

Sardar Patel – A Benefactor of Peasantry

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Abstract

Sardar Patel occupies an important place in the annals of India for his work. He was devoted politician, a great patriot, responsive administrator, sagacious statesman and a liberal social reformer. He had great concern for the peasantry and the labour. All through his political life he stood with them like a rock in their thick and thin, guided them and led their struggle against the atrocities of British Raj on several occasions. This research paper seeks to focus on Patel's role in alleviating the suffering of peasants by organising them for successful movements in Gujarat, such as Peasant struggle of Kheda, Bardoli Satyagraha, Borsad Punitive Tax Movement etc. For conducting this research work, an historical research design has been used appropriately, and material was arranged from different sources like books, journals, archives, and government reports and records. On the basis of findings, we also drew several conclusions and suggested future area of research on Patel's life and work.

Introduction :

Sardar Patel played a major role in India's struggle for its independence. He was a man of multi-dimensional personality – a patriot to the core, devoted political worker, liberal social reformer, an organizational man, responsible administrator and sagacious statesman. He was also the champion of farmers, who were under great sufferings, as they continue to be in the present times. He led farmers' struggle against the atrocities of *British Raj* on several occasions. And in all these struggles, he left no stone unturned to ward off their sufferings. He organized meticulously, the peasants against the oppressive policies pursued by *British Raj*. Being a farmer himself, he had first-hand knowledge of their miserable plight. He had great admiration for farming community. He often used to say "If anyone is fit to work with his head erect on the earth, it is the peasant. He is the producer, the others are parasites. But what a sorry plight he has been reduced to!"¹ He was convinced like Gandhi that unless farmers and villages grow, India will not grow. This paper seeks to focus on Patel's role in alleviating the sufferings of peasants in Gujarat and elsewhere in the country.

Objectives and Research Method :

The major objective of this paper is to adumbrate the role played by Sardar Patel in solving the problems of farmers and village communities, largely, in Gujarat during the early years of his political career. Such important activities which Patel undertook siding farmer are discussed in this paper. Peasant struggle of Kheda (1918), Bardoli Satyagraha (1928), Borsad Punitive Tax Movement (1924), and Labour struggle at Ahmedabad are analysed in this paper.

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It is through appropriate research methodology that objective of any research is achieved. A research method generally includes two components viz., Research design, and source material. For purpose of this research paper, a historical research design (mixing of descriptive and explorative designs) has been used. For collecting data and raw material, we have consulted books, journals, periodicals and state and national archives, government records and reports.

Analysis :

The three peasant movements mentioned earlier form the main body of our analysis in this paper.

Peasant Struggle of Kheda (1918) :

Peasants in India during *British Raj* suffered heavily due to either excessive or deficient rains with hardly any satisfactory relief work. Gujarat was no exception. For four consecutive years (1915-18), Gujarat experienced excessive flood or deficient rains. Plague also broke out in the Kheda area. The farmers of Kheda district in Gujarat (near Patel's home place) were in great distress and bagged the Raj to lower land revenue but their plea was turned down. Patel jumped into fray after suspending his law practice to lead the movement. He remarked, "My practice may or may not be there tomorrow. Let me leave them a higher legacy than money."² Patel did it at the cost of his career and material ambition. In this movement, thousand of activists and farmers were arrested, but movement remained non-violent. The movement, all across India, won sympathy, admiration and willing support. At last, the government agreed to negotiate with Patel and decided to suspend the payment of revenue for the year, even scaling back the rate. Patel in this successful movement emerged as a hero of Gujarat and was admired all over. Significantly, Patel infused the peasants with courage saying, "Why are you afraid of the English? If the people are united, no government can do anything."³ In June 1918, farmers invited Gandhiji to celebrate the victory of this movement. Gandhi appreciated Patel and said "The credit of this victory should go to Patel. You are fortunate to be led by such great hero."⁴ This was Patel's first experience in mass civic disobedience preparing him for the great battle of India's independence. Again, floods in Gujarat in 1923 and 1927 played havoc with the people and their cattle. This time Gujarat flood crisis assumed monstrous form in several districts like Ahmedabad, Kheda, Baroda and Bharoch, which taken together, recorded. 41 inches rains for three days combined with stormy winds. Fields, over a large tracts of area in these districts were flooded and houses washed away. The relief work on a mass scale in these areas became successful only because of Patel's courage, imagination drive and passion for rushing to people in distress and giving them immediate relief. Congress volunteers under the stewardship of Patel covered all the villages wading through 4 to 5 feet deep flood waters. Their efforts brought relief to the needy people. The Viceroy of India on this was so touched that he granted a sum of a crore rupees for relief work and people rehabilitation. This was termed the best relief program never done before. Patel organized the relief work quite efficiently and prudently so that the money did not go waste. The people acknowledged him a superb organiser and the savior.⁵

Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 :

