Misunderstanding Nehru-Patel

What is the issue?

- The people who rule the country today are teaching us a new history of India.
- They fight about the recent events surrounding our Independence, the integration of the princely states and the roles played by Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

What is the recent debate?

- These people's version is that whatever the Sardar handled was a great success and whatever was handled by Nehru turned out to be a great blunder.
- Manish Tewari of the Congress tried to assert in the Lok Sabha that it was Nehru who was responsible for the accession to India of the princely states of Junagadh, J&K and Hyderabad.
- The moment Tewari mentioned Hyderabad, the home minister asserted angrily that it was Patel who was responsible for the accession of Hyderabad, not Nehru.

What is the comparison about these leaders?

- Sardar Patel was 14 years older than Nehru and was a leader of the masses in his own right.
- Though Nehru had become the prime minister, the Sardar, as deputy prime minister and the home minister was almost, if not truly, his equal.
- The recent comparison which comes to mind is that of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani during the 1998-2004 period when they were both in government.
- Like Vajpayee and Advani, Nehru and Patel had their differences, sometimes very sharp ones.
- The differences between Vajpayee and Advani were always resolved through discussions and in the case of Nehru and Patel, through the Mahatma's intervention.
- At times the differences became so sharp that they led to Patel offering his resignation from the government, to be followed by Nehru making a similar offer.
- They also played politics with each other, especially when it came to party

affairs or the choice of the first president of India.
- Yet, despite their differences, Patel continued in government until his death and even accepted Nehru as his leader after the death of Gandhi.

What often led to differences between them?

- The Constitution was still a work in progress and so was the system of collective responsibility and the authority of the PM in the cabinet.
- Nehru was obviously keen to establish his position as primus inter pares in the cabinet and wanted his view to prevail.
- This often led to differences between Nehru and Patel as indeed between them and the other ministers. But is this not natural?
- In every cabinet, there are differences among the ministers and between them and the prime minister on issues which are finally resolved and a joint front presented in Parliament and outside.

What is the truth?

- There is enough material on record to support those who are interested in only highlighting the differences between these two great men just as there is enough material to support that they got along very well.
- But both these views represent the two extremes. **The truth lies in the middle**: Nehru and Patel jointly played a decisive role in the making of Independent India.
- Those who contend otherwise do not understand the working of the cabinet system.
- So whether it was the accession of J&K or Hyderabad to India, there were many rounds of negotiations, harrowing moments and differences of opinion among the decision-makers.
- Both Nehru and Patel played a vital role in the decision-making process. Also, Governor-General Lord Mountbatten played a key role.
- Patel was also party to the idea of plebiscite wherever there was dispute — Junagadh, J&K and Hyderabad.
- This was the clear position of the government of India then. It was Pakistan which was constantly running away from it.
- Patel did not resign from the cabinet when it was decided to refer the J&K issue to the UN or when India accepted a ceasefire.
- He might have had his reservations but went along with the decisions.

What is absolutely clear?

- It is equally clear from contemporary accounts that Patel would not have objected if J&K had acceded to Pakistan but he was absolutely clear that

Hyderabad should accede to India.

- All the decisions in those days were taken either in the defence committee of the cabinet headed by Mountbatten or in the cabinet. Patel was a member of both.
- He expressed his views freely, frankly and at times, even bluntly.
- But always went along with the final decision taken, as did Nehru and the others.
- It is easy for us to sit in judgement today after 73 years over the great men who fought for India’s independence and then ruled the country.
- But let us leave history to the historians.

Source: The Indian Express

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