

PATELISM AN ALTERNATIVE TO GANDHISM

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Abstract: *Politics is defined by political thinking of great leaders. Their exposure to public life helps them to show right direction to people to realize the best political life. India came across a few such great leaders during the long arduous freedom struggle. 'Colonization' provided them a context to interpret role of individual and responsibilities of the state. Great Indian leaders like Gandhi and Patel (Vallabhbhai) are no exception to it. Due to their long association in public life, many believe their ideas to be same. An attempt has been made to analyze their view points and relevance for the growth of Indian political thought.*

Introduction:

The struggle for freedom in India lasted for around hundred years. During the long duration, involvement of people with different lines of thinking helped India to evolve as a nation state¹. The tumultuous phase of Indian history witnessed emergence of a spectrum of political leaders with their different dreams for India. Though we had political outfits such as the Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and the Communist Party yet the Congress formed with the tacit support of the British in the late nineteenth century appeared to be most decisive². Its phase wise evolution with the help of the Moderates, Extremists, Agitationalists and Constitutionalists made it extremely matured to realize the compulsion of the presence of the British in India. So, the party remained united under the leadership of Gandhi who converted the party from an elite organization into a mass based party through non-violence³. It has been rightly observed; "The greatest innovation of the time was Gandhian politics-an ingenious combination of tireless social work and political goals. All political activity was conducted against this backdrop from 1919 onwards and it seemed an ideal combination in the imperialist context"⁴. The trend to part with the party began only towards the far end of freedom struggle when Subash Bose, the fire brand Congress Socialist decided to join hands with the Axis force. It became more soon after the independence with the departure of other socialist leaders such as Narendra Dev, Jaya Prakash Narayan and Achyut Patwardhan. Resignation of ministers like C. Bhabha, S. Chetty and K.C. Niyogi from the first Cabinet on ideological ground proved it further.

Amidst all these internal and external challenges the Congress continued to remain resolute due to the role played by the 'Indian Triumvirate', comprising of Gandhi, Patel and Nehru. People rallied round them against the British to make independence a reality. Under their leadership, Congress kept on changing its techniques from agitation to fighting election as demanded by the situation. Their exposure to the western world and access to the grassroots equation helped them to build an effective parallel political set up against the imperial authority. It was quite unprecedented in the given scenario. Around the time of partition and soon thereafter different perceptions of Nehru and Patel on nation building activities became the talk in the power corridor. Their distinct upbringing influenced them to articulate variedly issues like secularism, national integration and the nature of economic policy. The power tussle within the Congress could hardly be overlooked in fuelling such polarization⁵. Unlike Nehru – Patel equation Vallabhbhai's relation with Gandhi is mostly considered to be above controversy. He is believed to be one of the most trusted lieutenants of Gandhi⁶. It has been argued that Patelism without Gandhism would be inadequate⁷. Given the contribution of both the leaders, an attempt has been made to understand intricacies of their relation. It has become all the more important when Vallabhbhai Patel is remembered today for his independent views on state vis-a-vis the society.

Gandhi:

Gandhi was born at Porbandar in Gujarat in 1869 in a middle class conservative family. He had been to England to get the degree of law. As a lawyer, his expertise in India was not up to mark. So he moved to South Africa in search of opportunities. There he fought for the civil rights of Indian labourers. He returned to India in 1915 to repeat his experiment and to make people free from the British exploitation. He organized the Congress and followed the agitational path to make the country free.

Gandhi is possibly the only leader in India who succeeded in giving shape to the Indian Political Thought in the most comprehensive manner. During the process, he unveiled his ideas on human nature, nationalism, state, democracy and social organization. He attacked the contemporary leaders as most of them believed that the context of colonization provide them the impetus to interpret Indian political values. He was a diehard critique of western civilization and the policy of colonization. Like Rousseau, he believed that growth of science and technology to be the sole cause of moral degradation. His view reflected the concern of Marcuse who much later reiterated that affluence of western society had caused alienation, reducing individual to an 'one dimensional man'. Gandhi had tremendous faith on the ancient Indian Political Thought having elements such as moral human being, plural society and minimal state, needed for the complete growth of individual. He did not agree with the Greek conceptualization of politics as an all embracing activity providing scope for a sweeping justification of power. He also refuted the articulation of a minimal state only for the protection of the private domain of a self-seeking individual. He was inspired by Vivekananda who argued; "The basis of all systems, social or political rests upon the goodness of man. No nation is great or good because Parliament enacts this or that, but because its men are great and good. The aim is to promote a sound body of individual ethics and this must not be a political task, for men cannot be made virtuous by an Act of Parliament..... And that why religion is of deeper importance than politics, since it goes beyond to the root, and deals with the essentials of conduct"⁸. Gandhi found a deep connection between religion and politics. He believed in Hinduism which is much more than a mere religion. It helps individual to explore truth of life. "Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to his own faith or Dharma and so it lives at peace with other religion"⁹. Such a conviction helped him to be a votary of Hindu – Muslim unity. Though he revolved round the individual, he did not subscribe to the notion of natural rights such as right to property which should be protected

