CHAPTER - II

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In this chapter, an attempt is made to present the various forces that influenced and the circumstances that forced Vallabhbhai Patel to plunge into public life, along with an evaluation of his role in the Ahmedabad municipality, his various public activities, his first contact with Gandhi and his participation in Kheda and Bardoli Satyagrahas.

Sardar Patel, from the very beginning was very much reluctant to take active part in politics though he was occasionally making pungent comments on current politics. Many issues like the day-to-day political affairs, corruption among officials, protection given by police to goondas, etc., came under the lash of his biting wit and sarcasm at the bridge table in the club. But an under current of sadness was flowing in Vallabhbhai's heart. People had lost self-confidence and were afraid of antagonising the British rulers. Even honest criticism was met with penalty. Any patriotic
feeling and move was suppressed by the authority which considered it as a spectre of sedition and a threat to its authority.

To Sardar Patel, a realist by nature and Vaishnavite by conviction, the ways of the revolutionaries and the terrorists who played on the emotions of the people made no appeal, nor did the pious resolutions passed by the moderates in political conferences. They were like straws in the wind and lacked ballast; there was no force behind them. However, politics was a luxury to Vallabhbhai. He and his brothers together had only ten acres of land to maintain a big joint family. He, therefore, had to earn enough to maintain the family. Considering the financial position of his family, he could not afford to plunge into active politics. Besides this, there was an understanding between him and his elder brother Vithalbhai that the former should look after the family and the latter should devote himself to public work which brought no monetary return. As Vallabhbhai put it, his brother would do the good work (Punya) while he would drudge to keep the family going. But developments in the
country and also in Vallabhbhai's life soon made this arrangement unworkable. The influence of Vallabhbhai, with his growing practice at the Bar had grown by leaps and bounds. He was frequently called upon to participate in public activities. He had come in contact with a large number of public workers of Ahmedabad such as Govindarao Patel, Shivabhai Patel, Chimanlal Thakar, Maganbhai Chaturbhai Patel and others. In those days, public activity, whether political or social was virtually the monopoly of barristers and pleaders. Sir Ramanbhai and Dewan Bahadur Harilalbhai Desai were the recognized leaders in Ahmedabad. His friends' circle consisting of wealthy businessmen, mill owners and social workers in the Gujarat Club forced him to take an active part in public affairs. This may be considered as the earliest force that was preparing Vallabhbhai slowly to enter public life.

Gandhiji who had returned from South Africa in 1915 with a reputation for his unique achievement there, had started visiting clubs to address small gatherings and enlist the support of the members to his scheme of national schools and the gospel of Ahimsa (non-violence)
and Satyagraha (Civil Disobedience). The underlying theme of his lectures was the necessity of resisting the British bureaucracy wherever it acted against the interests of the people. This appeal of Gandhiji, though had no effect initially on Vallabhbhai's mind, had a phenomenal effect later and influenced him to plunge into active politics.

Another force which had begun to exercise the mind of the Sardar was Lokmanya Tilak's cry that 'Swaraj is my birth right and I shall have it'. To him this was the most inspiring cry. The Home Rule League founded by Lokmanya Tilak began to spread this gospel all over the sub-continent. Gujarat also organised its Home Rule Leagues and publicised Tilak's speeches on Swaraj in Gujarati.

Another force which influenced the mind of Vallabhbhai was Gandhiji's Champaran Campaign in Bihar against European planters. Gandhiji had defied the order of the district magistrate of Champaran asking him to quit the district or face imprisonment. He had declared that his sole purpose was to find the truth in
the people's complaints and expressed his determined intention to continue the enquiry. This had an electric effect throughout India. He was prepared to fight against the mighty Government and even to go to jail in order to secure the elementary rights of the farmers.

At this crucial moment, Vithalbhai, the elder brother of Vallabhbhai, came under the magnetic spell of Tilak and was soon elected to the Imperial Legislative Council of India. Kashibhai, the younger brother of Vallabhbhai also joined the movement and it seemed they would all be in the vortex of politics. Naturally, these national and family forces and circumstances had a tremendous impact on the mind of Vallabhbhai. Still his mind was not ripe to enter public life.

Undoubtedly, all these forces and factors were slowly preparing and ripening the mind of Vallabhbhai to enter active politics. Perhaps, the appropriate occasion had not yet arisen for him to enter into the domain of politics. But soon such an occasion was in sight.
Vallabhbhai was essentially a man of action and wanted to do some useful public work. His dynamic nature was craving for a wider field of action than the restricted field of law. The Ahmedabad Municipality which was in doldrums then attracted his attention.

Though the Municipalities were established to serve as training grounds for democracy, its members hardly enjoyed any freedom to oppose any action taken by officials, for they were afraid of the government. The government had decided to keep the local administration under its iron clutches. The government of Bombay amended the Municipal Act and made it obligatory for big cities like Ahmedabad to have an Indian Civil Service officer as Municipal Commissioner to manage their affairs. The public vehemently protested against the Bill as it was so designed as to vest all powers, patronage and influence in the hands of the government. Besides this, the high salary of Municipal Commissioner had to be paid out of local funds which meant an additional burden on the municipal funds. All revenue powers and judicial powers were already under the control of the District collector and the District Judge respectively. With the Commissioner in charge
of the municipality, these officers could almost control lives of the citizens. It was also feared that with a formidable boss at the top, the municipal councillors would be reduced to mere cyphers and local affairs pass completely into the hands of the bureaucracy.

In spite of the strong protest of the public, the Bill was passed by the legislature and Mr. J.A. Shillidy, I.C.S., was nominated as the first Municipal Commissioner of the Ahmedabad Municipality. Mr. Shillidy was most arrogant and dictatorial in his behaviour and unsuited for the position. He had an obsession that it was his mission to teach the elected councillors how to manage their affairs. With the backing of the government, Mr. Shillidy became most dictatorial and intolerable in his administration. Referring to the deplorable condition of Ahmedabad Municipality under the regime of Shillidy, K.L. Punjabi writes: "The municipality had become inert and lifeless under the virtual dictatorship of the municipal Commissioner." ¹

It was generally felt that only a person with a

tough temperament, rough manners and indomitable spirit could set the matter right. Naturally, the eyes of some of the members of the Gujarat Club fell upon Vallabhbhai who was dauntless, defiant, determined and was known for qualities of sustained labour, blunt reparatories and tendency of delivering telling blows on his adversaries. They also found that he would match the arrogance, obstinacy and irritability of Mr. Shillidy. Some of his friends like H.V. Divatia, R.S. Hiralal Desai and others advised him to enter the municipality and organise a strong opposition party and inject a fighting spirit into it and agitate for the abolition of the post of Municipal Commissioner and in the meantime control him. Vallabhbhai also had some interest in improving the sanitary conditions of Ahmedabad city and with that intention, and with the help of Dr. Jacob Soloman, M.V. Mavlankar and others took a leading part in establishing the 'Sanitary Association of Ahmedabad' in 1961. Fortunately, a vacancy had occurred with the death of Shri Ahmadnia Sarfuddin, a Municipal councillor representing Dariapur Constituency on 23-11-1916. Vallabhbhai and his brother were residing in that locality as tenants of Chandulal Mahadevia. Naturally
Yallabhbhai had the support of the residents of that locality, most of them, incidentally were Patels i.e., his own caste people. Even Chandulal Mahadevia supported his candidature and offered his services to organize the election campaign. Therefore, according to A.R.G. Tiwari, the death of Sarfuddin of Dariapur constituency "was also a factor of no mean importance in helping Shri Vallabhbhai in arriving at his final decision regarding his entry into public life."2

Some other factors prove that Vallabhbhai, by this time, has developed some taste for public life. For instance, he had attended the Sixteenth Session of the Bombay Provincial Conference held in Ahmedabad on 21-10-1916. He also attended the XXXI session of the Indian National Congress held in Lucknow in December 1916. These events evidently show that he had acquired some taste for public like. This factor also might have helped him to enter public life. Referring to this point A.R.G. Tiwari says: "...that also (taste acquired by Vallabhbhai) partly helped Shri Vallabhbhai in making up his mind to enter the municipality."3

3. Ibid., p.15.
Another factor was the popularity of the Sanitary Association. This Association which was established by him had, by this time, received good responses.

Vallabhbhai was told that he would have no difficulty in combining his professional work with his municipal duties. His best friend Chimanlal Thakar, however, advised him against taking part in public life as there was no public spirit among the people and they were too timid by nature. Vallabhbhai did not agree with this. He was of the firm view that it was for the leader to mould the people and infuse public spirit in them. Narahari D. Parikh says, "It was this line of thought that seems eventually to have convinced him of the desirability of joining the municipality."  

Vallabhbhai's friends put him up for the by-election and he was elected on January 5, 1917. But one of Shillidy's stooges challenged his election and it was set aside. Undaunted Vallabhbhai, a couple of months later fought another by-election on 14-5-1917 and returned unopposed and on 23-7-1917 he was appointed

as the Chairman of the Sanitary Committee of the Munici-
pality. His success in the Ahmedabad Municipal election was the first turning point in his life.

