jawahar is a thinker, Sardar a doer."[3]

Gandhi Chooses Nehru

In late 1945 and early 1946, India's British rulers held elections for the central and provincial assemblies in preparation for the transfer of power. The Congress Party won large majorities in these elections, aided in part by campaign funds Patel helped raise. In a gushing profile, *Time* magazine wrote that Patel had no "pretensions to saintliness." The magazine described him as, "in American terms, the Political Boss. Wealthy industrialists thrust huge campaign funds into his hands."[4]

In late April 1946, the Congress Party was ready to select its next president. Since India's freedom was imminent, the choice of the party's

president was critical. The Congress Party president would lead the party, and hence India, into independence. Under the established process, twelve of the fifteen Provincial or "Pradesh" Congress Committees nominated Patel; three abstained. As the veteran Congress Party leader Jivatram Bhagwandas (Acharya) Kripalani would later write, the party favored Patel because he was a "great executive, organizer, and leader."[5] Provincial leaders also felt beholden to Patel for the campaign funds he had raised. The Pradesh Congress Committees were not necessarily endorsing Patel as India's first prime minister. They understood that Nehru was popular with the Indian public. But they recognized Patel's leadership qualities and his contributions to the Congress Party. So they placed Patel in a position of prominence from which he could well have emerged as India's first prime minister.

Gandhi, however, stood above the rules, and he made the decision on who would be the party's president. Just as he had in 1929 and 1937, when Patel and Nehru competed for the presidency of the Congress Party, Gandhi chose Nehru, knowing on this last occasion that no Pradesh Congress Committee had nominated him. Gandhi saw Nehru as "a Harrow boy, a Cambridge graduate," who would represent India in international affairs more effectively than Patel. Nehru also had a stronger connection than Patel did with India's Muslim community. Above all, Nehru was fifty-six years old and like a son to the seventy-six-year-old Gandhi. Patel, whom Gandhi thought of as a younger brother, was seventy-one and in poor health.[6]

The British viceroy, Lord Wavell, had set up an Executive Council as the midway step to India's independence. As the Congress Party's president, Nehru became vice president to the viceroy in his Executive Council and, hence, India's de facto prime minister until the country became independent. Once so established, in addition to the huge popularity he enjoyed with the Indian public, Nehru also had the incumbent's advantage to become independent India's first prime minister.

Gandhi believed that Nehru and Patel would be like "oxen yoked to the governmental cart. One will need the other and both will pull together." According to Patel's daughter, Maniben, Gandhi expected that Patel would prevent Nehru from "making mischief."[7]

The Oxen Pull Apart

Prime Minister Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Sardar Patel began the post-independence years entangled in a stormy relationship. They fought about the most consequential matters that defined India back then and continue to do so today.

With Pakistan partitioned as a Muslim nation, a question on people's minds was what the role and place of Muslims in India would be. Within that broader context, an immediate issue arose as the horrors of religious hatred continued after partition in both India and Pakistan. In the Indian areas marked by Hindu-Muslim tensions, the government's machinery had collapsed or become "fiercely partisan." A rumor spread that Patel, as home minister, was protecting and aiding Hindus but not Muslims. Nehru seemed to buy into the rumor, even though it had no basis. The historian Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma and Patel's biographer, writes that Patel "was unquestionably roused more by a report of 50 Hindu and Sikh deaths than by another of 50 Muslim deaths. But his hand was just."[8]

Patel, in turn, was impatient with Nehru's soft approach toward Pakistani leaders, who were making only half-hearted efforts to contain the violence against Hindus and Sikhs on their side of the border. Patel insisted that the news of this violence was triggering a "mass psychology" of resentment and anger among India's Hindus and Sikhs.[9] Nehru and Patel never resolved their differences on how best to deal with India's Hindu-Muslim issue.

They also sparred over Kashmir. On October 22, 1947, a contingent of about five thousand armed tribesmen from Pakistan drove into Kashmir. The maharaja of Kashmir, Hari Singh, was a Hindu, but the Kashmir Valley had a predominantly Muslim population. The maharaja had avoided choosing between Pakistan and India, but on October 24, he desperately appealed to the Indian government for help. On the morning of October 26, Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession to India. That evening, an Indian infantry battalion landed in Kashmir and halted the tribesmen.[10] Pakistani authorities gave the name "Azad Kashmir" (Free Kashmir) to the land west of where the Indian Army stopped the tribesmen. Indians called that area "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir."

