

Chapter 2: Child of Gujarat

Who cares for your Bhakti or Mukti? Who cares what the scriptures say?
I will gladly go to hell a thousand times, if I can rouse my countrymen,
immersed in Tamasa, and make them stand on their own feet and be
men, inspired with the spirit of Karma Yoga.

Swami Vivekananda

Ambalal Dahyabhai Patel was born on 13 March 1905 in a Patidar family in the Charotar tract of the Kheda district of Gujarat. He was born in his mother's village of Mahij in the Petlad taluqa (subdivision), in keeping with the traditional Indian practice of women giving birth to their first child at their parents' home. But young Ambalal grew up in his father's neighbouring village of Pihij. That the child defines the man is, of course, a cliché, but like all clichés, it contains a grain of truth. Patel's Gujarati background, the social, cultural and political traditions of the Kheda district, and the early exposure to the nascent stirring of Indian nationalism and the manner of its expression had profound influence on his character and outlook. Kheda district is today well known throughout India for the prominent role it played in launching the Indian nationalist movement. It was there that Mahatma Gandhi started his first *satyagraha* campaign upon returning from South Africa in 1915. The district contributed more than its share of leaders to Indian politics and public life, such as Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel, the so-called iron man of Indian politics, and independent India's first Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Its people were spiritually eclectic, proud of their cultural heritage, independent-minded and fiercely anti-colonial. Ambalal Dahyabhai Patel, who came from the most politically conscious and socially prominent strata of the Kheda district, was thus a Gujarati's Gujarati. What he encountered in Fiji simply reinforced his determination to fight colonialism and the culture of petty discrimination and social inequality it spawned. The stubbornness of which Q.V.L. Weston spoke had deep roots in Patel's cultural heritage.

The state of Gujarat lies in western India,¹ bound on the west by the great Arabian Sea and in the east by the hilly tracts of the Western Ghats which separate the state from Madhya Pradesh in the northeast and Maharashtra in the southeast. Between the hilly tracts in the east and the sea on the west lie the flat alluvial plains of Gujarat, watered by the Tapi, Narmada, Mahi and Sabarmati. Although Gujarat as a whole is generally regarded as a prosperous state in modern India, the productive capacity of different regions within it vary considerably. The northern part of the state, which once formed its political

1 This section on the geography of Gujarat draws heavily upon the Government of India district gazetteers.

centre, and was ruled by the Rajputs from the 10th to the 14th century, consists of large tracts of sandy soiled plains. Its political significance declined when the Sultans moved the state capital to Ahemadabad, closer to the great ports of Cambay and Broach. In the south lies the Saurashtra region, known in British times as Kathiawad. The soil here, as in much of the northwest region of Kutch, is poor. The eastern, hilly regions of the district are inhabited by tribal groups, who still live on the fringes of mainstream Gujarat society. It is the central region of Gujarat that constitutes agriculturally the most productive part of the state.

Kheda district, with an area of 7,194 square kilometres (3.7 per cent of the state's total land area) lies in this fertile central region of Gujarat. Within the state, this region is known as the Charotar, the name generally thought to derive from the Sanskrit word Charu (beautiful), but there are other interpretations as well. To most Gujaratis, the cultural and political boundaries of the Kheda district and the Charotar region are one and the same thing. The prosperity of the Charotar region impressed early English visitors. Alexander Kinloch Forbes wrote in 1878:

The fields are, in the richer part of the province, enclosed with strong and high permanent hedges, which, with the noble trees that everywhere abound, render the country so close, that the boundaries of a field circumscribe the view, and unless the hum of voices, the whirr of the spinning wheel, or the barking of dogs, gives him notice of its vicinity, the traveller may enter a village almost unawares. Hedges and trees here swarm with the birds of many varieties, from the peacock to the sparrow; game of all kinds is in great abundance, and monkeys rove about in troops, or rather in armies.²

Not surprisingly, the rulers appreciated the fertility of the area, and during Moghul rule, the Sultans of Gujarat reserved the tract for themselves. Under the British, according to David Hardiman, the Charotar 'was one of the most highly assessed areas in India, with a revenue fixed at five times the amount paid on the best black-soiled lands of the Deccan.'³ So it is not surprising that the Charotari Gujaratis had a well developed and not entirely unjustified regard for themselves and their industry, and were respected, even feared, by groups in neighbouring regions.

Nonetheless, the Charotar is were not a homogenous community. They were differentiated by caste status and place of residence within the region. In 1911 the population of the Kheda district was 716,432: Baraiya and Patanvadiya (peasant cultivators) 266,665 (37 per cent of the cultivators); Patidar (peasant cultivators) 107,805 (15 per cent); Muslim peasant cultivators (63,280);

² David Hardiman, 1981, 260.

³ Hardiman, 261.

Brahman (priests) 30,587; Rajput (warriors and rulers) 28,382; Christians 23,592; Dhed (weavers) 18,085; Vaniya 18,929; and lower caste workers such as tanners, blacksmiths, carpenters and sweepers.