His Work as Member and Chairman of Sanitary Committee:

Vallabhbhai devoted the next twelve years to the affairs of the municipality with the zeal, interest and ardour of a crusader. Before he could stoutly oppose Mr. Shillidy and demand his removal and formulate further plans, he surveyed the municipal affairs carefully. He studied the technicalities and also the Municipalities' Act and discovered both its strong and weak points. It did not take much time for him to realize the defects of the councillors and the staff of the municipality. Within the first two or three meetings, he realised that the members lacked real grasp of the principles of local government and the chairman of the Managing Committee had no support and co-operation of the members. The servants were indifferent towards the welfare of the public and behaved often in an irresponsible manner.
They lacked unity among themselves. Due to these defects of the councillors, the Commissioner exploited them easily. A careful study of the Municipal Act made him to realise that he must secure the co-operation and support of the Councillors as well as the Indian officials to oust the undeserving and intolerable Shillidy. He also discovered that no attempt had been made to establish any liaison between the Indian officials and the Councillors. He started filling up the gap by developing personal contacts. He invited them to his home and over a cup of tea discussed the welfare of the people and the ways and means of promoting it. This was a novel experience to the officials. They had never been approached before on this level and taken into confidence. This worked a miracle and changed the very attitude of the officials towards their duty, Councillors and the people. This gave birth to the dynamics of a new Councillor-official relationship. People received good attention where formerly they encountered indifference and apathy.

As to the officials, Vallabhbhai tried to make them realise their responsibilities as servants of the
people. In the case of members, he tried to make them realise their rights as representatives of the people and their duty to use those rights fearlessly. He gave them 'pep talks' to raise their morale and encourage them to take decisions in the interest of the people rather than in the interest and at the behest of Municipal Commissioner.

After preparing the ground, Vallabhbhai was waiting for an opportunity to launch his attack on Mr. Shillidy. Opportunity came very soon. A small lake near the Railway station which was handed over to the Municipality in 1914 had become a breeding centre for mosquitoes. The municipality decided to fill it up. One of the Municipal Councillors Fateh Mohammad Munshi with the powerful backing of the Commissioner objected to this and claimed the ownership of the lake which he was using for seasoning the wood for his match factory. He filed a suit but lost it as the lake was legally owned by the municipality.

Munshi wanted to have it by hook or crook. He made a generous contribution to the war loans and sought the assistance of the Commissioner. Shillidy promised
him that he would arrange the matters in such a way that
the lake would remain unfilled and remain with Munshi
for his use. In recognition of his generous contribu-
tions to the war loans, Shillidy recommended to the govern-
ment that the lake should be given to Munshi on permanent
lease. This was Vallabhbhai's opportunity. After
securing the full details of the case, Vallabhbhai moved
in the General Board a long resolution on 7th June 1917
charging the Municipal Commissioner with deliberate
insubordination and demanded his removal. D.V.Tahamankar
observes, "Patel's immediate opposition to Shillidy was
emblematic of the gigantic movements against the British
Raj which developed in coming years in which he
accepted the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and fought the
battles for independence to the end." 5

Vallabhbhai brought other charges also on Shillidy.
Mr. Shillidy had informed the government without asking
the Board that the municipality did not require this
lake as it was not useful to it. Vallabhbhai exposed
another unscrupulous and shameful act of Shillidy that
he had deleted thirteen significant words from the last

paragraph of a letter addressed to the government and which had been approved and sanctioned by the Board at its General meeting. This was most unpardonable and reprehensible. Vallabhbhai brought vote of censure, demanding immediate removal of Shillidy which was carried by a large majority. Commenting on the vote of censure, Narahari D.Parikh writes, "This was perhaps the first instance in the history of the Ahmedabad Municipality when a resolution couched in such firm language had been moved against a British I.C.S., Officer. The facts were such that even the staunchest of supporters of the government in the Board found it difficult to challenge, and Vallabhbhai's resolution was passed by a majority." Finally, the government had no alternative but to remove Mr.Shillidy. As. D.V. Tahamankar describes it,"It was a red letter day in the municipal history of Ahmedabad - the people's voice had prevailed, they realised that popular opposition could defeat a bureaucrat, however powerful, if the opposition were led by an astute and resolute leader." Vallabhbhai crossed his swords with Mr.Shillidy's bureaucratic tendency and was successful in removing him from the position.

6. For the text of 'Vote of Censure', see A.R.G.Tiwari, op.cit., pp.79-84.
8. op.cit., p.57.
As a member of the municipal Board, Vallabhbhai had to cross swords with many officials. His sword was so sharp that it would cut them to pieces. Yet another incident needs mention at this stage.

Mr. F. G. Pratt, Commissioner of Northern Division in the Bombay Province was a hard bureaucrat, and was very much interested in retaining control over all the municipalities and local Boards in his Division. He decided to appoint two more British Officers to Ahmedabad Municipality, one an engineer and another an health officer, though two fully qualified Indian candidates were available. The councillors had no objection to the appointment of the health officer. But Vallabhbhai, as the Chairman of the Sanitary Committee opposed the appointment of the engineer on the ground that he was a railway engineer with no experience of municipal work and also because two available Indian candidates were far superior to him in experience and knowledge. Pratt ignored this opposition and got him selected with the help of the government-nominated members.
Vallabhbhai was waiting for an opportunity to launch his offensive against Pratt and remove this incompetent new engineer. To the misfortune of the engineer, the water shortage in certain parts of the city became so acute that it called for immediate attention. The people residing in slightly elevated places could not get water. The dissatisfied people organised a protest meeting under the auspices of Gujarat Sabha with Gandhiji in the chair. A copy of the resolution expressing their serious dissatisfaction about the water supply was sent to the President of the Municipality Collector and the Commissioner.

On receiving the copy of the resolution, the Commissioner invited the Secretaries of Gujarat Sabha to meet him. He told them that he was not responsible for the actions of the municipality. Further, he told them with anger, 'The Act speaks only of the Municipality. It makes no distinction between the elected and the nominated members. If you have any grievance, go to the Municipal Hall. Do not let the Municipal Committee have peace till you get what you want. If you still do not get water, go to their houses and burn them'. The
Secretaries reported this haughty and impertinent reply of Mr. Pratt to Vallabhbhai who made a note of the remark regarding burning the houses of the Committee members.

Mr. Pratt organised a group of members to visit and inspect the affected parts of the city, accompanied by the Municipal Engineer. Vallabhbhai was also invited to join. While inspecting, Vallabhbhai tried to put forward a suggestion. He had hardly begun with the words, 'The best way to meet the situation to my mind is', but immediately, the Commissioner interjected with the remark; 'The best way, Mr. Patel is for your Committee to cooperate with Municipal Engineer and not to non-co-operate'. Vallabhbhai could not swallow this impertinent remark from so senior an officer and he retorted; 'The best way is to dispense with the services of this incompetent officer whom you have foisted on this municipality. What is it that the Municipal Engineer wanted and my committee has not agreed to? Ask him if there is any such thing. Yet when the Secretaries of the Gujarat Sabha waited on you in deputation, you had the impertinence to advise them to burn our houses. Why burn our
houses? Why not burn the bungalow of that fellow who is at the root of the trouble?'. This was a deathblow to the prestige and the superiority of Mr. Pratt. The inspection was abruptly suspended. The Engineer resigned and left the place. This bold stand of Vallabhbhai was undoubtedly an event and it was an warning to the present and future Commissioners that they could not run the Municipality as a department of the Government. Speaking about these incidents, D.V. Tahamankar writes, "These successful skirmishes with British bureaucrats established Vallabhbhai's position as a sturdy champion of the people's rights."^9

Vallabhbhai also toned up the quality of the internal administration of the municipality. He found that a number of municipal taxes from a large number of high officials, influential and rich persons and public institutions were not recovered. The arrears were mounting up and Vallabhbhai took a drastic step of publicising these names. Knowing, as they did, Vallabhbhai would not mind using force, they paid up their arrears. Vallabhbhai did not spare any high official in the discharge of his duties. In fact, he

9. Ibid., p.59.
was merciless in this respect. For instance, he used judicious threats and persuasion to collect arrears of taxes from Khan Bahadur, a government pensioner and an honorary First Class Magistrate. Vallabhbhai was tactful, merciless and fearless in his municipal administration. Had he not taken this bold step, the arrears of taxes would have mounted up and the municipality would have become bankrupt.

Vallabhbhai was not tolerating any inefficiency and irresponsibility on the part of any officer. The case of Shri Wadia was a veritable testimony to this nature of Vallabhbhai. Shri Wadia was Water Works Engineer against whom Vallabhbhai took disciplinary action and removed him on the ground of his indifference and irresponsibility.¹⁰

The President of Ahmedabad Municipality:

By this time, Vallabhbhai and his party had become

¹⁰ For the interesting details of Shri Wadia's case, see Narahari D.Parikh, op.cit., pp.33-35. Also see A.R.G.Tiwari, op.cit., pp.102-120, for the text of interesting questions put by Vallabhbhai Patel, the then member of the General Board and the answers given by the President of the Ahmedabad Municipality, R.B.Ramanbhai, M.Nilkanth.
very popular and in the election of 1919, his party captured almost all the elected seats on the municipal Board and became a powerful force. For the first time, the Government block realised that it had to deal with an organised party in the municipality. In 1924, the government enlarged the municipal franchise. In the Municipal Board, Vallabhbhai's Congress Party won 35 seats and secured an overall majority of 25. Thus, with his party in power, Vallabhbhai was elected the President of Ahmedabad Municipality without any difficulty in 1924.

