

## **Sardar Patel had vision to address needs of border States<sup>1</sup>**

It was raining and cold outside. I was sitting with my local hosts around a smokeless chula installed in the center of the main room of their house.

I was in Menchuka, the remotest large village before the McMahon Line dividing India and China, in West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

After watching some cricket match between India and Australia (I don't understand anything of cricket), my hosts from the Adi community (one of the 25 main tribes of Arunachal Pradesh) switched their satellite TV to a news channel.

The Indian Prime Minister was seen with the Chief Minister of Gujarat inaugurating a large statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. When I asked if they were following Indian politics, my friends replied, 'of course! We Arunachalis are the most patriotic people of the country, though the leadership in Delhi seems ignorant about this simple truth'. It is true that a few minutes earlier, they had been frantically supporting the Blue Team against the Aussies.

They were now amazed by the size of the statue and kept repeating, "We need a strong leader to rule India". Though not particularly enamoured of the BJP, they believed Narendra Modi could be the 'next Iron Man' to protect them.

When I asked why they thought so, they said only an 'Iron Man' could bring roads and development to the border areas.

Menchuka, located some 50 km from the LAC (McMahon Line) witnessed the 'visit' of the Chinese 51 years ago; some old people still remember their stay for nearly one month in November 1962. I was told: "the Chinese soldiers

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were not aggressive; they just told us: 'You are Chinese like us, we will never harm you; you don't have long noses like the Indians, your eyes and skins are similar to ours''; today Beijing still calls the area 'Southern Tibet'.

It is a fact that while in Menchuka, the PLA did not take food or disturbs the local tribal Adis or Membas; despite this, the local population has remained loyal to India; unfortunately Delhi does not often acknowledge this.

The declaration of Narendra Modi: "Every Indian regrets Sardar Patel did not become the first Prime Minister. Had he been the first Prime Minister, the country's fate and face would have been completely different," rang true in this remote administrative Circle of Arunachal Pradesh (it takes 9 hours by car to reach Menchuka from Along, the district headquarters).

Warming up around the *chula*, the famous letter sent Sardar to Jawaharlal Nehru, five weeks before the Deputy Prime Minister prematurely passed away, was constantly present in my mind.

For the people of the border areas, it would have indeed been different if Gandhi had not interfered in the democratic process (Patel had been elected to lead the Interim Government in 1946, but Gandhi preferred 'the Haddows Boy') and if Patel had become Prime Minister.

On November 7, 1950, a month after Tibet was invaded, Patel told Nehru: "I have tried to peruse this correspondence [between K.M. Panikkar and the Communist government in Beijing] as favorably to our Ambassador and the Chinese Government as possible, but I regret to say that neither of them comes out well as a result of this study."

The 'Iron Man' added: "The Chinese Government has tried to delude us by professions of peaceful intention. My own feeling is that at a crucial period they manage to instill into our Ambassador a false sense of confidence in

their so called desire to settle the Tibetan problem by peaceful means. ...the action of the Chinese, in my judgment, is little short of perfidy."

Patel's conclusion was: "from the latest position, it appears that we shall be not be able to rescue the Dalai Lama." It was already too late.

Panikkar was not only "at great pain to find an explanation or justification for Chinese policy and actions", but Nehru did not even have the courtesy to acknowledge Patel's letter which suggested to review:

- A Military and Intelligence appreciation of the Chinese threat to India both on the frontier and internal security.
- An examination of military position and such redistribution of our forces as might be necessary...
- An appraisal of strength of our forces ...A long-term consideration of our defense needs.
- The question of Chinese entry into UNO.
- The political and administrative steps which we should take to strengthen our Northern and North-Eastern frontier.
- Improvement of our communication, road, rail, air and wireless in these areas and with the frontier outposts.

It is tragic that 63 years later, there is still no road for the last 37 km between the McMahon Line and Menchuka (though I was told the construction may start soon). The situation is much worse in the adjoining sub-division of Menigong. From Tato, another sub-divisional headquarters to Menigong, it takes some 7/8 hours to cover 67 km, and then, there is no road going onward to the border.

Ironically, during my visit to Menchuka, the Chinese announced the opening of a highway linking Metok, 'the last roadless county in China' with neighboring Bomi town, located just north of the McMahon Line.

The Communist Party said that 117-km highway, costing 155 million U.S. dollars will make the border town accessible for 8 to 9 months a year.

My local friends kept repeating with some envy in their voices, 'the Chinese are very much in advance on us'.

To come back to Patel's 'clairvoyant testament', it is not well-known that it was based on a Note prepared by Girja Shankar Bajpai, the Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs.

Does this Note still exist? I was recently told that some of the Bajpai Papers may have followed the fate of the CoalGate files.

Why did Nehru, then Foreign Minister not act on his Foreign Secretary's Report while it was Patel who was concerned by the issue of having an "unscrupulous, unreliable and determined power at the doors"?

It is not difficult to answer this question. Nehru saw China as India's best friend, if not brother.

Another reason why Patel would have made a difference is that he would have surrounded himself with efficient down-to-earth officers like Bajpai and not glamorous, worthless collaborators like K.M. Panikkar.

A few years later, Bajpai compared the protests of Panikkar with Neville Chamberlain's disapproval of Nazi Germany entering Czechoslovakia in 1938, he said: "Our Ambassador has allowed himself to be influenced more by the Chinese point of view, the Chinese claims, the Chinese maps and by

regards for Chinese susceptibilities than by his instructions or by India's interests.”

Nehru did it again in 1962 when he listened to an arrogant Corps Commander, ignoring the Army hierarchy's sounder counsels.

It is not enough to be a strong man; a leader of worth should be able to surround himself with wise advisors. Patel showed, at the time of the integration of the Indian States (with V.P. Menon) or later in the case of Tibet (with G.S. Bajpai), that he was more than an Iron Man, he was also able to find and listen to knowledgeable collaborators.

A small post-scriptum: Patel would have also made a difference in the Kashmir issue. On 23 December 1947, as Deputy Prime Minister, Patel wrote a draft letter to Nehru: “Your letter of today has been received just now at 7 p.m. and I am writing immediately to tell you this. It has caused me considerable pain.” Patel did want India to appeal to the UN: “your letter makes it clear to me that I must not, or at least cannot continue as a Member of Government and hence I am hereby tendering my resignation.”

Gandhi asked Patel to withdraw his resignation. The rest is painful history.

It is unfortunate for India that history cannot be rewritten. But one can at least learn from history.