HEROES OF HINDU NATIONALISM

Madan Mohan Malaviya and Atal Bihari Vajpayee have been chosen for the Bharat Ratna, India’s highest civilian award, while Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is to be the subject of a 600-feet statue—the highest in the world. What does this tell us about Narendra Modi’s India? Selected culling of these icons’ richly contradictory lives makes them perfect heroes for our times, our overtly Hindu majoritarian present.

Malaviya was not only a co-founder of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915, in an era of multiple allegiances he was also the Indian National Congress president in 1909, 1918, 1932 and 1933. However, he left the Congress twice—first in 1926 to found the Independent Congress Party (with Lala Lajpat Rai). The split from the Motilal Nehru-led (Swarajist) Congress occurred because Malaviya and Rai thought the Swarajist policy of non-cooperation in the Councils was harming the Hindu interests. Having proved their point in the 1926 elections, the duo then rejoined the Congress to protest against the Simon Commission. A few years later, on the issue of the Communal Award of 1932, Malaviya began to rethink anew his political affiliation. Though the Congress sought to keep its options open on the award, Malaviya thought it ought to be rejected and that Hindu members in the assembly be permitted to vote independently on the matter. So, he left the Congress again, this time to found the Congress Nationalist Party (with M.S. Aney).

Yet there was more to Malaviya than his doubts about the preeminent political outfit of the day. He, too, could be scathingly anticolonial. Author of a 1919 pamphlet addressed to the government of India titled ‘Searching Questions upon Martial Law in the Panjab’, Malaviya sought answers about the number of persons flogged, jailed, detained, executed, transported to other prisons, from each town and village under the martial law regime in Punjab—questions that would make every RTI activist proud. As most commentators have noted, Malaviya also co-founded the Banaras Hindu University (BHU). The BHU of 1930s was home not only to M.S. Golwalkar but, with Malaviya’s blessing, provided a base to RSS volunteers through this turbulent decade and into the ’40s (Malaviya died in 1946).

Sardar Patel is best known for the integration of princely states to India in the difficult years that accompanied the Partition. Economic historians recognise Patel as the Congressman with the closest ties to Ahmedabad and Bombay mill owners, one who could be depended upon to slow down pro-labour legislation or intervene on their behalf when other Congress leaders appeared willing to promote socialist aims during the years they held power in the provincial governments (1937-39). As home minister and deputy PM from 1947-50, it was Patel who took an overtly Hindu nationalist stance, urging Muslims that “mere declarations of loyalty to the Indian Union will not help them at this juncture. They must give practical proof of their declaration”. Less known is the fact that it was Patel who promised the rebuilding of the contentious Somnath temple in Junagadh. In the aftermath of Gandhi’s assassination, even as he temporarily banned the RSS and confiscated the records of the Hindu Mahasabha, he sought to persuade both outfits to join the Congress and take on a political role in the building of a new India (thereby anticipating, in some measure, the founding of the BJP).

Vajpayee showed his flair for ‘pragmatism’ in several ways. Protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, once in power, the new external affairs minister in the Janata Party in 1977 did little to upset the tilt towards the Soviet Union that had been the hallmark of Indira Gandhi’s regime since the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty. Vajpayee’s diplomatic skills in China also resulted in the reopening of the route to Kailash and Mansarovar. A believer in coalitions since the 1960s, Vajpayee, the PM candidate in 1998, walked the extra mile to bring regional parties into the NDA, accepting the need to shelve three key demands (the Ram temple, Uniform Civil Code and Article 370) to draw up a common minimum programme. Shortly after the nuclear tests and US sanctions, he spoke of India and the US being “natural allies”, a remark that has since been regarded as heralding a turning point in India-US ties. It comes a close second to his Lahore visit in 1999 when, this once RSS pracharak announced India’s acceptance of, and hope for, a stable Pakistan. Vajpayee, despite his equivocation on the Muslim question in 2002, is best remembered for his Pakistan visit that convincingly set to rest the destabilising RSS idea of an Akhand Bharat.

How then shall we interpret this commemorative exercise? The simplest conclusion is that a particular reading of Patel, the Congressman, Malaviya, the Hindu Mahasabhaite, and Vajpayee, the RSS-Jan Sangh-BJP leader can be deployed to endorse the idea of a Hindu nation. But a closer read suggests the importance of paying attention to alternate moments in their careers. The choice of Malaviya, Patel and Vajpayee, then, also forces reflection on their shifting political allegiances, ideological flexibility and pragmatism both in power and when seeking new allies.

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