Though the Patidar comprised only 15 per cent of the population, they were the most powerful group in the district. The Patidars came from the peasant community of Maharashtra known as Kanbi, a generic name for peasants in this part of India, just as Kurmi was the generic name for peasants in many parts of North India.⁴ Sometime during the Mughal period, the Kanbi of the Charotar tract organised themselves into a community of village rulers and named themselves Patidar. The name is derived from *pati* (strips of land) and *dar* (holder). Holders of strips of land, the Patidar assumed the responsibility for collecting revenue for the Moghul rulers. They cultivated the best land while leasing out the less desirable areas to other groups on whom they frequently levied extra taxes, grew the most lucrative cash crops, dominated the trading networks, and controlled local politics through force or patronage. In short, the Patidar were a community to reckon with; it was a brave person indeed who crossed their path. As David Hardiman says:

The Patidar controlled the economy of the village. In normal times, they could ensure that they were always richer than those lower in the village hierarchy. On paper, the Patidars were liable to pay far higher sums of revenue than the subordinate peasantry, for they farmed the richest lands. In practice, they invented a whole range of extra taxes which they imposed on the lower castes. As a result, the lower castes were normally impoverished while the Patidars were comfortably off.⁵

The Patidars maintained their privileged position during the British rule of India.

Socially, the Patidar did not constitute a caste in the strict sense. In fact, the word connotes a 'state of affairs to be achieved,' through competitiveness, appropriately arranged marriages and other such social rituals.⁶ The Kanbi, from whom the Patidar came, were divided into two main groups, the Leva and the Kadavr, their names apparently deriving from Rama's two sons, Lav and Kush. The Patidar belong to the Lav group, and regard themselves as *kshatriya*, the warrior community. Over time, they appropriated many Brahminic (twice-born) rituals and ideals, such as vegetarianism in diet and worship, the prohibition of widow remarriage, and the love of learning, especially the ancient Sanskrit texts. The one Brahminic practice they discarded as unnecessary, in view of

⁴ For an interesting historical study on this, see Ravinder Kumar, 1968.

⁵ Hardiman, 38.

⁶ David Pocock, 1972, 1.

their political and economic power, was the wearing of the sacred thread as a formal mark of high status. The Patidar did not need the sacred thread to impose at will their authority on others.

Outsiders were impressed with the Patidar and their spirit of independence. Bishop Herber wrote in 1825:

The Potails [Patels] of Guzerat are very inferior in dress, manners, and general appearance, to the Zamindars of Hindostan. Their manner, however, though less polished, is more independent; and here, as in Central India, instead of standing with joined hands in the presence of a superior, they immediately sit down, even if they do not advance to embrace him.⁷

Forbes, writing around the same time, noted:

The Koonbee, though frequently all submission and prostration when he makes his appearance in a revenue office, is sturdy and bold enough among his own people. He is fond of asserting his independence, and the helplessness of others without his aid, on which subject he has several proverbs, as, 'Wherever it thunders, there the Koonbee is a landholder,' or 'Tens of millions follow the Koonbee, but the Koonbee follows no man.'⁸

The Patidar community in the Charotar, however, had important distinctions of rank and prestige based not necessarily on material wealth but on social status which, in turn, derived from the length of residence in the area. Legend has it that around 1697 or 1698, the Patidar leader Vir Vasandas decreed the three top Patidar villages in the Charotar to be Sojitra, Vaso and Nadiad, followed closely by the villages of Karamsad, Dharmaj, Bhadran (the chhagam (six) villages) and Virsad, Nar, Tarapur, Uttarasanda, Od and Pihij, Ambalal's village. This ranking was naturally contested, but at the beginning of this century, these villages were generally regarded as the most prestigious ones not only in the Charotar tract but in all of Kheda district and, by extension, the whole of Gujarat. In a hierarchical and highly competitive society, rank was important. It certainly did not hinder A.D. Patel's standing in the Gujarati community in Fiji. S.B. Patel, another prominent Gujarati leader in Fiji, was from Sojitra, and the businessman and sometime A.D. opponent, Appabhai Patel, was from Dharmaj.

In the 20th century, the Kheda district distinguished itself by the role it played in the Indian nationalist struggle in several ways. As mentioned before, it was the district where Mahatma Gandhi launched his first *satyagraha* campaign on

7 Hardiman, 36.

8 Ibid.

behalf of the suffering peasants in 1917, two years after returning from Africa where he had gone in 1893 to work on behalf of the Natal Indians. Many of Gandhi's early campaigns focused on the Charotar region in such places as Nadiad, Borsad and Anand. As a result of this and because of their dominant position in rural society, the Patidar played a prominent role in the nationalist struggle at the local, state and the national level. Among many illustrious nationalists in Gujarat who emerged on the national scene were Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel (1890-1961) and his elder brother, Vithalbhai Jhaverbhai Patel (1873-1933). A.D. Patel was known to Vallabhbhai, who once asked A.D. to return to India to participate in the nationalist struggle. By then, however, A.D. was deeply involved in Fiji politics, and told the Indian leader that he had decided to devote the rest of his life to his adopted homeland.

A.D. Patel, then, came from a community that was politically powerful, socially prestigious, fiercely independent, land-based and in the forefront of Indian nationalist politics. His community and region had produced leaders who were attracting attention beyond the borders of their district. As a precocious secondary school and university student, Ambalal witnessed at first hand the nascent stirring of an India-wide, Gandhi-led nationalist agitation. Throughout his life, he maintained a deep interest in Indian, especially Gandhian, politics and philosophy. On two occasions, in 1940 and 1946, he visited India to represent Fiji Indian grievances to leaders of the Indian National Congress, including Jawaharlal Nehru. The constitution of the National Federation Party, specifically the structure of the Working Committees, is borrowed directly from the Congress Party's constitution.