Vallabhbhai, as President of the Municipality for the next four years rendered unstinted service to Ahmedabad city. The remarkable improvements he made in the municipal administration and the constructive works he carried out are indelible in the annals of Ahmedabad Municipality. He changed the very shape of the city. By his pleasing personal contacts with the citizens, great organising capacities and devotion to duty, he brought a psychological revolution among the citizens.

Soon after his election as President, Vallabhbhai
realised that the municipal administration of the city can be improved only through a constructive approach. With this view in mind, he organised inspection parties to tour the city. Vallabhbhai was personally taking a morning walk in different localities every-day, stopping outside a house, talking to the head of the family and observe the living conditions. He would keenly observe if streets in a locality had proper drainage, light, public conveniences, washing and bathing facilities. He would examine foodstuffs sold in the market and the state of cleanliness of the streets. For further improvement of the city, he carried out many works like opening of dispensaries, appointment of the staff, purchase of medicines, opening of Plague Hospital, Lunatic Assylum and Leper Assylum, transfer of burial and cremation grounds far away from city and improvement of the privies and latrines and urinals. Further, he improved the drainage system and constructed metal roads, provided adequate, good-lighting and constructed vegetable, meat and fish markets.

12. Ibid., pp.53-61, for details on the improvement of Drainage.
13. Ibid., pp.63-65, for details on the construction of metal roads.
Further, Vallabhbhai turned his attention towards solving of a vexing problem – shortage of water supply in Ahmedabad city. The water works of Ahmedabad city was designed as early as 1891. With the help of a band of experts whose report pointed out that the supply must be based on a population figure of about 300,000 which meant that the city would have to have 9 million gallons a day. Vallabhbhai as a Chairman of Sanitary Committee tackled this vital problem successfully. Further Vallabhbhai requested the government to set up a permanent Bacteriological Laboratory at Ahmedabad for testing water.

Ahmedabad had the privilege of holding the annual session of the Indian National Congress in 1921. To commemorate this historic event, Vallabhbhai decided

14. Ibid., pp.122-132, for the text of 'Shri Vallabhbhai's Report on Water Supply'. Vallabhbhai, as Chairman of the Sanitary Committee placed his report contained in 'Sanitary Committee Resolution No.320, dated 3-6-1920' before the General Board on 10-6-1920.

15. Ibid., pp.52-53, for details of Bacteriological Laboratory.

16. Ibid., pp.44-52, for details on water-works, prevention of waste, extension project, distribution of water and water supply to mills and other measures.
to build a hospital and a maternity home. He persuaded Vadilal Sarabhai and Chunilal Chinai, the two rich persons of Ahmedabad, to give a magnanimous donation of Rs.70,000 (£ 52,500) to purchase twentyone acres of land on the banks of the river.

Vallabhbhai convinced his industrialist friends that to develop a proper civic sense, their workers must enjoy happy houses and persuaded them to build housing colonies.

Vallabhbhai had ambitious schemes regarding Town Planning and development of parks and playgrounds for children, opening of recreational centres for workers and providing of free education for all citizens. He also made many improvements in Teacher's salary.17 But unfortunately, before he could implement these ambitious schemes, he had to resign the membership of the municipality.

Vallabhbhai's term of office as President was marked by his demonic energy and dynamic leadership and

17. Ibid., pp.70-72, for details of Teachers salary.
he served the Ahmedabad municipality with distinction.
It seems, there was hardly any civic activity which
escaped his notice.

The long record of Vallabhbhai's valuable and
indelible accomplishments in Ahmedabad municipality was
no surprise. But what was really surprising was that
he could accomplish so much in the face of government
opposition. Vallabhbhai's stamina, tenacity and
audacity to work in the face of vehement opposition of
British bureaucracy was unsurpassable when compared to
Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru who had also
been elected as Municipal Presidents of Patna and
Allahabad respectively. Faced with similar problems
and opposition of British bureaucracy, they could not
muster so much courage to face and pull on with the
administration and therefore, they resigned. Therefore,
it was astonishing that Vallabhbhai succeeded where the
great personalities like Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Nehru
had failed. Vallabhbhai resigned the Presidentship of
the Municipality in 1928 due to a difference of opinion
over an appointment. At this time the Bardolic
campaign was warming up and required his full attention.
Referring to Vallabhbhai's Municipal career, L.N. Sarin says, "At a time when municipalities were the factotums of the bureaucracy and showed no courage to resist its interference in the civic affairs of the city, he infused a new spirit of initiative and independence in its deliberations. To an amorphous municipal Board, he gave a personality by resisting the arrogance of an English officer... and who wanted to reduce it to his pocket - through." 18

If Vallabhbhai's municipal career was considered to be the training period in his public life and administration, the Ahmedabad municipality was considered to be a valuable training ground for him to handle democratic institutions and get the best out of them. On this training ground only, he learnt the art of managing men of diverse views and interests. Gandhiji had warned the members of the Gujarat Political Conference held at Godhra in November 1917 in which Vallabhbhai came in direct contact with him, 'if we are unable to run our village administration skilfully, honestly and justly,

how can we justify our demand for the independence of our country?' These words of Gandhiji were vibrating in his ears and proved that he was able to run the village administration skilfully, honestly and justly. The vigour and tenacity of the Patidar in him made him to pursue each problem to its logical culmination.

Replying later to the civic address presented to him by the Municipal Corporation of Bombay on January 16, of 1948, Vallabhbhai said; 'In the course/your address you have mentioned some things which I have achieved and others which I have not; but there is one which I accept without reservation, namely that I served the Ahmedabad Municipality to the best of my capacity. I had unalloyed happiness in the tasks which I performed them. After all, to all of us, to serve our own city must give unmitigated pleasure and mental satisfaction which I cannot get in any other sphere. Further, to cleanse the dirt of the city is quite different from cleansing the dirt of politics. From the former, you get a good night's rest while the latter keeps you worried and disturbed even at night.'

Mr. Alfred Master, who served for some time as Municipal Commissioner in Ahmedabad said; 'I remember Mr. Vallabhbhai J. Patel as a most efficient Chairman of the Sanitary Committee who stood aloof from the domestic and political intrigues in which some of his fellow councillors indulged.' This opinion has a special significance as it is expressed by one who had the opportunity to watch Vallabhbhai's work at close quarters and who had serious differences with him and left Ahmedabad.

However, the fact remains that these struggles with British bureaucracy during his municipal career brought out the fighter in Vallabhbhai and the experience he gained there became a firm ground for his future leadership. It was an opportunity for him to shape his political career as a disciplined soldier and a great commander.

Finally, it may be said that Vallabhbhai, during his regime in the municipality fought for independence.

As G.V. Mavlankar says "The History of the Ahmedabad Municipality from 1919 to 1929 is the history principally of Vallabhbhai's fight for Swaraj." 21

Meets Gandhiji:

The period 1917-1928 could be described as the formative period in Vallabhbhai's political life for it was during this period he served the Ahmedabad municipality, came in contact with Gandhiji, acted as Secretary of the Gujarat Sabha and participated in the flood-relief-work, the peasants no-rent campaigns, Flag Satyagraha and many other political and local activities. These activities overlap at many points. For instance, while Vallabhbhai was serving the Ahmedabad municipality, he was called upon to organise Flag Satyagraha at Nagpur, the Peasants Satyagrahas in Kaira District and Bardoli.

Gandhiji had returned to India in 1915 after his great victory in Natal in South Africa. He had experimented in the efficiency of non-violent non-cooperation technique to solve the problem of indentured

labourers. He decided to settle down in Ahmedabad and established his ashram there. To expound his ideas of ashram particularly the scheme of establishing a national school, he visited the Gujarat club in June 1916. On one such occasion, Vallabhbhai was playing bridge and ignored Gandhiji's appeal. Gandhiji, with his customary Kathiawari dress cut an odd figure among club members in their fashionable clothes and elegance. Barrister Vallabhbhai went on with his bridge and remarked, 'I have been told he comes from South Africa. Honestly, I think he is a crank and as you know, I have no use for such people'. But Gandhiji, with complete indifference to the surrounding pomp and show, started preaching his gospel of 'Ahimsa' (non-Violence) and Satyagraha (Civil Disobedience) to such members as cared to listen to him. L.N. Sarin describes the indifferent attitude of Vallabhbhai towards Gandhiji's preaching as follows: "Little did Vallabhbhai know that the medium-sized man who failed to attract his attention at the Gujarat club was not only his future guide, friend and philosopher but the maker of a new India."22

22. op.cit., p.21.
Gandhi ji turned up again at the Gujarat club to enlist the support of its members. Vallabhbhai, this time went to listen to him purely out of curiosity. Gandhi ji's preaching of 'Ahimsa' and 'Satyagraha' impressed him. Gandhi ji's Satyagraha in Champaran, against Indigo planters in Bihar in 1917 attracted the mind of Vallabhbhai Patel very much. In April 1917 Gandhi ji had shot into the limelight when he defied the orders of the local magistrate. Gandhi ji's refusal was something new to the law-abiding and law-fearing people. They were stunned and electrified by the daring resistance of Gandhi ji. This was the main topic of conversation in Gujarat club for a few days and their respect for Gandhi ji increased enormously. He was a man who had coined a new technique of non-violent resistance - 'Satyagraha'. It was about this time that the sixth session of Gujarat Sabha invited Gandhi ji to accept the Presidentship of the Sabha which had a dignified existence for over thirty years, but achieving very little.

