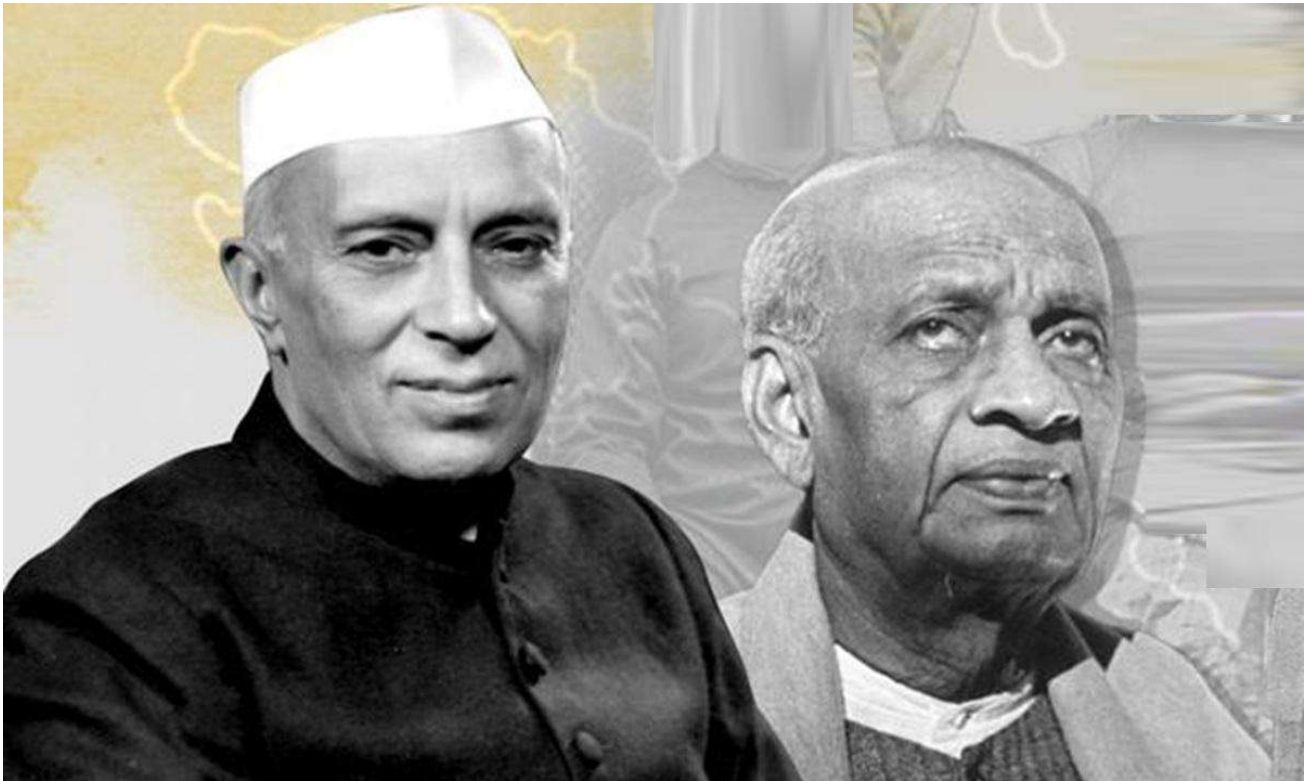


Did Patel face off with Nehru?



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In the present political arena there are arguments revolving around Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru versus Sardar Vallabhai Patel. Several people put forward meaningless arguments, blowing out of proportion the differences between the two great leaders. So, by way of setting the record straight on this birthday of Nehru, let us have a re-look at the sublimity of the relationship between the two leaders'.

Mutual respect

Patel was steeped to the core in the Indian culture, values and identities while Nehru's principles and outlook had a global character transcending the Indian ethos and glory. Hence, quite naturally the two leaders would frequently have differences of opinion. On

such occasions, Nehru used to seek Gandhi's intervention. In spite of their ideological clashes, both Nehru and Patel had a boundless mutual regard and respect for each other.

Referring to Nehru's role in the freedom struggle, Patel wrote in a letter to Gandhi during the Congress working committee meeting in August, 1936, "Nehru has done a tremendous work like the two burning ends of a candle. We both did not have even a slight trace of embarrassment while cooperating with him and toeing the line of his outlook on particular issues."

