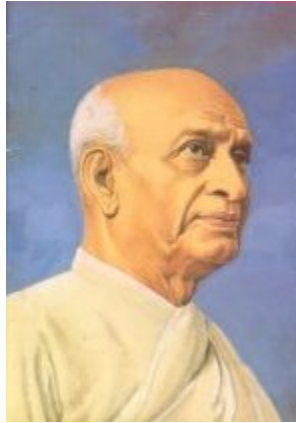


## ***Sardar Patel***



Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was known in India as the 'Man of Steel'.

Vallabhbhai was born in Nadiad. It was a small village in Gujarat. His father was Jhaverbhai Patel, and his mother Ladbai. Jhaverbhai was a poor farmer. He was a strong and sturdy man. His country and freedom were as dear to him as his own life. In 1857 the people of India fought for their freedom. Jhaverbhai, who was then a young man, fought bravely at that time. Vithalbhai, Vallabhbhai's elder brother, was also a well-known patriot. He was the Chairman of the Indian Legislative Council.

Once, when he was a small boy, Vallabhbhai suffered from a boil in the armpit. There was a man in the village who used to cure boils by touching them with hot iron. The boy went to him. The man heated the iron rod till it grew red. But he hesitated, seeing at the boy's tender years.

"What are you waiting for? The iron will grow cold. Hurry up, brand the boil," said the boy angrily.

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The man was even more frightened. The boy picked up the glowing rod and burnt the boil. Those who watched him were shocked and screamed. But there was not even a trace of pain in the boy's face.

This amazing boy was born on the 31st of October 1875. (This is the date generally accepted.) The elders were filled with pride and joy at the fearlessness of the little boy; the younger ones loved and admired him. No companion of his ever disobeyed him. By nature he rebelled against injustice. He showed a genuine interest in the welfare of his companions, constantly Enquirer about their needs and problems helped them as best he could, and promoted friendship and unity.

Vallabhbai's early education was in Karamsad. Then he joined a school in Petlad. After two years he joined a high school in a town called Nadiad. A teacher of this school used to sell the books, which the pupils needed. He used to force all the pupils to buy books only from him. If any boy bought books from others, the teacher used to tease him. Vallabhbai thought that this was wrong. He spoke to his companions, and saw to it that not a single pupil attended the classes. For a whole week the school could not work. The teacher had to correct himself.

When he was in Petlad he used to cook for himself. Every week he used to carry provisions from home, walking the entire distance. He could have gone by train, but he did not have the money to buy a ticket.

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During his school days, one day a teacher made a mistake in working a sum. Vallabhbhai pointed out the error. The teacher was very angry and said, "All right, you be the teacher." The boy replied, "Very well, sir." He worked the sum correctly, and sat down in the teacher's chair!

Vallabhbhai first chose Sanskrit. Then he changed to Gujarati. Sanskrit was dearer to the teacher who taught Gujarati than his own subject. When Vallabhbhai entered his class, the teacher wanted to taunt him, and said, "Welcome, great man!" Poor man, he did not know that the boy would one day become a very great man.

He asked the boy, in anger, "Why did you give up Sanskrit and choose Gujarati?"

Vallabhbhai answered, "If every one chooses Sanskrit, you will have no work."

The teacher was in a rage. He complained to the headmaster. Vallabhbhai narrated to the headmaster all that had happened. The headmaster said, "I have not seen such a bold pupil." This made the teacher even more bitter. Vallabhbhai, too, did not wish to remain in that school. He went back. He studied at home and passed the examination.

Vallabhbhai's cherished ambition was to become a barrister. But in order to realize this ambition, he had to continue his studies in England. But his family was in utter poverty. He did not have enough money evens to join a college in India.

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In those days a candidate could study in private and sit for an examination in Law. Vallabhbhai's brother, Vithalbhai, also was a lawyer. He attended coaching classes before entering himself for the examination. But Vallabhbhai did not even attend coaching classes. He borrowed books from the lawyer of his acquaintance and studied their judgements. Occasionally he attended courts of law. He studied their judgments. He listened attentively to the arguments of lawyers. He observed keenly lawyers of all types - the timid ones, the dashing ones and the skillful ones. He listened to them all.

Vallabhbhai passed the examination.

Vallabhbhai had absolutely no facilities to begin practice of law. He borrowed some money from his friends and hired a room in a town called Godhra. He furnished it with a couple of chairs, and also mats for those who wished to squat on the floor.

Before long clients were attracted to this enthusiastic young man. If he took up a subject, Vallabhbhai made a thorough study of it.