The Gujarat Sabha with Gandhi ji as President convened its first political conference at Godhra, the
headquarters of the Panch Mahal District, a backward area in Gujarat. Gandhiji presided over the conferences and made it unique in many ways. He invited many leaders from various provinces. Vithalbhai Patel the elder brother of Vallabhbhai Patel from Bombay, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Tilak and Khaparde were a few among the illustrious leaders that attended. By this time, Vallabhbhai Patel had earned reputation and popularity as a celebrated criminal lawyer and as Chairman of the Sanitary Committee in Ahmedabad Municipality. He was also invited to attend the conference.

Among some unique innovations of Gandhiji at this conference, the appointment of an Executive committee which would function throughout the year until the next session, was most important. Hereafter, it was the duty of the Executive committee to implement the decisions taken at the conference. Gandhiji was elected President of this committee and Vallabhbhai its Secretary. Ahmedabad was made the headquarters of the committee. Gandhiji wanted to convert the lifeless Sahba into an active body with a plan and programme.
The Gujarat Sabha was most memorable to Vallabhbhai as it brought a significant and phenomenal change. In fact, it changed the very career of Vallabhbhai. It was a significant turning point in his life. It was this Sabha which brought Gandhi and Vallabhbhai together. Together they grew into a powerful force and influenced the very course of the history of a big country like India and became the 'Father of the Nation' and the 'Builder of the Nation' respectively. As G.V. Mavalankar, a lawyer and a close associate of Vallabhbhai writes, "This was a small beginning of the close and great association in comradeship in the service of the motherland." 23

Vallabhbhai's contact with Gandhi brought a miraculous transformation in him and converted him altogether into a different man. Gandhi's powerful personality had an indelible and unfathomable impact on Vallabhbhai. As a result, a peasant who had donned the barristerial dress reverted to his original dress. His contact with Gandhi gave him a new mission in life and made him the 'Sardar of India'.

Vallabhbhai as the Secretary of Gujarat Sabha chalked out a fixed programme to promote the welfare of the masses.

Movement Against Forced Labour:

The first problem that attracted the immediate attention of Vallabhbhai was the forced labour or 'Veth' or 'Corvée'. It was customary on the part of the government officials, when on tour to extract work from certain sections of the people and often not to pay for it. The people rendering free service could not rebel against this inhuman treatment as they were afraid of the power of the government. But it required an iron man like Vallabhbhai to oppose it. Inspired by Gandhiji, he decided to solve this problem through non-violent non-cooperation. Vallabhbhai appealed to Mr. Pratt, the then Commissioner of northern division to discontinue this evil, unjust, demoralising and dehumanising practice. Vallabhbhai failed to get not only a reply but even the acknowledgement for his three

letters. Vallabhbhai published and distributed leaflets among villagers to educate them against forced labour. He told them that it was an illegal imposition and the people must assert their rights and resist their demand. They should demand the normal payment for the work rendered. This had an electric effect and marked the beginning of a revolt against authority. Vallabhbhai, along with a letter sent some legal rulings in regard to the illegality of forced labour to Mr. Pratt who considered it to be the height of insolence. In his third letter to Mr. Pratt, he wrote that if the reply was not received, the public would be advised not to submit to it under any circumstances as it was illegal. It irritated Mr. Pratt. Immediately he asked Mr. Patel to see him. Vallabhbhai replied that there was no point for discussion and if there were any legal rulings, he would be informed of them. Further, he wrote to Mr. Pratt that if the Commissioner himself was ready to meet him, he would be glad to see him in the office of the committee. Only a man with Vallabhbhai's audacity could reply in this daring manner to such an high ranking officer. Never did Vallabhbhai yield to such unjust European officers. He would emit fire against them.
Vallabhbhai, after waiting for ten days published a pamphlet on the subject and distributed in the villages throughout Gujarat. The movement against forced labour gathered momentum. Ultimately, the evil practice of forced labour ceased to operate.

In the very first year of his municipal career and when he was elected as the secretary of Gujarat Sabha, bubonic plague broke out in Ahmedabad. It spread like a conflagration killing hundreds of people everyday. It was a challenge to the sense of responsibility of Vallabhbhai who headed the Sanitary Committee. Immediately, he organised an anti-plague campaign with scores of disciplined and devoted volunteers to help the people. Everyday, he visited different parts of the city to see that streets were cleaned properly and the garbage cleared from everywhere. A friend warned Vallabhbhai of the danger of himself catching the disease and offered him accommodation away from Ahmedabad. Vallabhbhai turned down the offer and said, 'I know what it is to be attacked by bubonic plague. I was a victim when I lived in Godhra in 1900. In any case I prefer to die serving the people than live in safety when they expect me to be with them.'
A mass inoculation camp was organised. Vallabhbhai had to spend many sleepless nights without regular food. No doubt, his hard work helped the people but it broke his health. In April 1918, he suffered with high fever and stomach trouble for two months. It was characteristic of Vallabhbhai that though he was laid up, he never stopped looking the files of his Sanitary Committee. Due to over-strain during this period, he developed chronic constipation and piles from which he suffered for the rest of his life. Though, Vallabhbhai lost his health, he gained the affection of the people which paved the way to true leadership. Vallabhbhai's anti-plague campaign made him so popular that in subsequent tragedies to which his native province Gujarat was a prey, people looked to him with confidence to organise relief measures. No single man in our big country organised and with unfailing success as many and as extensive relief measures in natural calamities as he had done.\(^\text{25}\)

Another serious calamity that occurred in Gujarat required the devoted services of Vallabhbhai. Gujarat had torrential rains and floods on 23rd July 1927.

Vallabhbhai made no delay in organising the relief parties to provide shelter and food to the homeless people. He arranged communal kitchens, appealed to the merchants to supply rice and pulses, erected tents and bamboo structures covered with tarpaulin and provided them food and clothes. Many parts of Baroda and Kathiwada also became victims of flood. Kaira District, his own political stronghold had the hardest hit. Many families were rendered homeless and destitute. Vallabhbhai went personally to help and comfort the bereaved and distressed. As D.V. Tahamankar writes, "It was a measure of the public's confidence in Vallabhbhai that a single appeal from him in the Navajivan ... brought quantities of grain, sugar, paraffin and cloth for distribution."26

Vallabhbhai appealed to the government of Bombay to sanction a large amount from the Famine Relief Fund for the purpose of bringing flood affected lands under cultivation and rebuild the homes. Sir Chunilal Mehta, the Finance Minister appreciated the suggestion of Vallabhbhai and sanctioned a loan of Rs.1,30,00000 for

26. op. cit., p.67.
this purpose. Presenting a statement of expenditure on flood relief in the Bombay legislature, Sir Chunilal Mehta paid a warm tribute to Vallabhbhai's promptness in organising relief. 'In the absence of Gandhi, he said, 'Vallabhbhai took his place and discharged his duties most creditably.'

Impressed by the phenomenal services rendered by Vallabhbhai, Mr. G.T. Garatt, special officer in-charge of flood relief wanted to recommend him for some honour or title. Vallabhbhai humbly wrote, 'Thank you for your kindly thought. My colleagues and I take delight in serving our people, which we consider our highest reward and privilege. However, I value your spontaneous appreciation of our work more than any formal honour or title.'

Kaira No-rent Campaign:

The heavy rains of 1917 in Kaira District damaged the standing crops. Crops had failed for years and it

27. Ibid., p.68.
28. Ibid.
created the unusual phenomenon of a 'green famine'. The survival of the cattle was doubtful. No relief measures came forward from the government immediately. The law entitled the farmers either for exemption from or postponement of payment of land-tax if the yield was less than 25 % percent. But the government assessed the crop at 48 % percent in all villages except 103; the remaining 500 villages had to pay full tax.

All that was immediately called for was the postponement of collection of land revenue dues for a year. But it was not done. Those who talked on behalf of the agriculturists were mostly Lawyers and political agitators from cities. They argued that if the government accepted the demands of the peasants, it would be the success for the agitators and the decline of their prestige. Therefore, it had become a prestige issue.

On the 15th November 1917, the peasants submitted a petition requesting the government to postpone the recovery of land revenue as the crop was less than 25 percent. They also suggested that the poorer agriculturists i.e., those who paid less than Rs.30/- as land revenue
and, in particular, the backward class people should be exempted from payment of tax.

The Collector announced his decision that land revenue collections from 104 villages would be postponed. This order was not immediately communicated to the affected areas. In some villages, the revenue officers started harassing the people. The agriculturists of Kathalal village protested against payment of tax. But this had no desired effect. Therefore, the people separately approached Vallabhbhai with the request; 'Help us, you have a powerful voice and the government will listen to you'. Vallabhbhai replied; 'I shall see the crops myself and if what you say is correct, I shall request Gandhiji, to take up your fight'. On seeing, he was convinced of the injustice and reported to Gandhiji, who suggested the people to offer non-violent resistance if they were prepared to undergo the hardships.

Vallabhbhai launched his battle with full vigour. Here was an opportunity for Vallabhbhai to plunge into active politics. Soon, he presented to the government a petition signed by 18,000 peasants. He demanded a public
enquiry and an investigation of facts under an independent arbitrator. The petition was not properly heeded to by the government and the commissioner threatened the peasants that the tax would be recovered with full force of law.