Patel's well-known connection with the Indian nationalist movement, and his effort to use the leverage of India to prompt the Fiji government into action, was widely criticised. Both the government and his opponents accused him of unnecessarily introducing extraneous concerns into Fiji. Patel and others like him, the government officials said, talked of preserving the *izzat*, honour, of the Indian community, but showed no compunction in trampling on the *izzat* of the colony in the eyes of the world. Patel pointed to the government's indifference, at times even active hostility, to the interests and needs of the Indo-Fijians. It was pressure from the Government of India and an enraged Indian public opinion that ended indenture in Fiji, Patel argued, reminding the government of its effort to continue the system long after its abuses had become public. The Fijians, he said, could (and did) appeal to the Deed of Cession to protect their interests, the Europeans had a sympathetic ally in the government, but the Indo-Fijians were left at the mercy of others. Their only hope of effecting change in the colony's policies was through external pressure. After Fiji gained independence, India gradually ceased to be a source of advice and pressure, but its influence in the 1920s and the 1930s was considerable.

Another aspect of Patel's social background throws light on a part of his public life in Fiji. For more than two decades, Patel was deeply involved in matters relating to the sugar industry in Fiji. In 1943 and again in 1960, he was the principal leader of the cane growers' strike against the CSR. Many Indo-Fijian cane farmers were perplexed that such an educated and wealthy Gujarati as A.D. Patel should immerse himself in matters and disputes involving poor farmers, then represent them, invariably free of charge, before the various commissions of enquiry. The other Gujaratis they knew were all traders and businessmen, culturally exclusive and self-contained. The difference between the world of the *girmitya* and the Gujarati was the difference between chalk and cheese.

Naturally enough, people speculated about Patel's real motives. His critics charged, and some of them still do, that Patel was nothing more than a wolf in sheep's clothing, an agent of the Gujarati community preying on the greedy and the gullible farmers. The main reason for his involvement in sugar matters, they charge, was to divide the farmers so that the Gujarati merchants' economic stranglehold over them would remain unchallenged. Others saw his involvement as a cold-hearted attempt to use the farmers to launch his political career. The Gujarati community was small and could not provide him the numbers to get elected to the Legislative Council. For that he needed the support of the other Indo-Fijians. Muslims had their own leader in Said Hasan, the North Indians had Vishnu Deo. The only people, perhaps the most socially and culturally disadvantaged and discriminated group in the Indian community, who did not have a leader of national stature of their own, were the South Indians. Assessing their unfortunate situation and seizing the opportunity to promote himself, Patel became their advocate, their legal advisor and general manager of their schools. Thus, his critics argue, it was not the thought of service but a cold-hearted calculation to advance himself that led Patel to champion the cause of the South Indians and poor, leaderless farmers generally.

Political ambition would naturally have been a factor: Patel was no saint. As an aspiring political leader, he must have mapped out the cultural and social contours of the Indian landscape and assessed the best path to take him forward. But perhaps there are other reasons as well for Patel's involvement in the concerns of the Indian farmers. He had been a part of the landed gentry of Gujarat, many of whose members were variously engaged in agriculture, either cultivating or overseeing the cultivation of such crops as spiked millet (*bajari*), pigeon pea (*tuver*), sesame, castor, chillies and culinary spices, and such cash crops as cotton and tobacco which grew well in the fertile soil of the Charotar. It also explains why he became a big landlord himself, owning over 300 acres of freehold land in Savusavu, Sigatoka, which he leased to tenants. He also owned some large cane farms jointly with other Gujarati merchants in Nadi. His demanding relationship with his tenants sometimes became an election issue.

‘How can he accuse anyone of being hard on the farmers when he himself was so hard on his own tenants?’ his critics would ask. They said that Patel was extremely money-minded, lacked compassion and demanded that, no matter what the circumstances, his tenants should pay their due on time. If this was true, and there is enough oral evidence to suggest that it might have been so (even though an enquiry by magistrate Arthur Jeddre-Fisher found nothing untoward in Patel’s dealings with his tenants) , then it reflected aspects of tenant-landlord relations in India. Patel’s involvement in farmers’ issues was not simply a cold, calculating move to promote his political interests; it was actually an extension of his own social background as a privileged member of the Gujarati farming community.

That privileged status reflected itself in other ways as well. Patel was a man of elegance, style and taste. At official dinner parties, he wore a well-cut dinner jacket and a bow tie. In London, he wore a hat and fashionable overcoat. When Patel went to the constitutional conference in London in 1965, Governor Jakeway invited him to join the official party in the Royal Box along with two former governors, Sir Ronald Garvey and Sir Kenneth Maddocks and the Attorney General Justin Lewis, to take salute of the Band of the Fiji Military Forces at the Royal Tournament. All the other members of the Fiji delegation, including Ratu Mara and Ratu George Cakobau, were seated in the Royal Enclosure. Patel mixed well with members of high society, but when he talked with farmers, he sat on an ordinary chair or on the mat, eating with his fingers as Indians normally do. His personal library was well stocked with books on a wide range of topics, from Indian and Western philosophy to biographies, literature (Thomas Hardy being his favourite author) and how-to-do manuals on horticulture. There was music in the house, Jyotika Roy and Pankaj Mullick being his favourites. Patel himself played the harmonium. Leela was a trained artist with a fine aesthetic sense. In his relations with the outside world, Patel was conscious of his role and status as the leader of the Fiji Indian community. Symbolism was important. So in the 1950s, Patel had a large black Humber motor car, driven by a Fijian chauffeur (who also doubled up as his bodyguard). Only the Governor and the general manager of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company had Humbers. In the 1960s, as tastes changed, Patel bought a Mercedes Benz, the only one then in the colony. A keen horticulturalist, Patel ordered rose plants from New Zealand for his garden at the Waqadra Estate. When Jakeway left Fiji, Patel gave him an orchid plant as a gift. This interest in books, music, flowers, gardening and sartorial elegance remained with Patel throughout his life.