Patel, as minister of states, directed the Kashmir operations. But in early December 1947, he found to his surprise that Nehru, as prime minister, had taken control of India's Kashmir policy. Patel complained that he had been blindsided, and the two exchanged acrimonious letters.[11]

With Nehru and Patel evidently at loggerheads, Gandhi in late December delivered an ultimatum to Patel: "Either you should run things or Jawaharlal should." Patel wearily replied, "I do not have the strength. He is younger. Let him run the show. I will help him as much as I can from the outside." Gandhi, who had kept Patel and Nehru together for so long, agreed that it was time for Patel to step aside but said that he wanted to think the matter over.[12] Fate, however, intervened. On January 31, 1948, a Hindu nationalist named Nathuram Godse shot and killed Gandhi.

After Gandhi's death, in their moment of shared grief and to quash the swirling rumors of their imminent split, Nehru and Patel came together. In a radio address, Nehru said, "We have had our differences. But India at least should know that these differences have been overshadowed by fundamental agreements about the most important aspects of our public life." On March 3, Nehru wrote to Patel that the crisis required them to work together as "friends and colleagues." He ended graciously: "this letter carries with it my friendship and affection." Patel replied with equal grace: "I am deeply touched, indeed, overwhelmed. We have been lifelong friends and comrades in a common cause." All talk of Patel's leaving was forgotten.[13] The twists of history continued, however. On March 8, 1948, while eating lunch at home with his daughter Maniben, Patel had a massive heart attack.

Patel Integrates the States

Patel returned to work quickly after his heart attack and poured his energies into a monumental task that he had begun but not finished. That task was to integrate the princely states into a unified India.

When the British left India, the Indian government in New Delhi did not have authority over the entire land area known today as India. Scattered all over the country were more than five hundred princely states ruled by hereditary princes. All together, the princes ruled over one-third of India's land area and one-fourth of its population. They had survived

as princes because, after the 1857 mutiny of Indian soldiers in the British army, British authorities stopped annexing new territories. They feared that more annexation would trigger another mutiny. Instead, the British Crown established the Doctrine of Paramountcy, which granted the British authorities control over the princely states' foreign policy, defense, and communications, leaving, at least in principle, administration of the states to the princes. At independence, the British transferred to the new Indian parliament full control only over "British India," the part annexed before 1857; the British also transferred their paramountcy powers over the princely states. In independent India, therefore, the princely states could determine their political relations with the rest of India and set their own commercial policies. India risked becoming a politically and economically balkanized nation.[14]

In November 1947, an opportunity had arisen to begin merging princely states into the Indian state, the "Union of India." The prince of Nilgiri, a tiny state in Orissa, faced a domestic rebellion he could not handle, so he quickly surrendered his princely rights and powers to the Indian government. Patel took his cue from that early assimilation of a princely state into the Indian Union, and starting in mid-December, he used a vigorous combination of threats and inducements to bring other princely states into the Indian fold. He offered the princes and their heirs generous tax-free "privy purses" (pensions) and continued ownership of their personal properties if they handed over their authority quietly. If they did not, they might get nothing.[15]

The task lay incomplete when Patel had his heart attack in March 1948. But by mid-1948, the "birth and beginning of a unified India" was in sight. The last holdout was the nizam (ruler) of Hyderabad. At dawn on September 13, Indian Armed Forces began rolling toward Hyderabad. On September 18, the Hyderabadi commander surrendered.[16]

In a rare celebratory moment, on October 15, 1948, Patel wrote to the premiers of all Indian provinces (renamed chief ministers of states after India became a republic in January 1950). Patel reminded the premiers that the integration of states into the Indian Union began in earnest in December 1947 and had ended with the removal of the "Hyderabad sore." India had achieved, Patel wrote, "a measure of unity which it had never

before attained in the last so many centuries."[17] That was Patel's inestimable legacy to India.

The Conflict Resumes

The conflict between Nehru and Patel resumed in early 1950, triggered by the large inflow of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan. Although not as gigantic as the migration across the Punjab border in August-September 1947, when as many as 5.5 million people crossed in each direction, "more than a million people abandoned their homes" during the great Bengal migration. Patel was again upset with Nehru for not pushing the Pakistanis to protect Hindus. He angrily called for an Indian policy of "ten eyes for an eye," expelling ten Muslims from India for every Hindu the Pakistanis pushed out. Nehru rejected this tit-for-tat strategy. India, he said, must live up to its standards of equality for its citizens and fairness of treatment.[18]

Nearly simultaneously, a controversy arose over the goals of Indian economic planning. Patel did not oppose the Planning Commission itself. But like other ministers in the Nehru cabinet, he objected to a technocratic commission that might usurp the role of the elected representatives of the people. The ideological point of conflict arose when a draft Congress Party resolution stated that the Planning Commission would seek to eliminate "the motive of private gain in economic activity." We don't know the author of these words, but they bear a striking similarity to the language Nehru used in his presidential address at the Congress Party session (convention) at Lucknow in 1936. Then, Gandhi, "without uttering a word," had ensured that Nehru's language did not filter into the party's resolutions. Now, when that language reappeared, "right-wingers" such as Patel demanded that the offending paragraph be struck out.[19]

The real tussle, however, took place on a third front: the election in 1950 of the Congress Party president. Patel backed Purshottamdas Tandon. Nehru backed Acharya Kripalani. The Tandon-Kripalani contest was a Patel-Nehru rematch.