Though Gandhi agreed to lead the movement, he put a condition that at least one of the workers of Gujarat Sabha should accompany him and devote all his time to the campaign until it was completed. No one else except Vallabhbhai was prepared for this, much to Gandhiji's delight. Vallabhbhai abandoned his Western dress and took to Indian attire and donned the dhoti, long shirt, short-coat and the Bangalore cap to inspire confidence in people and to show that he was one among them. It was a change not only in his dress but also in his eating and drinking habits. Vallabhbhai would walk from village to village, talking to them freely, cutting jokes, passing pungent remarks, sitting with peasants and eating whatever food was served. The only luxury he permitted himself was smoking cigarettes and Havana cigars. The sophisticated barrister was being turned into a pious peasant. All these had a
magic spell over the peasants and united them in their struggle against the government.

Vallabhbhai divided the workers of Gujarat Sabha into groups and each group was allotted a certain number of villages for thorough investigation of the conditions. Gandhiji himself investigated the conditions in 30 villages, and Vallabhbhai with his helpers within two weeks covered 425 villages out of 600 and prepared detailed reports and presented to the government. Exemption from payment of taxes was demanded. On the basis of these reports, Gandhiji wrote to the Collector. 29

The Commissioner challenged these facts mentioned in the report presented by Vallabhbhai and replied, 'the collector of the district is right. He has the real interest of the cultivators at heart'. It was quite evident that government was determined not to yield. Therefore, the battle became inevitable.

On 22nd March, Gandhiji inaugurated the 'struggle' at Nadiad. 30 On the same day, 200 peasants signed the

29. See Narahari D. Parikh, op.cit., p.65 for the text of Gandhiji's letter to the Collector.
30. Ibid., p.69, for an inspiring and rousing speech of Gandhi.
pledge of the struggle and the number of signatures increased each succeeding day. An interesting incident occurred on the day after this meeting which showed how some of the government officials were terribly afraid of yielding to his pungent, blunt, forthright and decisive arguments. The Tahsildar of Kapadvanj Taluka charge-sheeted Shah Bholabhai Rupji on the ground that he carried on propaganda in many villages in favour of this no-revenue campaign. On the day that Shah Bholabhai Rupji appeared in the court and when the case was called, Vallabhbhai stood up as the Barrister representing him and submitted a reply on his behalf. When the Tahsildar saw Vallabhbhai standing up, he was non-plussed and when he heard the reply, he said at once that no offence had been committed and Bholabhai could go. After this, at Vallabhbhai's instance, Bholabhai enquired if it was an offence to advise people not to pay land revenue. To this the Tahsildar immediately replied, 'No, you can say what you like.'

Vallabhbhai had to take the heavy burden of leading the battle on his shoulders as Gandhiji had to go to Indore to preside over the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan.

31. Ibid., pp.70-71, for an interesting text of Vallabhbhai's reply submitted to the court.
Vallabhbhai convened a meeting of the agriculturists of the district at Nadiad. In a characteristically fighting speech, Vallabhbhai warned; "This fight will act as a spark which will set the whole country a fire. Happiness cannot be attained without undergoing trials and tribulations, and if per chance, you get happiness easily, it does not last very long. A state ought to be proud of a people who are strong and determined. There is nothing to be gained from the loyalty of a cowardly and cringing public. The loyalty which you get from a fearless and self-respecting people is the loyalty which a government should welcome... The brave man who has inspired this fight, however, is capable of converting the cowardly into the bravest of persons, and in India, Kheda district is the land of bravemen... But it is only if you are prepared to face hardships now and get the government to change its policy, that you can remove this source of hardship for all time."32

The government issued notices to the defaulters to pay the tax with fine. None responded. Land worth thousands of rupees was confiscated. The confiscation

notices were issued and Vallabhbhai told them to ignore them. The officers threatened them with auctioning their cattle, ornaments, utensils and other household goods. Vallabhbhai had to go from village to village to keep their morale high and strengthen their determination to stand by their pledges. Gandhiji was making a close study of Vallabhbhai on whom he had placed great faith and reliance.

It is worth noting here that neither Vallabhbhai nor Gandhiji had strained the relations with any officials. Without the slightest hostility against the government, they led the Kheda Satyagraha. Mr. Pratt, the Commissioner appreciated the courtesy of Vallabhbhai and Gandhiji and invited them with their people for a meeting. Nearly 2000 agriculturists attended and Gandhiji sent his trusted lieutenant. The Commissioner made a long interesting ironical speech, in which he threatened the agriculturists to pay the dues of land revenue, not heeding to Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai since their leaders were not the ultimate sufferers but they themselves. The commissioner tried to wean the peasants away from

33. Ibid., pp.74-77 for the full text of the speech of the Commissioner.
Gandhiji's and Vallabhbhai's influence. The farmers were unperturbed by the threats and exhortation of the Commissioner.

Gandhi had to leave for Bihar and again the whole responsibility of maintaining the enthusiasm of the people was entrusted to Vallabhbhai. Vallabhbhai, working day and night restlessly, giving guidance to the entire district by means of distributing pamphlets was most successful in holding the enthusiasm of the people high. Vallabhbhai, during Gandhiji's absence, kept the flame of Satyagraha burning and the spirit of the peasants alive.

The government fully realised that the people, under the magic spell of Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai would never yield. Soon after the return of Gandhiji from Bihar to Nadiad Taluka, the Mamlatdar met him and suggested that the tax would be collected only from those who could afford. This was what Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai had been fighting for. It was a victory to the peaceful resistance organised by Gandhiji and

34. Ibid., p.85 for the text of inspiring and thought provoking pamphlets.
supervised by Vallabhbhai. At last Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai issued a pamphlet and the great Kheda Satyagraha which was the first popular struggle of its kind in the whole of India was called off.

Vallabhbhai too with his participation in the Kheda Satyagraha was benefitted much. He imbibed many qualities of leadership by coming in direct contact with Gandhi. It was this Satyagraha which gave him an opportunity to plunge into active politics for the first time. It was here that he could come in close contact with peasants and study their mind and problems. He could understand fully the nature of the cruel bureaucratic British government in India. He could learn the art of taming the hard masters the British were. He could experiment and test the efficacy of non-violent Satyagraha of Gandhiji and was convinced that it had the power of moving the mountains. He got valuable training in the technique of Gandhiji's Satyagraha with which he could fight the foreign rulers later. According to I.N. Sarin, "Success at Kaira paved
the way for success at Bardoli and facilitated the rise of Vallabhbhai to the unique position of the Sardar of India. 35 Referring to the part played and the valuable training received by Vallabhbhai from Gandhiji during Kheda Satyagraha, Narahari D.Parikh writes, "The qualities of leadership were innate in Vallabhbhai, but in his campaign he worked as a soldier. He spoke seldom. He watched closely Gandhiji's method of work. He observed carefully the way in which he carried on his correspondence with officials and conducted his discussions with them; he observed the way in which he kept up the morale of the people and tested their mettle;... Thanks to the lessons he learnt and the training he received during this campaign, he was able to relieve Gandhiji later completely of anxiety regarding Gujarat." 36

It was during the Kheda Satyagraha that Gandhiji discovered Vallabhbhai and a life-long relationship and mutual affection and love developed between the two. In the words of Gandhiji himself: "A leader's skill is judged by the competence in selecting his assistants for

35. op.cit., p.23.
36. op.cit., p.73.
the execution of his plans. Many people were prepared
to follow my advice, but I could not make up my mind
as to who should be my deputy-commander. I then thought
of Vallabhbhai. I must admit that when I met Vallabhbhai
first, I could not help wondering who this stiff-looking
person was and whether he would be able to do what I
wanted. But the more I came to know him, the more I
realised, that I must secure his help. Vallabhbhai too
has come to the conclusion that although he has a
flourishing legal practice today and is doing very
important work in the municipality, he must become a
whole time public worker and serve his country. So he
has taken the plunge. If it were not for his assistance,
I must admit that this campaign would not have been
carried through so successfully.”

The Kheda Satyagraha has a special significance
not only in the history of Gujarat but also in India's
Satyagraha movements. It laid the foundation of an
awakening among the peasants of Gujarat. The peasants
of Gujarat vindicated their right to be consulted
before any official estimate was to be done.

It is worth noting here that though, Vallabhbhai became an admirer and follower of Gandhiji, he never became a blind follower of Gandhiji. But being a great disciplinarian and a brave soldier he carried out the orders of his commander Gandhiji. G.V. Mavalankar, an eminent lawyer and a close associate of Vallabhbhai and also the Vice-President of Gujarat Sabha writes, "I must here mention that this does not mean that he became a blind follower and never differed from Gandhiji. His quality of opposing all that does not appeal to him and maintaining his own against anybody was still there, perhaps maturer than before. At the same time, he was a great disciplinarian and a brave soldier who would carry out the orders of his commander without any consideration of risk or consequences."  

Labour Strike in Ahmedabad:

When Gandhiji was touring Kheda district to have a first hand knowledge of the failure of crops, he had to solve the conflict between the Textile Industrial owners

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and the labourers. Over the issue of their bonus, the labourers were on agitation. A tribunal was appointed to determine the extent of increase in salary, with Collector as President, Gandhiji, Vallabhbhai and others as the representatives of the mill workers.