Let us turn now to Patel’s family background. Ambalal was born to his father’s second wife, Haribai. The first wife had been unable to bear children, and the absence of children was, and is still, considered to be a tragic misfortune for Hindu couples, the curse of the gods for some misdeeds committed in previous

life. A vital purpose of marriage is procreation, the continuation of the family lineage. For this purpose, the birth of sons was essential; girls could not perpetuate the family line, for upon marriage, they became members of their husband's family. Sons were also essential because only they could perform the appropriate final funeral rites for their father, to ensure the safe passage of his soul to another life. Bearing all this in mind, Dahyabhai's first wife insisted that he marry again. He did, and she continued to live as an integral member of the household.

Ambalal's birth brought great joy to his father, who was then 35 years old, long past the age (in traditional Indian society at least) when men became fathers for the first time. Other children followed: Surajben, Manubhai, Raojibhai and Ishwarbhai. However, as the eldest, Ambalal remained special, in the way most first-born usually are, self-confident, assured of his place in the family hierarchy, somewhat spoilt and used to having his own way. Dahyabhai, the proud middle-aged father, was gentle with his children, and according to Raojibhai, always used reason and persuasion with them. He was financially not a particularly well-to-do member of the Patidar gentry, but unlike many in his community, he did not much care for material wealth or social prestige.

Dahyabhai was an intellectual, a respected scholar of Sanskrit and Mathematics. This is a formidable combination of expertise, requiring (and encouraging) logical thinking and analysis and immense powers of concentration and memorisation. Education was his passion. Above all else, he wanted all his children, especially his sons, to be educated. For this purpose, he even mortgaged his house and property so that his children could receive the best education that was to be had in the district. When people asked Dahyabhai about his wealth and investment for his old age, he used to reply: 'My four sons are my investment, my property.' Two of his sons, Ambalal and Raojibhai, became successful barristers, Manubhai became a teacher and Ishwarbhai graduated a medical doctor. Some of his father's passion for education would pass down to Ambalal who would devote a great deal of his time to promoting it in Fiji.

Haribai was a devoted housewife and mother, kind and gentle, who seemed, like most Indian mothers of her time and even now, to have dedicated her life to the welfare of her children. As she often said, 'They are my life.' She taught them the simple pleasures of life, and through her stories and anecdotes about heroic episodes in Gujarat's history, imbued in the children a deep sense of pride in their cultural heritage and a distinct sense of social responsibility. She must have been a very good teacher, for throughout his political life, Patel made constant allusions to stories about Indian gods, ghosts and goblins to illustrate or dramatise his points to Indo-Fijian audiences. Even the hallowed chambers of the Legislative Council in 1969 heard one such story, to underline the futility of the way in which the Sugar Board operated. A devil threatened to devour a

man. When the man pleaded for mercy, the devil said he would let him go only if the man gave him something to do. If he ever became idle, he would return and devour him. The man assigned all sorts of tasks to the devil, but he kept returning for more. Just when the man was about to run out of ideas for new tasks, he had an inspired thought. He told the devil: 'You keep on climbing up and down the stairs.' That, Patel said, was how the Sugar Board treated the farmers, and people understood what Patel meant.

The Dahyabhais were an orthodox Hindu family in cultural and religious matters. Daily prayers, observance of rituals, and performance of ceremonies were regular and important features of family life. Like most people in the district, and indeed like many in the state of Gujarat, they were followers of the Vaishnav tradition of Hinduism, the devotees of Lord Vishnu. Vaishnavism first appeared as a religious reform movement, like Buddhism and Jainism, but based on theistic principles. In its background stood the *Bhagavada Gita*, with its emphasis on karma yoga, service without the thought of reward. It was this text which influenced Patel's philosophy and outlook more than any other. It fortified his resolve to confront evil without fear and deepened his belief in the importance of action. The essence of Vaishnavism was a spirit of sympathy for the lower castes and classes of Hindu society. Spirituality required, indeed demanded, social responsibility. In this creed, there was no distinction of caste, people could dine together provided they were the devotees of Vishnu and had been admitted to the fold.⁹ Perhaps this helps explain in part at least Patel's involvement in the struggle of the cane farmers of Fiji.

Haribai instructed her children in religious matters and told them stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the two great epics of Hinduism. The example of the parents also inspired deep pride in the achievements of Indian culture and civilisation, and in their own family tradition. The children could trace their family genealogy up to eight generations, to the founding ancestor of the clan, Keshuda, who was also known as Vhala Bapa. The children were taught Sanskrit from an early age, and encouraged to read the literature in their own mother tongue of Gujarati. Over the years, Patel developed a deep reading knowledge of Sanskrit. In the 1950s, when he was out of national politics, he began translating the *Bhagavada Gita* from Sanskrit into Gujarati. His speeches to Indian audiences were often sprinkled with quotations from the *Upanishadas*. Political addresses frequently became discourses on philosophy and ethics.