Similarly, Nehru asked his fellow Congress activists in Bombay in July, 1940 to cooperate with Patel. Nehru categorically and unequivocally stressed the importance of Patel's leadership for the success of the freedom struggle. He said in glowing terms that only a select few had as much eligibility, skill, will power and dedication as Patel had.

Political rivalry

There was an unexpected contest between Nehru and Patel when efforts were under way to form an interim government in 1946. But with nine days left for filing nomination for the Congress leader post, Mahatma Gandhi had hinted personally that his choice was Nehru.

Meanwhile Abul Kalam Azad wanted to don the mantle of the Congress leader for the second time. But on Gandhi's advice, Azad had a re-think and finally there were only Nehru and Patel left in the fray. Out of the 15 Congress Pradesh committees, 13 voted for Patel, saying that they had done so because it was the election of the party president and had it been an election of Prime Minister, they would have favored Nehru. Two committees had not expressed their choice. In these circumstances, Gandhi succeeded in persuading Patel to opt out of the contest for the party chief post.

Gandhi explained his stance, saying, "Nehru would not like to play a second fiddle in the Cabinet. Moreover, he is more popular than Patel abroad. He alone could make India act vibrantly in the international affairs. Patel can take care of the internal affairs of the country. Both will function like twin horses of a government carriage. Both will draw along the carriage jointly, needing each other."

Joined hands

Finally Nehru won the party chief election with the support of Gandhi as Patel had withdrawn himself solely owing to his love for Nehru and respect for Gandhi. The moment of forming the post-Independence government was drawing closer. The onus fell on Nehru. On August 1, 1947, Nehru wrote to Patel, "I formally invite you to join the new Cabinet. You are the strong pillar of the Ministry."

Responding to this epistle, Patel wrote, "Our closeness, love and camaraderie have been sustained for almost 30 years. You can use my service as you please. I will show my dedication and loyalty for the rest of my life. The reason for it is that none in the country has sacrificed as much as you have done. Our proximity to each other will be intact. That's where our strength lies."

So, both leaders worked jointly. When it came to critical issues, they used to call at each other's residence and discuss before arriving at policy decisions.

They expressed their viewpoints very clearly during the critical moments of partition and independence. They visited several regions and exhibited their dedication to secularism. "India will not turn a Hindu state as long as I am at the helm of affairs," said Nehru while Patel affirmed that there was no danger at all to Hinduism.

After Gandhi

It may be surprising to many that even a few minutes before Gandhi was assassinated by Godse on January 30, 1948, he advised Patel not to quit the Cabinet following differences of opinion with Nehru. Patel was advised to work with Nehru jointly.

After the assassination of Gandhi, both Nehru and Patel decided to work jointly for the welfare of the country, burying their differences of opinion. However, Patel justified his controversial points of view. Though on the surface level there was bonhomie between the two leaders, Patel's viewpoints revealed that he had not mentally accepted Nehru's leadership. At the same time, Patel said openly at a meeting in Indore on October 2, 1950 two months before his death that some people were trying to drive a wedge between him and Nehru. "Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is our leader. Gandhi had nominated Nehru as his heir. So it is the duty of his followers to accept his directive. Those not ready to accept it are sinners before the God. I am not a disloyal soldier. I am not after power and position. I know I stand where Gandhi asked me to," Patel said in unmistakable terms.

Similarly, paying homage in Parliament to Patel on his death on December 15, 1950, Nehru said in his moving speech, "It is a great story, as all of us know, as the whole

country knows, and history will record it in many pages and call him the builder and consolidator of the new India and will say many things about him. But perhaps to many of us here he will be remembered as a great captain of our forces in the struggle for freedom and as one who gave us sound advice in times of troubles as well as in moments of victory, as a friend and colleague on whom one could invariably rely, as a tower of strength which revived wavering hearts when we were in trouble.... Seeing his empty chair here, it feels like he is still sitting in the chair. A sense of emptiness engulfs me, seeing his empty chair.”

While history testifies to a unique relationship of warmth and camaraderie between Nehru and Patel, it is quite unhealthy to view their great achievements and positive kinship from a biased and partial perspective.

November 14 marks Jawaharlal Nehru’s 135th birthday.

Translated by V. Mariappan