In a short time Vallabhbhai made a name as a very eminent lawyer. By then he was married. Two children were born - a daughter, Manibehn, and a son, Dhayabhai. Vallabhbhai's wife fell ill, and he sent her to Bombay for treatment.

As Vallabhbhai wished to become a barrister, he was saving money and making preparations to go to England. He wrote a letter to a travel agency about his trip to England. By chance it fell into the hands of Vithalbhai. He told Vallabhbhai, "I shall go to England first; you can go later."

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Without the slightest hesitation Vallabhbhai agreed. "Take it that my money and my ticket are yours. Make use of them gladly. And if you need money in England write to me. I shall send you the money," he told his brother.

Vithalbhai's wife was not a woman who would easily adopt herself to circumstances. She was worded; what was she to do if her husband went abroad? Who would look after her? Vallabhbhai said, "Come and stay with us till my brother returns. Think of my house as yours."

Three years passed, and the elder brother returned from England.

One day Vallabhbhai had to appear in a very important case. He was arguing before the judge with the almost concentration. He was still on his feet when an urgent telegram was handed to him. He glanced at the contents and folded and put the paper in his pocket, and went on with the argument. It was only after he concluded his speech and sat down that even those near him learnt the contents of the telegram -his wife was dead!

Vallabhbhai had read the news -and had gone on with his arguments as if nothing had happened. Such was his sense of duty. All through his life, troubles never discouraged him. With a will of iron he completed whatever task he had under taken.

Patel was only thirty-three years old when his wife died. He did not wish to marry again.

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After his brother's return, Vallabhbhai went to England. He studied with single-minded devotion. The glitter and luxury of fashionable life did not tempt him. The library was at a distance of eleven miles from his lodging. Every morning he walked to the library, and walked back in the evening. He stood first in the Barrister-at-Law Examination.

As soon as he returned to India, Vallabhbhai set up practice as a barrister at Ahmedabad. Day by day his fame and his influence grew. The elder brother, Vithalbai, said, "You look after the family; I shall work, for the country."

"Yes," said Vallabhbhai. At the time he was earning eight to ten thousand rupees a month. He spent his leisure hours playing cards in a local club. He dressed like the English. He was not at all interested in politics. He sometimes laughed at Satyagraha (nonviolent non-cooperation) and service to the country as dreams of crazy fellows.

Gradually the spell of Gandhiji spread all over Gujarat. It changed Vallabhbhai's life, too. Gandhiji attended the Political Conference at Godhra. He and Vallabhbhai met at that time, and soon became friends.

Patel was very fond of children, but he was never given to an exhibition of his affection. When Manibehn shyly asked him, "How are you, father?" he made a brief answer: "I am all right."

Dhayabhai sometimes tried to engage his father in conversation; but Vallabhbhai seldom responded.

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Gandhiji entered Patel's home, too. He was like a father to the two children.

The training and refinement she received inculcated several good qualities in Manibehn. Love of simple life and good habits developed in her. When public life imposed a severe strain on her father she devoted herself to his service. She became his private secretary, took care of his health, and found joy and fulfillment in serving him. She was convinced that she could best serve the country by sharing his burden to the best of her ability.

In 1918 heavy rains destroyed the crops in Gujarat. The farmers in Kaira District were particularly in distress. The Government demanded the payment of the revenue taxes to the last pie. The farmers turned to Gandhiji as their refuge.

Gandhiji said, "I need some one who will assume the entire responsibility for this struggle."

"I shall be responsible," said Vallabhbhai Patel, and assumed the leadership of the struggle. He infused the peasants with courage, saying, "Why are you afraid of the English? If the people are united no government can do anything." He gave up his western clothes, and began to dress like the poor and humble peasants. He walked from village to village along rough tracks full of stones and thorns and brought about unity among the farmers. The farmers were filled with reverence and admiration for this prominent barrister from Ahmedabad who toiled for them day and night. One word from him, and they were ready to lay down their lives for him. So the government had to yield finally. The taxes were remitted. The

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struggle led by Patel was successful. In June 1918 the farmers celebrated their victory. They invited Gandhiji and presented him with an address.

Said Gandhiji, "The credit of this victory should go to Vallabhbhai Patel. You are fortunate to be led, by such a great hero."

Patel said with modesty, "The people of Kaira District have fought with courage and endurance. Theirs is the honor of this triumph."

Vallabhbhai lived up to his ideals. In 1920 the Congress Party passed a resolution on non-cooperation; it resolved not to cooperate with the foreign government in any way. Patel gave up his practice as a barrister, which used to bring him thousands of rupees every month. He asked people not to send their children to schools run by the government. He founded the Gujarat Vidyapeetha to educate the children to grow up to be patriots. He collected lakhs of rupees for this institution and built it up.