Young Ambalal received his primary and secondary education in Nadiad, which was adjacent to his own taluqa of Petlad. The town was a hotbed of nationalist politics. Mahatma Gandhi addressed a meeting there on 21 March 1918 during his Kheda *satyagraha* campaign urging rich farmers to withhold

9 See Bhandarkar, 1965.

their land revenue to the government. The campaign against the Rowlatt Act, which severely restricted people's freedom as the British attempted to deal with an upsurge in revolutionary political crime in the country, was directed from Nadiad. Gandhi, who had made the town the headquarters of the Rowlatt Campaign, urged people to boycott government schools and colleges and courts, addressed a meeting of some 12,000 on 30 September 1920. Many other such campaigns would follow in later years. It was impossible for anyone, certainly not intelligent, socially conscious students, to be unaware of the new tides in Indian nationalist politics lapping at the gates of their school compounds.

Ambalal attended a small school in his village where he was taught in Gujarati. As he progressed through the grades, however, English was added to the curriculum. It was very early in his school life that Ambalal developed the habit of reading prolifically, frequently asking his father to explain complex concepts he found difficult to understand. Patel continued the habit of reading throughout his life. Jai Ram Reddy who once worked in Patel's office as a young lawyer, recalled him as a 'voracious reader' of everything, magazines, novels, poetry, history, philosophy. Not surprisingly, Patel excelled in secondary school, graduating near the top of his class. Pleased with Ambalal's success, Dahyabhai used some of his pension money to send him for further education at the prestigious Gujarat College in Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat. There Ambalal studied economics, politics and history, including English history. Once again, he performed brilliantly, graduating a Bachelor of Arts with honours in 1925, at the age of 20. Some acquaintances recall him as a shy lad, but also a resourceful debater fluent in English and Gujarati.

When Ambalal entered college, it was generally expected that he would train to become a *mofussil* pleader (a local lawyer) in the district. For young intelligent men of India, law was the preferred profession. It was financially lucrative and socially prestigious. It enlarged one's network in the community. Moreover, the legal profession could and often did pave entry into local and even national politics. The leadership of the Indian nationalist movement was dominated by local pleaders who had risen through the ranks to national prominence. Among the most notable of them was Motilal Nehru, the father of Jawaharlal. In the Kheda district itself, the two most prominent examples were the brothers Vallabhbhai and Vithalbhai.

But there were other plans in store for Ambalal. With the academic success and the tremendous promise he had already shown in college, his family and the village elders agreed that Ambalal was destined for something more than just a district pleader. It was decided that Ambalal should proceed to London and, after an appropriate period of preparation, sit for the Indian Civil Service examination. Nothing in Indian public life, or in the British Empire for that matter, was more prestigious than being an ICS officer. The ICS was

the preserve of the best and the brightest of Indian and English aristocracy, 'a class of guardians specially trained and chosen,' 'repositories of the wisdom and courage of the state,' men who were persuaded 'that the god who created them had mixed gold in their composition to distinguish them from the common people'.¹⁰ These were the men who ran the mighty Indian Empire, the much cherished jewel in the British crown. They were the Viceroy's right hand, as the armed forces were his left hand. Until the middle of the 19th century, no Indian was allowed entry into the ICS. The 1857 Mutiny changed that policy as the government realised the need to co-opt the best and the brightest of India's own to administer the country. Satyendra Nath Tagore was the first Indian to enter the ICS in 1863, followed a few years later by Romesh Chander Dutt, Behari Lai Gupta and Surendranath (Surrender Not) Bannerji, all members of the Bengali intellectual and cultural elite. In the 20th century, many ICS men, such as K.P.S. Menon and H.M. Patel, A.D.'s contemporaries, occupied distinguished posts in civil administration and diplomacy.

A.D. Patel went to London in 1925. He could have sat for the exam in India itself, but chances of success were better for candidates with direct experience of the English intellectual, social and political scene. He enrolled himself at the London School of Economics, which, in the 1920s, was under the influence of the great socialist thinker and economist Harold Laski who was one of the few prominent English intellectuals to favour independence, or at least some measure of self government, for India. Among his Indian proteges was Krishna Menon, the turbulent intellectual who later occupied a series of prominent positions in post-independence India, including being its ambassador to the United Nations and its Home Minister at the time of the first Indo-Chinese war in 1962. London in the 1920s was full of bright young Indian men, future leaders of India, who had gone there to study law or to prepare for the ICS or, in the case of some princes, just to have a grand old time at the social centre of the English-speaking world. Among the many London students who later rose to prominence included M.C. Chagla, the future Chief Justice of India, P.N. Saprú, Judge of the High Court, B.R. Sen, future Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization, Liaquat Ali Khan, one of the founders of Pakistan, and S.W.R.D. Bandranaike, future prime minister of Ceylon.¹¹ Leading Indian luminaries also periodically visited London; Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate in Literature, was there in 1921. Indian political leaders visited London often for conferences or fund raising or to keep their overseas supporters informed about developments in India.

Indian politics, especially the future political status of India, was a hotly debated topic in university clubs and in such organisations as the India League (re-named

¹⁰ Woodruff, 1954, 75-76.

