

PATEL MUST BE OURS

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(English Version)

It is amazing how the University Grants Commission could issue an order to all vice chancellors which is beyond its powers. This order of 27th October directed them to observe Sardar Patel's birthday on the 31st and to send a compliance report with photographic evidence like untrustworthy schoolboys. With just three day's notice, all higher educational institutions in India were to organise "Unity Runs", inter college competitions, dramas, songs, essays; design T shirts and invite freedom fighters. This absurd "order" signed by a bureaucrat in the UGC was so far fetched that it was obviously meant to provoke a hue and cry from the academics and liberals, who could then be branded as 'anti nationals'. An earlier one had actually directed all institutions to place TV screens to hear Modi pay homage to Deendayal Upadhyaya, who was his former party boss, not any national leader. This is strange, because Prakash Javadekar has a college degree unlike his predecessor in the HRD Ministry, Smriti Irani, and is expected to have more respect for the autonomy of educational institutions. I know him as a reasonable minister and therefore one concludes that the pressure on him must be too much to refuse.

We need, therefore, to understand why the BJP is so desperate to prove that it alone cares for Sardar Patel. This is exactly what PM said on the 31st PM: that all previous governments had ignored Patel. He forgot that this includes Vajpayee's three governments as well, Modi must win back the estranged Patel or Patidar community of Gujarat by using India's most iconic Patel, Sardar Vallabhai. Apart from the crude ham-handed manner in which this regime approaches every issue, whether it be the flag and patriotism and the mandatory Aadhar card or demonisation and the GST, this reveals something more and that is 'panic'. After all, Hardik Patel's dramatic agitation has weakened the BJP's traditional hold over the Patidar-Patel community. The Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti's North Gujarat convener Narendra Patel, claimed on 22nd October that he was offered a crore of rupees to join the BJP and said he had proof from his "sting operation". We do not know the facts in this case, but we do know that it was Sardar Patel who took the strongest steps to check communal forces, represented by the BJP's forerunners and mentors, the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, and their Muslim counterparts.

Let us recall what Patel said and did after Gandhiji's assassination on 30th January 1948. As Deputy PM and Home Minister, he banned the RSS immediately and on the 6th of February, he reassured Nehru that he was taking the sternest of steps and even keeping sharp watch on the RSS open air Gita Classes to know what was being said. On the 27th of that month, he told Nehru that even "government servants in Delhi have already been arrested for RSS activities". Patel felt, however, that "it was a fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha directly under Savarkar that hatched the (assassination) conspiracy and saw it through". He was clear that "the RSS has undoubtedly other sins to answer for, but not this one". He records that Gandhiji's killing "was welcomed by those of the RSS and the Mahasabha who were strongly opposed to...his policy". In a letter to Shyamaprasad on the 18th of July, he declared that "the activities of the RSS constitute a clear threat to the existence of government...(and that) the RSS circles are becoming increasingly more defiant and are indulging in subversive activities throughout India". The RSS supremo, Golwalkar, repeatedly pleaded with Patel to lift the ban but he remained firm for one and a half years. Sardar Patel lifted the ban in July 1949 only after the RSS pledged to abjure violence and secret activities and, what is more important, it finally professed "loyalty to the Constitution of India and the National Flag" that it had been opposing. Now we understand why an excess of patriotism is being enforced and why the national flag is being bandied everywhere, including movie halls. They need to make up now. Will these facts about the national hero that it wishes to appropriate be publicised by the BJP or will it stomach everything because the Patels constitute a solid 20 percent of Gujarat's voting population?

This new game of snatching national leaders from the Congress pantheon has been necessitated also because the political right wing is obviously starved of national leaders. The founder of the RSS, KB Hedgewar, had deliberately decided not to join Gandhi and the Congress in momentous movements like Quit India. In fact, Home Ministry records give the impression that the RSS was quite loyal to British masters and caused no problems for them. The other stream of the BJP's ancestry, the Hindu Mahasabha, had a mercurial leader like Veer Savarkar who initially took some part in the freedom struggle but when he was imprisoned in the Andamans' Cellular Jail, he begged for mercy many times. And the NDA government decided to ignore hundreds of other prisoners who suffered detention and died in the Andamans, the vast majority of which was from Bengal, and name Port Blair airport after Savarkar and also single him out for other honours like the son et lumiere show. The second reason why rightists do not have any tall leader is because even after Independence they remained quite self centred and did not participate in great political upheavals except during Emergency. Besides, they did not have too many years in

power, even in coalitions. Vajpayee obviously stands the tallest but then his angst with Modi over the Gujarat riots is public knowledge. Shyama Prasad is a distant figure but he is from a peripheral state and cannot excite voters either in the Hindi belt or in Gujarat. Vivekananda is often hijacked by those who see only his saffron robe but have no idea how strongly he despised communal fanatics. So the hunt to appropriate leaders goes on relentlessly. Lal Bahadur Shastri is invoked and the “raw deal” he got from the Gandhi family is agitated. But what have stalwarts like Advani, Murali Manohar Joshi or even Yashwant or Shourie got from Modi? The rightist Swarajya daily recently discovered UN Brahmachari of Kalazar fame and instantly declared him to be a “saint” that Bengal has ignored. Another acolyte from the Hindi belt recently brought out a cut and paste biography of Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay and ticked off Bengalis for forgetting him. More such strategies will surely come before the Bengal elections but let us now return to what Patel said on 17th December 1948. This government that is so fond of Patel and also of slogans could use his immortal words as a banner: “India is a secular country and it will be nothing else.”