

Sardar, Menon & the States Ministry

Six weeks before the Independence of India, the Ministry of States came into existence on 5th July 1947 with Sardar Patel as the Minister and VP Menon as the Secretary, and given the difficult mandate of dealing with the unprecedented situation of dealing with the impending lapse of paramountcy. While the Ministry was, in many ways a successor to the erstwhile Political Department in the sense that it handled the relationship between the states and the Empire, the objectives were entirely different. For the Political Department, the 'so – called internal autonomy of the states provided a convenient device for the maintenance of the feudal structure in the states as a bulwark against the movement of democracy from percolating in their domains'. The States had continued to dot the political map of India as disruptive patches, retarding the political and economic integration of the life of her people in less than two months, the Interim government had to negotiate with 562 states, covering over forty five percent of the area and a population of ninety-eight million, and ranging in importance from Hyderabad on the one hand to estates comprising a few acres in Kathiawar on the other.

It must also be mentioned that by the time the States Ministry was formed, the Political Department had already sent to the Rulers, the draft of a Standstill Agreement, but their (Political department's) proposal to call a conference of Rulers was rejected by the States Ministry, and Sardar insisted on a common Instrument of Accession in which Defence, External Affairs and Communications were ceded to the Government of India. The Ministry's White paper on Indian states, (July 5,1948)reads : ' the accession of the states to the Dominion of India was a momentous event in India's history . For over half a century, the states had been a sealed book so far as the leaders of the public opinion in British India were concerned. There were not a few who nursed the hope that, overwhelmed by the combined weight of the partition and the disruption of the states,

the Government of India would go under. In the context of these heavy odds and handicaps, the consummation of the idea of a federal India comprising both the Provinces and the States was not a mean achievement. For the first time, after hundreds of years, India became welded into a Constitutional entity'.

After consolidation and integration, the major challenge was of introducing the element of democracy and 'popular will' in the governance of these states. Before the advent of Independence, the protection of the Rulers and their dynasties was guaranteed by the Crown, both against external attack and internal revolt. However, the democratic upsurge could not be contained in the geographical areas of the former British India, and the smaller states in particular could not meet the demand for equating the position of their people with that of their countrymen in the rest of India. 'In free India, there could no room for double standard of democracy, that which applied in Provinces, and that which applied in States'

Then there was the need to look at fiscal integration of states, privy purses to the erstwhile Rulers, the question of state troops and the extension of All India Services to the States and Union of States. Both Patel and Menon emphasized that under the new Constitution, the position of Provinces and States will largely be that of equal partners, occupying the same position and with identical rights and responsibilities and thus a uniform system of federal finance became the central feature of the new relationship. With regard to Privy Purses, the challenge was to make a distinction between the expenditure on the state, and the expenses on the Rulers and their families, including expenditure on residences, marriages and other ceremonies. In general, the privy purse was calculated on the basis of 35 per cent on the first lakh of the average annual revenue of the state concerned, ten percent on the next four lakhs, and seven and a half percent above five lakhs, subject to a maximum of ten lakhs. Along with the settlement of Privy Purse, the private property of the

Rulers had to be separated from the State property in consultation with the popular ministries.

With regard to Indian states forces, the Ministry had to deal with the fifty odd states which maintained state troops, and this had been encouraged by the Crown, especially in the context of the World wars, when the British sought their support. The Standstill agreement concluded with the states at the time of their accession provided for their continuance. In the interim, these were placed under the Raj Pramukha - both in Union of States, and in states which retained their geographical identity, but ' in the exercise of this authority, they (Raj Pramukhas) were subject to any direction or instructions that may from time to time be issued by the Government of India '.

And then, there was the issue of extension of All India services to the provinces, for the first civil services examination had already been conducted, and the first batch of the IAS had been inducted on April 21, 1948 at the Metcalfe House, New Delhi. As Menon wrote 'such an arrangement will not only help to improve the administrative standards of the Unions, but also bring about greater co-operation and co-ordination between the administration of the Centre and the State.

One would have expected that a Ministry charged with so much responsibility would get recognition from the highest quarters, but that was not to be. The Ministry was too closely identified with the personality of Sardar and his trusted lieutenant Menon. And so, when Patel breathed his last on December 14, 1950, it was the beginning of the end of the States Ministry. In fact, the accolades received from all quarters, especially Mountbatten only added to the discomfiture of Prime Minister Nehru, whose relationship with Sardar,(and by default with Menon), had become quite strained. So much so that on one from this Ministry was invited to join the state funeral of the Sardar at Bombay. Menon nonetheless chartered a

plane and flew in with all the officials who had worked with him in the Ministry.

In her magisterial work VP Menon: The Unsung Architect of Modern India, the Sinologist and historian Narayani Basu, (also his great granddaughter) informs us that 'by 1951, he (Menon) began to feel Nehru's dislike more palpably. The States Ministry was still functional, but he knew that its days were numbered, and with that knowledge, came a sense of relief that India had been integrated in Sardar's lifetime'.

The premonition proved to be true, and within four months of Patel's death, the Ministry was wound up and merged into the Ministry for Home Affairs, and for the first time in over three decades, Menon was without a job !