¹¹ See Menon, 1965.

the Commonwealth of India League in 1923), founded by Annie Besant and in the 1920s headed by Krishna Menon. The League's official goal was to work for a dominion status for India as an equal partner in the British Commonwealth, though later it included freedom and self-determination for the sub-continent among its goals.¹² Pamphlets were published and resolutions passed denouncing British imperialism. So also, though less heatedly debated, was the question of overseas Indians and their precarious situation in such colonies as Kenya and Fiji.

No one pursued the cause of overseas Indians more tenaciously than the Anglo-Jewish lawyer Henry Saloman Leon Polak, who was a leading member of the India League.¹³ He had been with Gandhi in South Africa in the early years of the 20th century, and in 1909 published a book that exposed the terrible conditions of the Indian settlers in that colony. Later, he moved to London, where his Indians Overseas Association became an important pressure group for overseas Indians' causes. More than any other individual in London, Polak kept a vigilant eye on Fiji and was an effective spokesman for the cause of Fiji Indian rights in the imperial corridors of power. Aware of the need for educated leadership in the colonies, Polak was ever on the lookout for bright idealistic young men who could be persuaded to go to these colonies to work on behalf of Indian communities there.

Fiji attracted a disproportionate amount of public attention in India and among the watchers of overseas Indian affairs. It may have been partly due to the colony's reputation as a callous trustee of the rights of Indians living in the colony. The CSR's reputation as a ruthless employer, a white company keeping its indentured labourers in bondage, did not help Fiji's reputation. Fiji Indians had the highest suicide rate among all overseas Indians at the turn of the 20th century. The widespread view that Indian women on the plantations were sexually exploited indiscriminately by the overseers and other men in positions of authority was portrayed as a blot on the name of India. Several sympathetic observers, such as Reverend J.W. Burton, had written critically of the moral decline among Indian indentured labourers, and their views were widely publicised in India.¹⁴ Reverend C.F. Andrews, Mahatma Gandhi's confidante and friend, visited Fiji in 1915 and 1917. His exposure of the social evils of indenture, together with the emotionally gripping account of conditions in Fiji by *ex-girmitiya* Totaram Sanadhya,¹⁵ especially about the plight of women, helped to convince the Indian

12 See George, 1964.

13 Tinker, 1976, 24.

14 Burton, 1910.

15 *Fiji Dvip Men Mere Ikkis Varsh* [My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands].

government and the public to end the system which had by the turn of the century become a badge of dishonour for a country beginning to demand its own rightful place in the international community of nations.¹⁶

Because of this adverse attention, and the plea for an effective and articulate leadership fluent in English, Polak and others attempted to persuade some of the young Indians studying in London to go to Fiji. Among them was Shivabhai Bhailalbhai Patel, commonly known as S.B. Patel. He arrived in Fiji on 24 December 1927. A Charotari Patidar from the prestigious village of Sojitra in the Kheda district, and a London-trained barrister, S.B. was one of Gandhi's many secretaries. It was at Gandhi's urging that he came to Fiji. S.B. was by temperament a quiet and reflective man, well-read, much more at home in private negotiations and counselling than on the public stage. He played an influential role in Fiji and Fiji Indian politics in the 1930s and the 1940s, though precisely what he did remains undocumented. For much of his life in Fiji, however, he remained behind the scenes, listening, negotiating, mediating. H.M. Lodhia recalls S.B. as a king-maker, trusted by all sides. Certainly the government used S.B. as a valuable channel of communication to the Indian leadership at critical moments.

A.D. Patel was temperamentally different from S.B. A.D. was a born fighter, who loved the cut and thrust of the public debate, unafraid of, and undaunted by, controversy and willing to go against the grain of public opinion if he was convinced that what he was doing was right. Given his temperament, it is not too much to assume that soon after arriving in London, Patel must have found himself in the company of other nationalist-minded Indian students. I have not seen any record of Patel's London experiences, but they were very important ones for him. One result was that he changed his original plan for an ICS career without conferring with his parents, and proceeded instead to the Middle Temple to qualify as a barrister. In 1928, at the age of 23, he graduated Bar-at-Law of the Middle Temple, and in the same year left for Fiji, giving up what would certainly have been a prosperous legal career and a prominent place in Indian public life.

This decision understandably caused much anguish to his parents, for they had other hopes of their eldest son. His father, Dahyabhai, had retired from teaching in 1927, at the age of 62 on a meagre pension of fifty-five rupees a month. That year the district suffered from floods and drought. The family was facing hard times. Dahyabhai tried to persuade Ambalal to return and practice law in India, and to help with the education of his younger siblings. But Ambalal, the eldest, spoilt, and stubborn as ever, refused, not out of disrespect for his parents but

16 Andrews and Pearson, 1916. See also Lal, 1983.

because he now felt he had another mission in life. In the end, Dahyabhai acceded to his son's request, and used some of his own pension money to help with his fare from London to Fiji.

There was another compelling personal reason why Ambalal wanted to remain outside India for a while at least. In London, he had fallen in love with an English woman, a divorcee, Patricia Catherall Seymour, who had a young son from her previous marriage. For a Charotari Patidar of A.D.'s background to have a *de facto* relationship with a foreigner, even if she was English, was something rare; to have a serious relationship with a divorcee with a son was simply unthinkable, beyond the bounds of all social convention. Among those who reportedly held this view was Appabhai Patel, a prominent leader of the local Gujarati community. A.D. knew well the social dishonour his personal life would bring to himself and especially to his aging parents and his siblings. Life in distant Fiji might be different, away from the critical eyes of the intensely exclusive, status conscious Patidar community. This is a guess, but not an unreasonable one.