By universal agreement, Tandon was a man of unimpeachable integrity. Such integrity was a particularly valuable virtue amid the growing corruption in Indian politics. "The spoils of power were now [being]

distributed with a feverish intensity," Nehru's biographer Michael Brecher wrote. Nehru agreed that Tandon, "an old friend," was an upright man.[20]

Tandon, like Patel, was "staunchly anti-Pakistan." But he went further. He opposed changes to Hindu customs and traditions, which meant that he opposed the Hindu Code Bill that gave Hindu women rights to divorce and property inheritance. Tandon also promoted a classical (Sanskritized) version of Hindi as India's national language. He did not wear shoes of cowhide because slaughter of a cow, an animal sacred to orthodox Hindus, was a sin.[21] Tandon's prominence was a reminder that a narrow-minded Hinduism was entrenched in the Congress Party in the earliest post-independence days.

For Nehru, an important concern was Tandon's aim of subordinating the cabinet to the Congress Party's High Command.[22] Nehru was right: the Party could not micromanage the elected government.

Patel actively lobbied for Tandon, helping him win the presidency in mid-September 1950. But Tandon's election was Patel's last victory. The Sardar died on the morning of December 15. He was seventy-five years old.[23]

The Colossus Finally Rises

Without Patel to support him, Tandon resigned as Congress Party president in August 1951. Nehru held the position until 1954, after which he made sure the president he handpicked would not be overly assertive.

With Patel gone and other rivals neutralized, Nehru faced a disorderly Congress Party. It had become a "cockpit of factions," as Patel angrily said before he died, and was being pulled in many different directions. The glue, in the form of the ideals of the independence movement, had dissolved. In June 1951, just months before the first general elections in independent India, *Time* magazine commented on the party's unruly nature and the corruption that had seeped into it. The party had become a "sprawling conglomerate" that lacked "a unifying purpose." It had grown "fat and lazy." It harbored many "timeserving officeholders" and well-known "black-marketeers."[24]

Though disruptive, the factional leaders, typically large landlords and other rural notables, brought with them valuable "vote banks" that

FIGURE 2.1: On the eve of India's first election, Nehru towered like a colossus. Source: Gopal, Sarvepalli. 1979. *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Volume One 1889–1947*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 163.

consisted of peasants working for them and caste affiliates. Nehru shied away from establishing structure and discipline in the Congress Party. Instead, he relied on his connection with the Indian people. He campaigned relentlessly, dispensing platitudes to crowds that idolized him.[25] In November 1951, with the balloting in progress, the cartoonist R. K. Laxman showed Nehru riding a campaign cart, towering above both party members and the Indian public (Figure 2.1).

The elections held between October 1951 and February 1952 were the first test of India's democracy. Out of 175 million registered voters, 108 million voted, amounting to a turnout of 62 percent. Although lower than the turnout rates common at the time in advanced industrial democracies, it was a remarkable performance, given that only about 17 percent of the Indian population could read and write. Even more impressive:

less than 2 percent of the votes cast were declared invalid. The gigantic election machinery worked stunningly well. On the day after polling was completed, the *Times of India* wrote, "Although there had been a few cases of impersonation and tampering with ballot-boxes, by and large, the elections were fair."[26]

The result, however, was not necessarily a victory for democracy. As Sarvepalli Gopal, Nehru's most important biographer, concluded, the Congress Party's easy victory was "a personal referendum in Nehru's favor, overriding all other issues." The affection Nehru enjoyed with the Indian people made him an uncontested national leader. He remained above the disorder in the Congress Party and ruled without a rival in any other party.[27] India's democracy was now in the hands of one person. India's problems were Nehru's problems. The conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir remained unresolved. At home, Hindu-Muslim tensions simmered. Despite Nehru's own commitment to communal harmony, pro-Hindu sentiment infused even senior Congress Party leaders. Above all, India's deep poverty and illiteracy needed immediate attention. Could Nehru the thinker also be a doer? Could he shape, as he had promised, an India that worked for all?