In 1923 the government ordered that no one should carry the tricolored flag in any road in Nagpur where government officers lived. Who could object to the display of our flag in our country? The people decided to disobey this offensive order. They invited Vallabhbhai Patel to guide them. As soon as he arrived the struggle grew more spirited. Satyagrahis began to pour in from other parts of the country. The agitation went on for three and a half months. Finally the government withdrew the order, and the satyagraha ended in a victory for the people.

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The people of Borsad Taluk were subjected to great suffering at that time. A dacoit, Babar by name, and his gang began to indulge in murder and looting. A police force arrived to put him down. But the police became as much a menace as the robbers. They frightened the people and took away money, jewels and grains. In the meanwhile the government imposed a new tax on the people to meet the expenses of the police force. (This kind of tax is called punitive tax'.) This was adding insult to injury. The people grounded under the burden.

In this hour of distress Vallabhbhai raced to the rescue of the people. He formed a team of young volunteers from the neighboring villages for protection from the bandits. As soon as these young men swung into action the dacoit disappeared.

Patel told the Government: "We do not want your police force here; and we are not going to pay the new tax." The officers of the government tried to frighten the people in a number of ways. But their tricks were of no use. The government had to withdraw its order tamely. Vallabhbhai's fame spread to every nook and corner of India.

That year the rains played havoc in Gujarat. There were floods everywhere. The roads were under water. Thousands of houses were washed away. Lakes of people lost everything. Vallabhbhai came to their rescue. His efforts brought 2,000 volunteers together. They supplied food and clothes to those that had suffered owing to the floods and looked after them.

But their services were still needed. Hardly had the floods subsided when a terrible famine broke out. The farmers had no oxen,

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and no seeds; how were they to till the land? People were in utter despair. Patel drew the attention of the government to the sufferings of the people. He argued that the government collected taxes from the people, and therefore, it was the duty of the government to help them in their distress. So forceful was his demand that finally the government had to spend fifteen million rupees to help those in the famine stricken areas. Patel organized the relief works very efficiently so that the money was used properly. The world realized that he was not only a great fighter but also a superb organizer.

Bardoli is a Taluk in Gujarat. The people of this Taluk were in sheer distress, having suffered because of the floods and the famine. But, in this hour of distress, the foreign government raised the revenue taxes by thirty percent. The people did not know what to do. They went to Patel and said, "You are our only hope."

Said Patel, "If you oppose the government your sufferings will multiply. You will lose your lands and houses, The Government will do its best to crush you. You will not have a grain of rice or a drop of milk, and the women and the children will suffer sheer misery. Consider well. If you are confident that you have the grit to face all this, let us fight."

"We are ready. We will die rather than bow to injustice," said the farmers.

First of all, Patel wrote to the Governor, and appealed to him to reduce the taxes. But he turned a deaf ear to Patel. The Government even announced the date of the collection of the taxes.

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"No one shall pay a pie as tax," Patel instructed the farmers. The bugles of war sounded.

Patel divided Bardoli District into several zones. Each zone had a center, and a leader and some volunteers manned each center. There were messengers to carry messages from one center to another. Patel also appointed spies to report on the movements of Government officials.

"We shall use all our powers and crush the agitation," declared the Governor of Bombay. The Government sent ruffians to frighten the villagers.

The ruffians would enter villages and beat up the villagers. They used to force their way into houses and carry away grain, goods and money. They insulted the women. But the farmers refused to yield. They did not pay a single pie.

The government began to auction the houses and the lands. But not a single man came forward to buy them. Vallabhbhai had appointed volunteers in every village to keep watch. As soon as he sighted the officials who were coming to auction the property, the volunteer would sound his bugle. The farmers would leave the village and hide in the jungles. The officials would find the entire village empty. They could never find out who owned a particular house.

Patel was with the villagers all day and night, and infused courage in them.

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"If you still have a shred of fear," he told them, "throw it to the bottom of the well. It is the government which is now frightened, not we."

"I, too, am a farmer," said Patel. "I know the mind of the farmers. I want that the farmers should be respected and am able to hold their heads erect. I can have peace of mind only when that is achieved."

Patel learnt that some rich men were coming from cities to buy the lands of the farmers, which were being auctioned. "I am the Sardar (chief) in Gujarat," declared Patel; "let them come, I know what to do." There was total social boycott of those who bought the lands. The rich men who had come from, outside could not get a grain of rice or a drop of water, and were glad to escape alive.