The picture was complicated by the fact that A.D. had been betrothed to a girl from his community before he had left for London. The Patidar take the institution of marriage very seriously. A Brahmin, says David Pocock, becomes a true Brahman when he is born again at the sacrificial fire and invested with the sacred thread. For the Patidars, 'marriage is the sacrament of confirmation.'¹⁷ The betrothal was arranged by his parents and other village elders; that was the way things were done in traditional India. Marriage was too important an institution to be left to the whims and tastes of the young. Ambalal was not consulted, and he stubbornly refused to have anything to do with the whole affair. He would choose his own partner or he would not marry at all. In the end, the betrothal ceremony had to be terminated because Ambalal had worked himself into quite a state.

Patricia Seymour arrived in Suva with her young son late in 1933, and she and A.D. were formally married on 25 January 1934. The first few years of the marriage were happy ones, as they explored the country together and set up home first in Ba and then in Nadi. But the happiness did not last long: their inter-racial marriage was strained in a colonial society rigidly compartmentalised into racial groups, with its well-defined sense of social hierarchy. The couple simply did not fit into the pre-existing order of things. A.D.'s increasing involvement in Fiji Indian and colonial politics, and the constant travelling throughout the colony that this and his law practice required, did not help matters, especially when the London-born Patricia was left alone in Nadi's rustic surroundings for

17 David Pocock, 1972, 1.

long periods of time at a stretch, ostracised by local Europeans and unable to communicate with the neighbouring Indians. She was trapped in a world she could not comprehend or come to terms with.

A.D. Patel's well known wandering eye and rumors of his numerous marital infractions did not help matters. Older men today tell stories—strictly for one's private ear, one is told, if the teller is a Patel supporter, and for public dissemination, if one is his critic!—about the time when Patricia, distraught at all the allegations of unfaithfulness, attempted to shoot her husband. A.D. reportedly escaped by jumping from the window of a house where his wife had caught him *flagrante delicto*. There are reports in the colonial files about Patel's car always stopping at certain places en route from Suva to Nadi, his nocturnal activities becoming, in the words of one of his later aides, 'the full occupation of wagging tongues, prompting men with beautiful wives to feel somewhat insecure when A.D. was in their vicinity.' The couple separated in March 1939 and divorced on 17 May 1943. A.D. and Patricia kept on friendly terms with each other long after they had separated, and exchanged letters, gifts and occasional visits. They even talked of reconciliation, but it never transpired. Eventually Patricia left for New Zealand, though her framed photograph hung in Patel's office for more than a decade after she left Fiji. Patel's foes berated him for his extra-marital affairs, though he was neither the first nor the last Indo-Fijian public figure to be accused of infidelity.

Soon after arriving in Fiji, Patel set up his legal practice at Renwick Road in Suva, which was then the heart of the Gujarati (Patidari) business community. A few years later, he moved to Ba, which by the 1930s had become the dominant area of Indian settlement. While he retained an office in that sugar town, Patel moved to Nadi in the mid-1930s, and he remained there for the rest of his life, except for a brief period in the mid-1960s, when he was the Member of Social Services and lived in Tamavua, Suva. His Nadi home at Waqadra, a few miles from the town toward Namaka, was set in lush green surroundings full of flowers and tall majestic trees. He named it 'Shantiniketan' (Gardens of Peace) after Rabindranath Tagore's open air university in Calcutta, a place of peace and solitude, a retreat from the entanglements of a hectic public life. Patel wanted to buy the piece of land where he lived, but its European owners, the Watson family, refused to sell it. He loved its ambience so much that he refused to move to his own freehold property nearby. Like the rest of the Indian community, Patel lived on leased land.

What brought A.D. Patel to public attention was his eloquence as a speaker both in Hindi and English, his impressive, fluent knowledge of Indian culture and philosophy and, perhaps most important, his brilliance as a barrister. According to Karam Ramrakha, Patel was not as great a legal scholar as Said Hassan; his forte was advocacy. And as an advocate, he had few equals in his day. Andrew Joseph

recalls Patel 'handling each case with vigour and zeal, applying his brilliance with ruthless determination.' Every Crown Counsel 'who had to contend with A.D.'s penetrating mind and ability to magnify some minute issue favouring the defence, feared the final outcome no matter how strong the Crown's case.' Patel never bullied witnesses, Joseph goes on to observe, 'but he did not spare them any agony either.' Jai Ram Reddy, himself a noted criminal lawyer, says that Patel had raised cross-examination to a fine art. He has never met a lawyer in Fiji or elsewhere who could tell whether a witness was telling a lie quicker than Patel. While conducting a trial, Patel never lost his concentration. He mastered his case fully, got inside the mind of the witness, mixed gentle persuasion with artful trickery, leading him through a tangle of seemingly simple questions until he fell into the elaborate trap Patel had laid.

The 1930s were a turbulent time for A.D. Patel. Besides the convulsions in his private life, colonial officialdom had to be tackled head-on to resolve the pressing problems facing the Indian community. To do that, he had to learn quickly the political configuration of the land, and chart his course accordingly. Perhaps even more important, he had to learn to navigate his way through the faction-ridden politics of the Indian community. He was soon to discover how difficult this task really was.