to the maximum length to provide ample opportunities for the maximum growth. He was a believer of 'every one according to his need and to nobody according to his greed'. Such an articulation of the nature of individual in society appears to be in consonance with the Indian value system of balancing the status of individual with the dynamics of plural society. It made the concepts of liberty, equality and justice quite holistic.

After laying down the objective of moral growth of the individual Gandhi pondered over the means to be applied to realize it. He rejected the idea that ends justified means, a notion which Kautilya and Machiavelli endorsed for self preservation. He considered man to be rational not for being able to project himself but for having the capacity to link means with ends. He was influenced not only by the dispassionate philosophy of Bhagwad Gita but also by Aldous Huxley and Tolstoy. He outlined techniques such as non-violence, Satyagraha, picketing, fasting, untouchability, etc. to realize Swaraj which not only needed political liberation but also required India's spiritual liberation through a fundamental change in Individual's, perception. He supported passive resistance as it minimized loss of life. He believed in social reform like untouchability, women emancipation, etc. to be pursued 'simultaneously' with political work. He argued, "my work of social reform was in no way less or subordinate to political work. The fact is when I saw that to a certain extent my social work would be impossible without the help of political work, I took to the latter and only to the extent that it helped the former. I must therefore confess that work of social reform or self-purification of this nature is a hundred times dearer to me than what is called purely political work"¹⁰. But, critiques argue that the Gandhian innovation was only need of the hour to create awareness in a traditional society bound by mechanical solidarity to fight against the semi-hegemonic colonial state¹¹.

With the due link between ends and means Gandhi organized the Congress to fight against the British. He carried out the Non-Cooperation (1919), Civil Disobedience (1930) and the Quit India Movements (1942) to expel the colonial power. He succeeded in generating the spirit of nationalism which he believed to be indigenous. He argued, "The English have taught us that we were not one nation before----- In fact we were one before they came to India. One thought inspired us..... It was because we were one nation, they were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently they divided us"¹².

Gandhi like Thoreau visualized a minimal state to govern the least. He claimed, "any increase in power of the state with the greatest fear because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress"¹³. He was in favour of conditional obligation where resistance should be agitational but peaceful. He was a critique of parliamentary democracy which allowed the representative to engage themselves in endless talks. He supported decentralization and party less democracy where village communities would rule themselves. The social basis of the ideal society would be Varna system based on functional division. It would ensure each fruit of one's labour. His trusteeship system was articulated to harmonize labour and capital both in agriculture and industrial sector.

Vallabhbhai:

Vallabhbhai was born in 1875 in a Patidar community in Karamsad of Gujarat. He belonged to a community known for its upward mobilization from a low migrant status to a well entrenched powerful community. The Patidar community picked up cultural practices such as vegetarianism and dowry practices to cope with the challenge of individual land ownership system introduced by the British and to arrest its declining status. Hence, as a staunch Patidar, Vallabhbhai learnt to be conservative and pragmatic throughout his life. He had appeared in the District pleader examination and unlike Gandhi established himself as a successful criminal lawyer. Subsequently, he went to England to become a barrister. After his return, he entered into public life by contesting election for the Ahmedabad civic body. He came in contact with Gandhi during the Kheda agitation (1918) and joined the Congress to become part of the freedom struggle. He played a crucial role during the transfer of power. He was a member of the Constituent Assembly and handled the Department of States and Home of the first Cabinet of India.