Gandhiji had to encounter serious impediments and swallow insults and had to go on fast to settle this problem.

This incident gave Vallabhbhai another opportunity to work very close with Gandhiji and learn valuable lessons from him. He keenly observed how Gandhiji, in securing justice to workers, maintained his equanimity of mind and harmonious relation, love and affection with workers as well as mill-owners.

First World War and Recruitment of Indians:

Another memorable work done by Vallabhbhai during the Kheda Satyagraha was the recruitment of Indians to the British army.
When the Kheda Satyagraha was in progress, the First World War had reached a critical stage. At the behest of the Viceroy, Gandhiji persuaded the Gujarat Sabha to recruit members for the war. Gandhiji knew that he would be successful in recruitment if he won the support of Vallabhbhai for it. But the people who were antagonistic to the British government refused to cooperate with Vallabhbhai and Gandhiji and support the British government.

Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai took a tour of Gujarat to recruit the people. During this tour, Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai lived mainly on a diet of roasted and powdered groundnut, gur, bananas and the juice of two or three lemons. Sometimes, Vallabhbhai cooked for himself and Gandhiji.

At last, their unceasing and restless efforts bore fruits. Many people came forward to join the army. This was another occasion for Vallabhbhai to come closer with Gandhiji and to have training under him in the technique of 'Satyagraha'.
Flag Satyagraha:

In 1920, the Congress adopted the tricolour flag with 'Charakha' (wheel) in the centre as the National Flag. It represented the hopes and aspirations of the Indian people, but to the Britishers, it represented a symbol of revolt.

In August 1922, the Jabalpur Municipality flew the National Flag in its office premises to welcome Hakim Ajmal Khan, President of that year's Congress. The government considered the flying of Tricolour Flag as an insult to the Union Jack. This news travelled to London and the government of India was seriously warned against the recurrence of such things. Things worsened on the anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy which was observed on 13th April all over India with processions and meetings at which the National Flag was prominently displayed. The police pulled it down and trampled it. The local Congress Committee strongly reacted to this wanton insult to the National Flag and started Satyagraha, organising processions with the flag. They were arrested and their flags confiscated.
When the movement spread to Nagpur, Seth Jamnalal Bajaji, a millionaire follower of Gandhiji and treasurer of the Congress led a procession with the Tricolour on the streets where British officials lived. The working committee of the Congress made this an All-India issue and its appeal brought volunteers from all parts of India. At the behest of the working committee, Vallabhbhai sent bands of volunteers from Gujarat. Bajaji was immediately arrested and awarded the rigorous sentence of two years' hard labour. It became a prestige issue and the All-India Congress Committee considered Vallabhbhai as the most suitable person to lead this movement to success and therefore it requested him to take charge of the Satyagraha. When Vallabhbhai received the call, he told his friends: 'Now my place is alongside Jamnalalji's!' Soon, he set out for Nagpur on June 22nd to take charge of Satyagraha. After studying the situation in Nagpur city, he wrote to Congress Committee in various provinces and volunteers poured in to offer Satyagraha everyday. His brother Vithalbhai who was not a believer in Satyagraha also joined him at Nagpur but worked behind the scene.
With Vallabhbhai as the leader, the Satyagraha was continued, with great force and fervour. Nagpur jail was overflowing with prisoners and they had to be sent to Akola jail. Vallabhbhai won the support of the local people. The National Flag and Satyagraha haunted the hearts of Europeans day and night and in it they saw the beginning of the end of their rule. The Governor Sir Frank Sly was fully convinced that Vallabhbhai and his forces would never yield. Vallabhbhai intensified the Satyagraha and threatened that he would invite women also from all-over India including Kasturba. He demanded that the order should die a natural death and all the Satyagrahis should be released. The authority had considered that the procession of volunteers with Tricolour was a provocative act and a revolt.

Sir Moropant Joshi met the Patel brothers to find out some way to break the deadlock. It was agreed that the procession would be allowed to pass through the civil lines, the citadel of the European population on the condition that police authorities were informed in advance of the march and the route to be followed. This is what Vallabhbhai and his people wanted. They, therefore readily agreed and led a peaceful and orderly
procession carrying the National Flag on August 18th.

There was an unnecessary delay in releasing prisoners. Vallabhbhai gave an ultimatum on September 2nd that he would revive Satyagraha unless the prisoners were released within twentyfour hours. The government was afraid of Vallabhbhai's threat, for he meant what he said. All the prisoners were, however released immediately.

Speaking on the heroic qualities of Vallabhbhai, D.V.Tahamankar says, "Good general as he was, Vallabhbhai believed in attacking the enemy with massive force; that is why he asked all provinces to send volunteers and saw to it that the flow from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bengal, United Provinces and other parts of the country was maintained. The Flag Satyagraha once more proved that Vallabhbhai, although a stubborn fighter where a principle was involved, was also ready to accept an honourable compromise." 39

Vallabhbhai emerged as a consummate organiser in this Satyagraha. The efficacy of Satyagraha as a weapon

39. D.V.Tahamankar, op.cit., p.71
for fighting the British bureaucracy, bulging with pride and vanity of imperialism, had been proved at last.

Lord of Borsad:

Soon after the successful Flag Satyagraha of Nagpur, Vallabhbhai was invited to tackle a classical case at Borsad, his own taluka. The people of Borsad were facing the savages of highway dacoits and outlaws. The dacoits seemed to have been operating under a licence from the police. The government posted a special police force to investigate and discover the criminal party and imposed a punitive tax to the extent of the cost of maintenance of the special police. The people had to pay Rs. 240,074 a year for the misdeeds of the police.

Vallabhbhai was requested to come to their rescue. After a thorough investigation, he discovered that the criminal party was no other than the Police Superintendent himself. He advised them to resist payment of the tax provided they were prepared to undergo the necessary sacrifice and remain non-violent throughout the struggle.
The people followed his advise and resisted payment of tax. The government attached their property and forfeited lands. The people did not yield. Vallabhbhai, in a public meeting in Bombay, in his speech attacked the conduct of the police at Borsad and supported it by reading extracts from confidential papers of the government which proved beyond doubts that the police officers helped Ali a notorious robber to commit robbery and murders. Immediately the payment of tax was withdrawn. Again, it was the triumph of Vallabhbhai and the people.

Due to the stupendous organising capacity and ingenuity in handling such a dacoity case successfully, Gandhiji called Vallabhbhai the 'Lord of Borsad'. In this case also, Vallabhbhai showed his robust commonsense, and astute handling of problem with spectacular discipline and proved himself a consummate organiser.

Bardoli Satyagraha:

After Vallabhbhai’s success in Kheda, Nagpur and Borsad Satyagrahas, his prestige went up. Again in 1928,
there was a call to him from the people of Bardoli and it was at Bardoli that he reached the pinnacle of his popularity.

It is an indubitable fact that the British government had attached much importance to the collection of land revenue itself. In fact, it was the bedrock of provincial finances. Nearly 40 per cent of its total income came from land revenue itself. Even a slight challenge to the right of the government to assess, impose and collect it from the people of India in any area would not only enrage the government, but strike at its financial roots and affect the administration vitally.

In the Bombay Presidency, the land revenue assessment was subject to review every thirty years. The assessment was due in 1926. A Deputy Collector of Surat, Shri Jayakar was the Assessment officer and he recommended 30 percent increase in land revenue assessment in the whole taluka. The Settlement Officer Mr. Anderson gave effect to this. This worked out to an increase in the land tax from 5.14 lakhs to 6.7 lakhs for the next thirty years. To make a show of generosity
and fairplay, the government reduced the increased tax to 22 percent.

But, even this increase of 22 percent was not justified for the income from land had not increased much and whatever little increase there was, was mainly due to the shedding of their sweat. The increase was completely unjustified and would hit heavily the smaller peasants. Therefore, a small group of peasants appealed to their leader to challenge the increased assessment. Vallabhbhai felt that the peasants had a reasonable prima facie case, but he did not give his cold shoulder. He asked them, "you go back to Bardoli. If the agriculturists are prepared to withhold not merely the increase in the land revenue but the whole of the revenue and if they are prepared to face all the dire consequences that would undoubtedly ensue, I am willing to come."\(^40\)

After a week, the deputation returned and told Vallabhbhai that there was unanimity and keenness about

\(^{40}\) Narahari D. Parikh, *op.cit.*, p.303.
offering Satyagraha. Only when he got this promise, Vallabhbhai decided to help them. But, he being a devoted and staunch follower of Gandhiji, he could not launch the struggle without the wise counsel and blessings of Gandhiji. Vallabhbhai explained Gandhiji all the facts and convinced him that their case was just and genuine. Gandhiji gave his blessings saying, "Well then, there is nothing more to be considered. Victory to Gujarat."41

Vallabhbhai, visited personally the villages, and found the people of Bardoli gentle and meek and would submit to authority easily. Vallabhbhai was faced with a challenging problem of converting the meek and weak lambs into tigers and infuse confidence in them. He had to unite Hindus and Muslims. He had to settle down differences between Hindus also which was really an uphill task for him. Vallabhbhai had an uncanny sense of measuring the strength of the opponent and of anticipating every move of his and therefore he easily expected the hardships involved in this problem.