Several members of the Bombay Legislative Assembly opposed the unjust policies of the government and resigned. Government, too, lost heart. The people's agitation triumphed. Vallabhbhai came to be known as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The farmers of Bardoli presented him with an address and praised his greatness and leadership. In reply Patel said: "It was Mahatma Gandhi who gave me the herb of Satyagraha. All that I did was to administer the medicine. And you strictly followed that doctor's instructions. So all that you have said in praise of me in your address should belong to him and to you; all that remains for me is the blank sheet of paper. The prosperity of the country is in the hands of the youth. Do not forget - in every country it is the young who have won and consolidated freedom, and passed it on to later generations."

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All India now knew Patel as the Sardar.

Sardar's fiery words provoked the British Government. It sent him to prison twice in 1930. But this only increased his influence. Sardar Patel was elected President of the Karachi Session of the National Congress, which met in 1931. In his speech Patel declared in unmistakable words, "Swaraj (independence) is our goal. There cannot be the slightest modification of that goal." The government was even more infuriated, and sent him to prison again. He was freed only in 1934.

The Sardar's experiences in the prison make interesting reading. He was treated as an ordinary prisoner. There was only one lavatory in the prison. Every morning the prisoners had to queue up for their turn. And they had to wait in another queue for water. There was no secluded place where they could pass urine. The food served in the prison was rotten. But nothing could dishearten the Sardar.

The officials of the prison loved to give the prisoners pinpricks. Some friends gave the Sardar as presents a few articles for his use in the prison. Among them was a razor. The officials would not let Patel have it. Finally Patel protested.

Patel said, "Why not give me the razor and let me shave all the prisoners? That will give me some work to do, and I can spend sometime."

Everyone including the clerks who heard him burst into laughter.

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Patel's faith in God and in religion was not obvious to outward view, but when he was in prison he got copies of the Bhagavad- Gita and the Ramayana through the authorities of the prison. He studied and pondered on them every day.

Elections to the Legislatures of Provinces were held in 1937. The Sardar was the Chairman of the Congress Parliamentary Board. Under his stewardship the Congress secured a majority of seats in eight provinces and formed ministries. The reins of all of them were in the hands of the Sardar. He unhesitatingly took to task any minister who did wrong.

In 1942 the Congress called on the British to quit India. It started what came to be known as the 'Quit India Movement' or the 'Chalejav Movement'. The government jailed all the important leaders of the Congress, including Sardar Patel. Patel fell ill in the prison. The government would not allow his doctor to examine him in the prison. All the leaders were released after three years. At the time the Muslim League went on creating complications, and made the achievement of freedom more difficult. Patel declared, "We shall fight all those who come in the way of India's freedom."

Freedom dawned on the 15th of August 1947. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of independent India. Sardar Patel became the Deputy Prime Minister. He was in charge of Home Affairs, Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of States.

There were more than 600 states in India at that time. Except a few they were small states. Some of the Maharajas and Nawabs who

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ruled over these were sensible and patriotic. But most of them were drunk with wealth and power. They were dreaming of becoming independent rulers once the British quit India. They argued that the government of free India should treat them as equals. Some of them went to the extent of planning to send their representatives to the United Nations Organization.

If these states had not become a part of free India there would have been many problems. India would have had to take their permission for trains to pass through their states. If inter-state rivers flowed through these states, India would have had to seek their permission to use the waters. Their permission would have been needed to build dams. And, in the event of a war between India and any other country, how would these 600 states behave? Whom would they support? It was impossible to tell. These 600 states would have been 600 sores in the body of India.

"if we unite, we can soon make this country prosperous. Come and join us. Cooperate with us," so Sardar invited the rulers even before Independence Day. He also warned them: "If you do not join us before the 15th of August, thereafter the position will be different.

You may not then get the consideration and the concessions you now get." Patel also met a number of rulers and held discussions with them. As a result, a number of patriotic rulers joined the Indian Union.

But the rulers of Junagadh and Hyderabad were plotting secretly to Join Pakistan.

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Patel sent an army under Brigadier Gurudayalsimha to the border of Junagadh to deal with Pakistan. The people of the state who wished to join India rebelled against the ruler and set up a People's Government. The Nawab, who had tried to betray the people, ran away. Patel reached Junagadh on the 12th of November 1947. In the course of a speech there, he warned that the Nizam of Hyderabad would share the fate of the Nawab of Junagadh if he did not behave sensibly.

But the Nizam was slow to learn the lesson. He sent millions of rupees to Pakistan. One of his men, Kasim Razvi by name, began to harass the Hindus. His gang was called the Razakars. They tried to drive the Hindus out of Hyderabad. There was no limit to their crimes. They tried to get arms and ammunition from outside.