Like Gandhi, Vallabhbhai did not make many deliberations on individual – state relationship. His ideas were mostly inferred from his correspondences made to leaders of his contemporary period. As a man of pragmatic outlook, he realized the constraints of his time imposed by the imperialistic framework and thought of giving priority to 'purely political' activities rather than social work¹⁴. His interpretation of politics was devoid of morality and ethical consideration. It was as simple as creating a strong stable state to look after the basic requirement of individual. As a professional criminal lawyer, he had observed the fallible human nature from a close proximity. He believed, It is true that man has the divinity in him. But does not Gita also say that a man harbours his worst enemy within himself? If there is a God in everyman, there is also a devil in him"¹⁵. So, he pleaded for an independent state, free from vested agenda to make law to regulate rights and liberty of people in the society. He sounds like John Locke who believes law to be an essential condition for the enjoyment of liberty. Vallabhbhai was highly possessive of rights of individual. As the President of the Karachi Congress (1931), he was instrumental in the drafting of the Fundamental Rights which became the basis of Part – III and Part – IV of Indian Constitution. He had tremendous faith in the Right to Life, Right to property, Right to religion and Right to freedom of speech and expression. Vallabhbhai's taste for good clothing and hatred towards fasting proved his inclination towards life¹⁶. He never glorified sacrifice as a virtue. Like Locke, he interpreted property as the creation of God which might be enhanced by the use of one's intelligence and labour. He believed, profit motive is a great stimulant to exertion and rules human conduct in whatever walk of life it may be whether it is the capitalist, the middle class, the labourer or the agriculturalists with whom we may have to deal"¹⁷. So, he was in favour of land' reform with due compensation without which it would be looting, guarded nationalization, Privy purse for princes who decided to merge with the Indian union at the time of partition and last by not the least Right to property as one of the Fundamental Rights. He would be remembered for introducing the concept of Private Property into the Indian Political thought. Like Gandhi, Vallabhbhai also felt Hinduism as a way of life. But he was extremely practical and did not mix ethics with religion. K.M. Munshi once said "Sardar is fond of Gita, but in his aim way. He does not worry about the philosophical aspect, he concerns himself only with its inspiration"¹⁸. It was the very Hindu way of life based on practice and principles and hierarchy and empathy for others that made him accommodative. He was quite vocal about reforming Hindu religion and emphatic in showing concern towards the minorities including the Muslims.

He wanted to make India a secular state. He said, "Ours is a secular state. We cannot fashion our policies or shape or conduct in the way Pakistan does. We must see that our secular ideas are actually realized in practice"¹⁹. His perception towards Hindu – Muslim unity was not as candid as that of Gandhi. It was his Hindu conviction dominated Patidar way of life, limited exposure to the outside World, little knowledge

about other religions and hard attitude towards certain organizations at the time of partition made people sceptic about his concern towards the minorities. The compulsion of office might have influenced him to take firm steps such as banning of communal organization at the time of assassination of Gandhi and support to Property Evacuee Bill and Permit System during refugee influx. Vallabhbhai's liberalism was more similar to J. S. Mill than Adam Smith. Like Ranade he advised for state intervention for effectiveness of liberty in case of civil liberty he argued, "please not the adjective civil before liberty. The moment you drop the world civil, liberty becomes license. No responsible Government can allow license or unlimited liberty to the people"²⁰. Vallabhbhai was highly pragmatic to realize the compulsion of freedom struggle for which he gave more priority to political than social activities. He himself utilized caste hierarchy in the Kheda and Bordoli struggle. He was very often dependent upon the Patidars for their solidarity seeking habit²¹. It diluted his fight against women and caste emancipation.

Vallabhbhai as a pragmatic Patidar was more focused on ends (political liberation) than means. During the period of agitation (1919-1930), his sympathy towards Gandhian techniques such as Khadi, non-violence and fasting was questioned very often. A few believe that his switching over to Khadi during agitations was part of a new alignment strategy²². Regarding fasting he was not comfortable. Once he said, "I am not an expert in fasting and I do not understand its philosophy. But, I think a few days of fasting will certainly improve one's mental condition and physical balance"²³. During the Quit India Movement, he supported sparing use of violence²⁴. Vallabhbhai was not so fastidious over means. His focus was on freedom struggle for the liberation of the country. He kept on changing his techniques according to the need of the hour. After the suppression of the Civil Disobedience Movement, on the one hand legitimacy of the Gandhian techniques was questioned on the other 1935 Act opened new constitutional opportunities. During the critical period Vallabhbhai thought it to be wise to go in favour of the council – entry programme and to support tacitly withdrawal of Gandhi from active politics²⁵. Then he reorganized the Congress for the 1937 provincial election. He used Gandhi skillfully to enhance the base of the party in rural areas and to make up the deficiency of horizontal and vertical mobilization of people. Such a policy of ruralization helped the Congress to counter the influence of Socialist and to hold on to the electoral politics. This focused strategy of Vallabhbhai helped the Congress to a large extent to take advantage of the decline of the British in India particularly after the Second World War and to pressurize it for negotiation. Many Socialist alleged that he was responsible for partition.