On 4th February, in Bardoli, he addressed a conference which was attended by the farmers of nearly 80 villages. He told them that he had no doubt as to the justice of their case, but he was not sure of their strength. He further said, "I shall stand by the side of anyone who is prepared to take risk... This is not a question which concerns only one taluka. It concerns many talukas and many districts. If you lose, all will suffer."  

The reasons that the revenue officers gave to justify an increase in the land revenue were based on wrong information or assumptions. On 6th February 1928, Vallabhbhai addressed a letter to the Governor of Bombay requesting him to order a fresh enquiry as the increase was arbitrary and unjust and to postpone the recovery of the revised land tax. He argued the case of farmers point by point. Vallabhbhai, in his reply mentioned that he was not much worried about the tax on the land of the rich but was particularly worried about the plight of the poor agriculturists.

42. Narahari D. Panch, op.cit., p.304.
43. Ibid., p.298, for nine reasons.
44. See D.V.Tahamankar, op.cit., pp.98-99 for the interesting reply given by Vallabhbhai. He has replied point by point.
The government gave Vallabhbhai a curt reply that his letter had been sent to the Revenue Department for official consideration and disposal and after eleven days, the Secretary of the department wrote to him rejecting the proposal of Vallabhbhai in toto and the government had decided to go ahead with the revenue collection.

On 12th February, Vallabhbhai met the people of Bardoli. Meanwhile, the people who had not let the grass grow under their feet had further discussed the question of non-payment amongst themselves and actually commenced taking signatures to a tentative pledge of non-payment of assessment.

Then Vallabhbhai addressed them; "I will ask you to think twice before you take the plunge. Don't derive comfort from the feeling that you have as your leader a fighter like myself. Forget me and forget my companions, fight if you feel that you must resist oppression and injustice. Do not take the plunge lightly. If you miserably fail, you will fall not to rise again for several years, but if you succeed you
will have done much to lay the foundations of Swaraj. Now I am going to ask you to take charge of the resolution, you will move it and you will second and support it. None of us will speak on it. It will be the expression of your own free will and choice." It was how Vallabhbhai gave full freedom to the people and tested their true opinion and courage. As a wise leader, he did not force upon them any opinion.

Vallabhbhai convened a conference of the peasants and told them, "... In the circumstances I advise you to refuse payment of the whole assessment so long as the government do not come to terms. ... The mightiest tyrant must bend if the people are determined to put up with suffering... It is possible that Government might pick up the leading men amongst you first to set an example. Government might first confiscate the lands of those who move the resolution today. If you are sure that these things will leave you unshaken, take up and fight the good fight."^45

46. Ibid., pp.51-52.
Thus he infused confidence in them, cautioned them against all the future dangers and encouraged them to fight bravely. Again, he exhibited here the quality of a wise leader who can foresee the future developments and dangers.

After listening to his address, the following resolution was passed by the peasants of different villages, "This conference of the people of Bardoli taluka resolves that the revision settlement in Bardoli is arbitrary, unjust and oppressive and advises all the occupants to refuse payment of the revised assessment until the Government is prepared to accept the amount of the old assessment in full satisfaction of their dues or until the Government appoints an impartial tribunal to settle the whole question of revision by investigation and enquiry on the spot."  

Vallabhbhai thus launched the battle. He devoted all his time and energy for organising the peasants belonging to different places and communities. He

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47. Ibid., pp. 52-53.
injected in them the spirit of rising to the occasion. He would exhort, admonish, advice and humour them drawing on the Hindu epics. He encouraged them, ridiculed them but at the same time infused confidence and hopes in them. He organised a publicity department to issue and distribute free his speeches in pamphlets and also a daily news bulletin.

Vallabhbhai gave utmost importance to the organisation and discipline of villages. In fact, during Bardoli battle only, he came to be known for his sense of organisation and discipline. He advised the peasants, "organise your village and you will set an example to others. The campaign has begun. Every village must now be an armed camp. The news from every village must reach the taluka headquarters daily and punctually and every instruction from the headquarters must promptly be obeyed. Discipline and organisation mean half the battle. Government have at the most one Patel and one Talati to every village. For us every adult in the village must be a volunteer." 48

48. Ibid., p.60.
Vallabhbhai mobilized effectively his forces for a peaceful and non-violent campaign. He had organised more than 80,000 people from eighty different villages with different castes, colours and religion into one compact unit. At this time he received a letter from the Governor-in-Council saying that the Government had fixed lower rates than those recommended to them by their officers and that they were not prepared to make any concession and that if the people of Bardoli default in the payment of revenue, acting "on their own or yielding to the advice of persons from outside, they would have to suffer the consequences."49

Vallabhbhai was shocked and pained at his being called an outsider. While thanking the government for their threats, he wrote:

"you regard me and my colleagues as outsiders. I am helping my own people and am bringing to light your misdeeds. You are forgetting that you speak on behalf of a Government which is composed mainly of outsiders. Let me assure you that though I claim to belong as much to Bardoli as to any other part of India, I have to come to Bardoli at the request of the distressed people of the Taluka, and it is open to them to tell me to clear out at any moment. How much nicer had it been if they had it in their power equally easily to dispense with this administration of foreigners which has been sapping their vitality and which is maintained in power by force of arms."50

49. Ibid., p.62.
He appealed to the people to stop or postpone all marriages and such other past-time. He also told them that the prestige of India lay in their hands. The Government could not swallow these fiery comments and insults. Therefore, on 15th February, they fired their first shot by serving notice on fifty Banias to pay the revised land revenue within ten days. Banias were considered to be weak and mild and therefore the Government were hopeful of their paying the tax. But, to the astonishment of the government only two Banias paid.

Vallabhbhai infused courage in peasants who were much worried when the government started selling their lands. He said:

"... let them rest assured, that neither government nor a traitor coming forward to purchase the land can swallow the land. It is like arsenic sure to recoil on them. Land is not worth more than sacred pledges or self-respect. There are thousands in this country who are quite landless. The land of many who owned it was washed away by the last year's floods and it is covered with sand-heaps. If Gujarat bravely withstood that calamity sent by a heavenly power, let Bardoli bravely go through this sent by an earthly one and keep to its pledge."51

In another meeting, he told women of the Raniparaj to greet the officials by offering their bangles to wear. He said "If they come to attach your property, greet them bravely and offer them your bangles and let them wear them if they like."\textsuperscript{52}

Being a peasant, he was very proud of himself and gave peasants a very high place. Once he said, "If anyone is fit to walk with his head erect on this earth, it is the peasant. He is the producer, the others are parasites."\textsuperscript{53} Thus Vallabhbhai gave a fitting compliment to the peasants.

It may be noted that perhaps in Bardoli, Vallabhbhai came across ideal men and women and that is why all references to the peasants in his speeches were full of melting pathos and as Mahadev Desai says "Every burning word he spoke full of rage and full of grief."\textsuperscript{54} Vallabhbhai had no doubt; that the peasants had a certain faith in God which kept them loyal to their

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p.99.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p.105.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p.104.
cause and fulfill their pledges. As Mahadev Desai writes, "Indeed these simple folk vivified and gave form and shape to the Sardar's latent faith in God." Once Gandhiji said, 'Vallabhbhai found his Vallabh (God) in Bardoli'. He inculcated in them such an enthusiasm and courage that had never seen before. Gandhiji and others were astonished to see the revolutionary changes brought in the Bardoli people by unceasing efforts of Vallabhbhai. The Bardoli fight was the first nail in the British coffin. Vallabhbhai in many of his sharp and fearless speeches asked them to shed fear and cowardice and learn to fight as heroes and lions.

Vallabhbhai, with vision and foresight united women also and made them to support and cooperate with the battle and play a vital part in it. He appealed to them to keep up high morale of the men and inspired them to fight till the last drop of their blood. He also told them not to be disheartened by the plunder and placate of their land, cattle and other household materials.

55. Ibid., p.107.
Vallabhbhai, being a great organiser organised his forces on military pattern. Almost a war atmosphere was created. Five ashrams and Chhavnis (volunteer camps) manned by trained volunteers were opened at different centres to discipline, guide and enthuse the peasants. To use Burke's picturesque phrase, a people who were 'but in the gristle' only the other day had suddenly 'hardened into the bone of manhood'. Many volunteers were collected from all places of Gujarat and were posted to different camps. He appealed for funds which spontaneously poured in not only from Gujarat but also from all over India.

As a shrewd person, he realised that the Government could only function in villages through Patels and Talatis - the village officers. Therefore, he decided to win over them to paralyse the village administration. He appealed to them to cease their cooperation with the brute government. He assured them that they would be reinstated with additional honours when Swaraj was attained. He ridiculed the way they allowed themselves to be used by the Government.
The Government intensified its brutal activities. It issued notices of fines and confiscation of land. The people remained unperturbed. The Government started confiscating the lands of defaulters. A land worth Rs.40,000 was attached to recover a tax of Rs.700/-.

Nearly 14,000 acres was sold in auction. He was blazed with indignation. He assured the people that their lands would be restored to them for their victory was certain. He warned the Parsis who had purchased the land not to cultivate the land against the will of their brothers, otherwise, they would be inviting trouble.