Patel was often his own man, but he sought and valued the advice of leaders, some of whom became his lifelong friends. Among them was S.B. Patel. The two were particularly close in the first two decades of their time in Fiji. By the 1960s, however, their relationship, though amicable, became more remote, as A.D. immersed himself completely in sugar cane and constitutional politics.¹⁸ S.B. thought A.D. a bit too impatient for change, too much in a rush to accomplish things. In the 1950s, S.B. had thought A.D.'s idea of a colony-wide public library system premature, to which A.D. replied that one did not wait for hunger to begin preparing food. A.D. used S.B. as a sounding board and a conduit of information.

Pandit Vishnu Deo was another close colleague and friend in the early years. Born on 17 July 1900, Deo was a man of limited formal education but gifted with a keen intellect. As a debater and public speaker fluent in both English and Hindi, he had few equals in his day. He joined the Immigration Department as a clerk in 1918, and started his own importing and exporting agency in 1927. Patel and Deo worked particularly closely on land and political issues facing the Indo-Fijian community in the 1930s. The two were at the forefront of the common roll debate and in the effort to negate the colonial government's

¹⁸ I base my assessment of the relationship between the two men on conversation with people who knew them both, and on a private note that S.B. wrote to A.D. on 25 August 1960. S.B. sent A.D. a copy of Kipling's famous poem 'If' and wrote the following words in the margin: 'have always regretted my not coming any closer to you, perhaps I have not tried enough.'

attempt to replace election to the Legislative Council with nomination. Deo was the founding president of the Indian Labour Union in 1930 and of the Southern Cane Growers Association, besides managing schools and other voluntary social organisations such as the Gram Sangathan Mahila Mandal, Nav Yuvak Sabha, the Swaym Sevak Dal and the Gram Sudhar Sabha. He was also the leader of the Arya Samaj in which capacity he got embroiled in the heated religious politics of the post-indenture period. In 1932, Vishnu Deo involved himself in the publication of a book, *Fiji Men Arya Samaj se Shastrath* [Debate with the Arya Samaj in Fiji], which the government declared to be ‘wicked, scandalous and obscene.’¹⁹ Vishnu Deo was charged for peddling obscenity. He pleaded guilty, was fined £5 and bound over for 12 months. This blemish on his record did not damage Deo’s public credibility though. It was his service to the community at large which earned him widespread respect, and which people still recall with gratitude even today.²⁰

Relations between Deo and Patel foundered in the late 1940s over their competing ambitions to become the first Indian member of the Executive Council. Patel managed to out-manoeuvre Deo, but Deo took his revenge by using his widespread influence and powerful contacts to keep Patel out of the Legislative Council twice, in 1950 when Patel was defeated by the first Fiji-born Indian lawyer Tulsi Ram Sharma, and by Ajodhya Prasad in 1953. Patel did not enter the Legislative Council until 1963. The bitterness that this caused gradually evaporated when Deo retired from the Legislative Council in 1959. He died on 7 May 1968.

Patel’s greatest friend and confidante throughout his life in Fiji was Swami Rudrananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission. The two saw each other virtually every day of their lives. Swamiji was a regular dinner guest in the Patel household. When the Patels were away on overseas visits, Rudrananda kept them informed about the children and their antics through letters which make hilarious reading. In one such letter in 1962, he told A.D. and Leela how their tiny daughter, Shyama (Amita), kept everyone amused with her song ‘*Pyaar kar lo nahin to phansi pe chad jayega!*’ [Fall in love otherwise you’ll face the gallows!] The two held weekly *Bhagavad Gita* classes at the Mission ashram in Nadi, and took turns holding religious discourse at ashrams throughout Viti Levu. They co-founded the English weekly *The Pacific Review* and the Hindi weekly *Jagriti*, both published by the Sarada Sangam Press. They also co-founded Fiji’s first private, non-Christian secondary school, The Sri Vivekananda High in Nadi. Both were the principal leaders of the growers in the 1943 strike, which earned them the wrath of the colonial government in the form of a house arrest order restricting their mobility to within a five mile radius of the Nadi town.

19 *Fiji Samachar*, 5 March 1932.

20 See generally, Billimoria, 1985, 15: 103-129; and Kelly, 1992.

Swami Rudrananda (Muthukrishnan) was born in a well-to-do family in Tamil Nadu in March 1901. Heeding Mahatma Gandhi's call for young people of India to devote their lives to the cause of social reform, Rudrananda joined the Ramakrishna Mission and came to Fiji in 1939 on the advice of Swami Avinasananda, who had visited Fiji in 1938 and obtained government approval for the Mission to work in the colony. Rudrananda was no bookish, temple-bound monk, he was a social activist. 'You don't talk religion to a hungry man,' he responded to those who asked him not to mix religion with politics. He was concerned to create a fair and just society in Fiji, to improve the living condition of the cane farmers then so firmly under the thumb of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. Rudrananda, like Patel, was a fearless crusader for the things he believed in. His zeal so annoyed his opponents that they petitioned both the colonial government as well as the Mission headquarters in India itself to have the monk removed from Fiji. The same people had also called for Patel's deportation, in both cases unsuccessfully. Patel and Rudrananda, one a patrician lawyer and the other a rustic monk, were two unlikely peas in the same pod, but together they formed a formidable team, dedicated to the project of social and political reform. They both left behind permanent footprints on the soil of their adopted homeland.