The liberal thinking of Vallabhbhai influenced him to stick to the Indian political value of a 'minimal state' not only for his moral growth but also for his overall development in the society. As the state was indispensable for him, as the Minister of the Department of States he played an effective role for the merger of the princely states. He was instrumental in transforming and indiansing the earlier 'steel frame' of the British to cope with the partition complications. For its effective functioning, if he ensured constitutional protection to the services, on the other he brought legislation to regulate them against corruption. He was in favour of parliamentary democracy and representative Government. He talked about recognizing the police force and the Army of the country to protect the country internally and externally. Infact, throughout his life, except a brief period from 1919 to 1930, as a liberal conservative, he remained loyal to constitutional politics. He played a crucial role in the making of Indian Constitution. While defining the role of the Government, he followed the footsteps of Ranade who advocated state aid to encourage and nurture the spirit of individual effort and the state's guidance and direction to voluntary enterprise as far as possible in the form of, education so as to alleviate the helplessness of individuals²⁶. While talking infavour of a minimal state he argued, "A Government, which engages itself in trading activities, will come to a grief. The essential function of the government is to ensure increased production and fair distribution of available resources..... In both industries and trade, there was a limit in which the government could go as far as commitments were concerned. Therefore, it was essentially the function of the private enterprise to step in"²⁷. Hence, he was in favour of socio economic organizations independent of the Government to play a role in the field of education, health, etc.

Comparison:

Thus, both Gandhi and Vallabhbhai have different perceptions towards political values. Though they worked together for around thirty years (1917-1948), it would be wrong to assume Vallabhbhai as a blind follower of Gandhi²⁸ or to consider him just to have been picked up by Gandhi²⁹. It was a coincidence that both belonged to the same place (Ahmedabad). They chose the place for different reasons. For Vallabhbhai, who was little comfortable in an unknown world, it was natural to lean upon his native place. But, Gandhi found the place to be a confluence of both tradition and modernity and to have a fertile soil for both unrest and mobilization³⁰. Vallabhbhai came in contact with Gandhi in his forties, when he had already asserted himself within the Ahmedabad Civic body. He was attracted towards Gandhi, as the Congress divided between the Moderates and Extremists was still an elite organization. Gandhi's Champaran success by means of spirituality, non-violence and discipline not only generated awareness among the people but also confidence in the authority to be negotiated with. Vallabhbhai participated sincerely in all the agitations launched by Gandhi. But there was little doubt that the latter was dependent upon the former to make his strategy of agitation successful. Vallabhbhai's ability to play the role of a linkman in between the national leadership and the local Patidar leaders and to reconcile the impracticalities of the Gandhian philosophy with the realities of peasant politics, made him indispensable³¹. Gandhi himself admitted the assistance of Vallabhbhai in Kheda agitation. "If it were not for his assistance I must admit that this campaign would not have been carried through successfully"³². Vallabhbhai realized the ideological burden of Gandhi in the age of power politics and took a neutral stand in the Bombay session of the Congress on the issue of Gandhi's, withdrawal from active politics. He confided, "If Mahatma is outside the Congress it would be more efficient and he would be more helpful to it. If he remains in the organization, he would only impede the organization and make it weak."³³ Gandhi also expressed his helplessness in the changed circumstance where power had occupied the centre stage.

Gandhi believed that without social commitment politics would never be successful. So he pleaded for taking both the responsibilities simultaneously. But, Vallabhbhai as a pragmatic leader realized the limitations of fighting against the British by ignoring the privileged section, playing a crucial role in the freedom struggle. Further, the partition complications such as refugee influx and law and order problem made him cautious to pursue the agenda of social justice carefully.

Conclusion:

Thus, both the leaders have their own ideas on politics. Gandhi might have been a political thinker in true sense of the term for his comprehensive articulation of individual - state relationship which reflects the spirit of Classical Indian Political Thought. But, Vallabhbhai as a pragmatic grass root leader viewed politics otherwise to fulfill the dream of liberation. As a true Patidar he felt at home in accepting western

ideas of private properties, nationalism, constitutionalism and democracy. He came forward when ideas of Gandhi were questioned. He never disowned the social responsibility of a political system but argued that it should be taken care of in due course of time. In the age of globalization, when atomized individual has become the essence of politics, challenging the Nehruvian centralization, Vallabhbhai's minimal state with due space for social plurality sounds relevant.

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