Finally Sardar Patel sent some forces under General Chowdury to undertake 'Police Action'. Within five days the Nizam was forced to surrender. Kasim Razvi ran away to Pakistan. The atrocities of the Razakars came to an end and peace returned to Hyderabad. The firm policy of Sardar Patel, the Man of Steel, crushed all the plots against India.

A similar problem arose in Kashmir. The Maharaja and the Legislative Assembly decided that the state should join India. But the Pakistan army forcibly occupied two-fifths of Kashmir. The Ministry was handling the Kashmir question for Foreign Affairs and there was nothing Patel could do.

Sardar Patel was a man of remarkable foresight. In 1962 China sent her army across the border and India reeled under the blow.

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This is the saddest episode in the history of Free India. But as long back as on the 7th of November 1950, Patel wrote a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru and declared that China was not to be trusted. He wrote: 'The Government of China speaks of its desire for peace and is trying to mislead us. Hereafter, in planning the defense of our country, we must remember the intentions of Communist, China.'

Five weeks later Patel passed away. About twelve years after his death China attacked India.

Many people misunderstood Patel. There was false propaganda that he did not like Muslims. On the 6th of January 1948, speaking in Lucknow, he said, "There is a cry that I am against Muslims. But I am their true friend. I cannot beat about the bush. I cannot dissemble. Let no one try to have his two feet in two different boats. Let every one choose one boat. Let us all, who belong to India, swim or sink together."

The Sardar's plain words made some people angry. They complained to Gandhiji. What Sardar Patel said at that time shows the superb self-confidence of this mighty man:

"I cannot speak anything but the truth. I cannot turn back on my duty, just to please some one."

The 30th of January 1948, was a dark day in the history of India. An evil man killed Gandhiji on that day. Gandhiji was like an elder brother and a Guru to Patel. They had been put in the same jail several times.

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Gandhiji has said of their days in prison, "Vallabhbhai's affection for me reminded me of my mother. Before that time I had not realized that such a tender, affectionate heart was hidden in him."

Sardar Patel undertook several measures to uphold the greatness of India. The sight of the great Somanatha Temple practically in ruins because of the repeated attacks of foreigners was most painful to him. He undertook the renovation of that temple. He made it the symbol of the power and the victory of resurgent India who had shaken off the slavery of centuries and felt a new energy throbbing in her veins. It was from him that Kania Lal Munshi got the inspiration to found the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Bombay.

Once the engine of the airplane in which he was travelling failed, and the vehicle had to make a forced landing on the bank of a river at a distance of about thirty miles from Jaipur. The Delhi Airport had lost all contact with the airplane. For about four hours Delhi did not know what had happened. But luckily the Sardar was safe.

Two days later the Sardar entered the Lok Sabha. Forgetting all rules the members greeted him with cries of 'Sardar Patel Jindabad'.

The Speaker congratulated the Sardar who was unhurt and said, "The misery and the anxiety of the entire nation until news came that he was safe show what a place he has won in the hearts of the people."

Eight days later the members of Parliament got up a function to felicitate him.

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Even in his old age the Sardar was so busy that he did not have a moment's rest. He had to tour extensively all over the country this affected his health. He passed away in Bombay on the morning of the 15th of December 1950. The General of Bardoli, the Lion of Gujarat, India's Man of Steel, the Sardar of the country's fight for freedom, the Mighty Architect of the integrity of India, the Vallabhbhai Patel of rock-like will power, was no more.

He was then seventy-five.

Prime Minister Nehru said, "His name will live for ever in history. He is the Architect of Modern India. He was a wise counselor in the hour of trial, a trustworthy friend and a mine of courage and inspiration."

Patel was known as the Man of Steel. But tenderness was very much alive in the steel of his nature. He looked after not only Gandhiji but also other friends like Kania Lal Munshi with the affection of a mother, when they were all in prison. He did not believe in making speeches. He was a man of very few words. He accepted with a calm mind whatever life brought him- happiness or sorrow. Pain and sorrow could not alter a single line of his face. When necessary he could be dominating; but by nature he was very courteous. After the Bardoli Satyagraha he became famous all over India. When he went to attend the Congress Session he forgot to take his pass with him. The volunteers stopped him. He went back. Next day the volunteers understood who he was, and were ashamed. But Patel was not at all displeased.

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It is a hundred years since this hero, the Sardar, was born. Let us remember him with reverence and bow to him. Let us emulate his admirable qualities.

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