Bardoli Satyagraha added one another feather to Patel's cap that made him famous and gave the title of 'Sardar' by which name he came to be known all over. This movement also adopted the principle of non-violence. The successful *satyagraha* gave confidence to the country in the efficacy of this instrument for achieving the freedom of India later.⁶ People of Bardoli (a *taluk* in Gujarat) suffered heavily on account of flood and draught and at the same time *British Raj* raised the revenue taxes by 31 percent. On this, entire peasantry of the *Taluqua* was in revolt against the *British Empire*. They also approached Patel and he wrote a letter to the Governor in this context but to no avail. Thereafter Patel sounded the people not to pay any tax and 'no tax campaign' was started. All kinds of repressive measures were adopted by the government to frighten the agitators. The *British Raj* used *Pathans* to recover property, seizing farmers land, cattle and other properties of the defaulter villages. But due to the strategies adopted by Patel to lead the non-violent peaceful movement, *Pathans* were turned into ridicule by the people. He cautioned the people "Let everyone work with utmost restraint. Even if you have a just cause for anger, be patient..... even if they (*Pathans* and others) take away from you the things most dear to you, keep quiet! Despair has made the government like red hot iron; the people one the hammer which can mould the hot iron to any shape they desire. But the hammer cannot do this if it also gets red hot in contact with the iron; keep cool, if you desire victory over the government?"⁷ Besides, Patel's special emphasis on the mobilization of women to join movement proved very useful in maintaining the overall morale of the family members. Women began to outnumber men at meetings and sang rustic songs of the misdeeds of *British Raj*. Students were also involved. Those who showed sign of weakness and were hesitant to join movement were also brought into line by social pressure and threats of social boycott. Patel also promised to the farmers that every inch of peasants' land confiscated would be restored to them at an opportune moment. He himself being farmer knew how deeply were farmers attached to their land and they consider it their 'Mother Earth'. He fulfilled this promise in 1937 when the Congress ministers assumed power in the provinces, Sardar got enacted a special law in this context.⁸ Ultimately, government yielded and people's agitation triumphed. Bardoli was Patel's fight all the way. Neither the Congress nor the GPCC had any role to play. Patel's remarkable tenacity and organising skill was more visibly acknowledged during the Bardoli Satyagraha. After this satyagraha, Patel rose to highest of popularity not only in Gujarat but across India. Bardoli also restored Indians confidence in their ability to fight against *British Raj*.

The Borsad Punitive Tax Movement (1923-24):

The people of Borsad taluk were subjected to great sufferings by a dacoit Babar and his gang. The police posted there to overcome the menace themselves acted like robbers and looted people property and belongings. Strangely, the government imposed a new tax on the people to cover the expenses of police thus deployed in the area. With Patel intervention, who formed a team of young volunteers from these affected villages, the people got rid of dacoits and they disappeared. Then Patel put pressure on the government to

withdraw tax as well as the police. Government had no alternative and withdrew both tamely. Patel also played pivotal role when people of Borsad and neighbouring villages were afflicted with plague in 1935. Plague was so fierce and cruel that in one village 589 deaths took place in that one year alone. While serving these people, Patel along with his volunteers, used to sleep at night in the field outside the villages, using the bundles of grass and straw as pillow and bare grounds in the affected villages.⁹ After this Patel's fame spread far and wide in India.

Great Liberator of Women and Labour :

He was averse to the idea of confinement of the women under veils. He lambasted the peasants and making them understand that keeping the women under seclusion is akin to an affliction of half of their organs, with gastritis and gangrene. It was under his chairmanship that at Karanchi Congress Session equity was pledged between men and women. He was also against child marriage and dowry.

Similarly, he was quite progressive in understanding workers – industrialists relations. While serving as President of workers union he provided number of incentives to workers to work hard in the interest of the country. He also built the structure of Indian National Trade Union Congress in the country which in his life had been a signal success. In fact, women farmers and labour leaders in India had drawn their inspiration from Patel to organize them. He opined that the whole world depends on these three and yet they are the worst sufferers and abused. His approach to the agrarian, labour, and women reforms was through non-violent means preceded by creation of adequate wealth available for distribution. His approach was to improve the lot of 'have-nots' instead of playing one against the other. He also opined that political freedom devoid of economic freedom cannot provide really meaningful freedom.

Conclusion :

Some following significant conclusions that emerge from the study are as under :-

- Sardar Patel was a great benefactor of peasantry and poor workers. He always stood with them like a rock whether it was Bardoli *satyagraha*, flood and famine of Kheda or Borsad problem of dacoits, punitive taxation and epidemic (plague). He instilled in them the spirit of oneness and togetherness among the soft peasants and workers.
- His approach to help peasants and workers was all through by peaceful and non-violent means preceded by creation of adequate wealth available for distribution and not to place them against the others. His ideas of prosperity of nation and its integrity were ideal.
- He was a great organiser of unparalleled capability and extraordinary skills. He could easily identify himself with the poor and 'have nots'. Whatever he did, did with vigour precision and efficiency and he generally succeeded in doing it successfully.
- It is unfortunate that even after 69 years of independence, problems of peasants, labour, and women are multiplying. Had Patel been alive for more years, he would have addressed these problems? It is

high time that the historians and thinkers highlight and revisit Sardar's life and work to do justice to him.

References :

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