To crush them further, the government started attaching the cattle. The local officials refused to perform this dirty work. In desperation, the government employed Pathans from Bombay. The Pathans were known for their strength, brutal ways and turbulent nature. They were agents provocateurs. Since, there were no buyers of buffaloes, butchers were imported and sold them for a song. A Satyagrahi composed a lampoon which became so popular that it was sung in every public meeting. The song runs as follows:
"Pathans to the right of them,
Pathans to the left of them,
Pathans to the front of them,
Police at the tail of them,
Marched the Buffaloe Brigade."56

People had to look up their cattle behind their closed doors for a number of days. It is said that as many as 40,000 buffaloes were locked up. Due to lack of fresh air and sunshine, they became whitish. The people feared that they were suffering from some disease. Vallabhbhai said jokingly: 'you should be glad that they have become white; they are now white madams like the wives of the officials who come to attach your property.'57 Vallabhbhai continued to be the President of the Ahmedabad Municipality. But he resigned the Presidentship to concentrate his full attention on the Bardoli Battle.

His organisation had become a parallel Government. No Officer, nor even Collector could get a conveyance unless it was sanctioned by Vallabhbhai. It was at

this time that Vallabhbhai came to be known as the 'Sardar of Bardoli'. This appellation stuck to his name for the rest of his life.

Sir Roger Lumely, Governor of Bombay invited Sardar to a meeting and offered him the Premiership of Bombay but added that the lands confiscated from the peasants of Bardoli would not be returned. Sardar immediately replied: "Note it down that I am not going to be Premier, and also that the lands will be returned to the peasants." 58

If Sardar Patel were selfish and after power, he would have gladly accepted the lucrative position leaving the poor peasants to their fate. But he was selfless and devoted to public cause. No position or power could attract him from public cause.

The Government brought 400 police ten times more than the normal strength, to frighten the people. It

looked as though a 'Police Raj' was established at Bardoli. But it had no effect. Describing the corrupt and foul means adopted by Government to wreck the solidarity of Satyagrahis, Krishnalal Shridharani says:

"The Government struck back with all the force it could muster. It tempted several of the Indians with bribery and flattery but without anticipated results. It tried to play one Satyagraha committee against another with the intention of wrecking the solidarity of the combating group. The strict discipline of the volunteers and the vigilant eye of the leaders proved to be unsurmountable obstacle."59

Winterton, the Under Secretary of State for India, in the House of Commons admitted that Vallabhbhai had achieved 'a measure of success' but law and order were being enforced against the tenants who refused payment. Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the reactionary former Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab raised a cry in London of 'a prompt enforcement of the law of conspiracy' against Vallabhbhai and advised the government to proclaim martial law in Bardoli.

When suffering became unbearable, Vallabhbhai asked peasants to make 'hizrat' i.e., to emigrate 'enmasse'.

It is said that more than 80,000 people migrated from Bardoli to the neighbouring villages in Baroda state to escape oppressive regime of Revenue Department of the Government of Bombay. Krishnalal Shridharani writes, "The Government had come to a standstill after its shocked realization that there were very few left to be governed." This shows the extent of the oppressiveness of the British regime.

The 'Police Raj' of the British had no reason or rhyme or humanitarian considerations. Even young boys were arrested without proper reasons. Even, Vallabhbhai's mother aged over 80 was not spared. When she was cooking, the police broke into her home and knocked down the boiling pots. In some other places, they mixed stones and paraffin with rice to make it uneatable.

Everywhere, the Government's repressive measures proved to be ineffective. Sanity dawned on them ultimately. They were afraid that if Bardoli Satyagraha were to spread to other parts of India, that would be the end of British rule in India.

60. Ibid., p.101.
In the meantime, the President of the Central Legislative Assembly Vithalbhai exerted his influence with the Viceroy Lord Irwin. K.M. Munshi, a member of Bombay Legislature resigned over this issue. Sir Leslie Wilson, Governor of Bombay was also anxious to come to a compromise. The Government, therefore turned to a compromise with the people. Viceroy himself came to Surat on July 18th to discuss with Vallabhbhai. Now, it was his turn to dictate terms which were as follows:

1. Pending the enquiry, old assessment would be accepted.
2. Satyagraha would be called off once a judicial enquiry is announced.
3. All confiscated lands would be restored.
4. All Satyagrahi prisoners would be released.
5. All Talatis and Patels would be reinstated.

The Viceroy found these terms very serious and if accepted the prestige of the Government would be shattered to pieces. The Governor, therefore insisted that first the land revenue should be paid and Satyagraha be called off. It was not acceptable to Vallabhbhai and the talks came to an end and the situation became tense. Military
Officers were sent to Bardoli to fix sites for camps. The people, including Gandhiji thought that Vallabhbhai's arrest was imminent.

Soon Gandhiji visited Bardoli and was delighted to see Sardar's organisation and the high morale of peasants. The organisation was so tight that Gandhiji himself expressed that he would not go or talk there unless the Sardar ordered him to do so. He continued to say, "I cannot speak as the order of the Sardar is clear. If he had been here and asked me to speak I would have done so..."61

But abruptly, due to the tact and resourcefulness of some of the Surat members and Sir Chunilal Mehta, the senior member of the Governor's Council, the crisis was averted. It appeared that all that the government desired was that the members of the Council from Surat District should write to Sir Chunilal Mehta in the following terms: "We are glad to be able to say that we are in a position to inform the Governor that the conditions laid down by His Excellency the Governor in

his opening speech to the Council dated 23rd July will be fulfilled."  

An appeal was made to Vallabhbhai to agree to the issue of this letter. Vallabhbhai could not understand this diplomacy of Mehta and the Government, but, however, in good faith, he told Mehta that he would agree to this in case the Surat Members would sign the letter. The letter was signed and sent to the Governor who ordered the setting up of an independent judicial enquiry, release of all political prisoners, restoration of confiscated lands and reinstatement of Talatis and Patels.  

However, Vallabhbhai came to know that the diplomacy of Mehta was nothing but a face-saving device. But, Vallabhbhai won on almost all points except the compensation to the peasants for their confiscated cattle. After a thorough investigation, the Committee recommended an increase of 5.7 percent as against 22 percent originally fixed. Thus ended the glorious Bardoli Satyagraha under the able stewardship of Vallabhbhai who emerged from this as the 'Sardar of India.'

62. Ibid., p.257.
63. Ibid., pp.256-261, for details of diplomacy and face-saving device.
Referring to Bardoli Satyagraha, P.D. Saggi says, "From that day the Sardar stands for efficiency of organisation, thoroughness in handling the situation and mastery in management of big things." 64

Referring to the success of Vallabhbhai in Bardoli, Mahadev Desai writes, "One of the secrets of the Sardar's success in Bardoli was his burning love for the peasant and his overmastering passion to help him out of his woes." 65

The Bardoli Satyagraha was the third in Sardar's successful campaigns, the third milestone that he has had the honour of laying on the road to Swaraj. The Nagpur victory was the vindication of a technical right. The Borsad victory won after a short and swift campaign only redressed a local grievance and though no victory could have been more signal and decisive, the campaign because of its swiftness failed to draw the nation's attention to the extent that the Bardoli campaign had drawn.

64. P.D. Saggi, (Ed.), 'Portrait of a Patriot', op. cit., p.IV.
65. op. cit., p.104.
The Bardoli Satyagraha was significant from many points of view. In the words of Sardar Patel himself, 'The Bardoli peasants demonstrated to the world that truth and non-violence cannot be crushed even by the mightiest power'. Vallabhbhai's technique at Bardoli set a model for future campaigns and undermined the Imperial citadel. Its triumph attracted not only the nation's attention but also the whole Empire. The justice and moderation of people's demand won universal admiration. It was unique for it was fought by perhaps one of the meekest of the talukas in India. It compelled the mighty Government, pledged to crush, to yield. It was a notable triumph for both the Satyagrahis and the Government as well. It showed that Government was susceptible to the pressure of public opinion.

The Bardoli Satyagraha was unique in another sense that the leader of the campaign shed all idea of prestige and the Governor did all that he personally could to bring about peace. Even the camouflage that he seemed to have consented to was in the worthy cause of peace. That was why Gandhiji and Vallabhbhai congratulated both the Governor and the people.
Bardoli Satyagraha was a landmark in the annals of our freedom movement. It gave a new meaning and significance to the history of Satyagraha in India and led the way for the future bigger struggle. Gandhiji's dream of the spirit of non-violent resistance was fulfilled by the Sardar in this Satyagraha. As Nehru put it, 'Bardoli became the sign and symbol of hope and strength and victory of the Indian peasant.' It proved that though the object of Satyagraha was local and specific, it had an All-India application and it had an indirect bearing on Swaraj.

Above all it gave an unique opportunity for Vallabhbhai for the first time to lead the struggle independently and prove himself a consummate organiser. It projected the personality of Vallabhbhai and proved that he was a titan among men with indomitable strength and ability to lead people. "It projected him on the national scene as a man of action, clearheaded and firm of purpose and a trusted lieutenant of Gandhi."66 It

66. Durga Das (Ed.), op.cit., p.XLII.
also proved Vallabhbhai's thoroughness in handling a situation, his unfailing tact and his uncanny judgement of men—the qualities which go to make a leader—which made him not only the 'Sardar of Bardoli' but also the 'Sardar of India.' 67

67. For various interesting tributes sent on the occasion of the success of Bardoli struggle, see Mahadev Desai, op.cit., pp. 264-268.