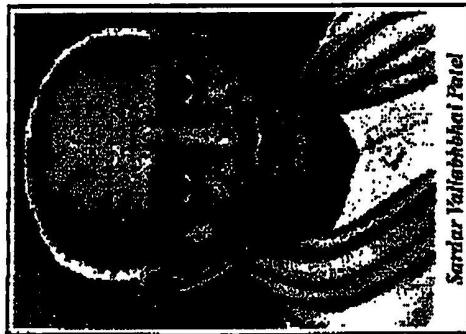


FUNDING

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Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel

Story behind installation of Sardar's statue

by Prakash Lalbhai
 Ford, NJ: The 21-foot-tall statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel - a revered freedom fighter from Gujarat - whose inauguration created an unforeseen stir in political circles back home - was installed in a quiet function on August 23 at the Royal Albert Palace here.

"This is only an installation.... formal inauguration will be done on October 31," Sardar Patel's birthday," said Albert Jassani, president, Federation of Indian Associations in the Tri-State area.

The \$250,000 project of granite ideas was scaled-down considerably and its costs may not even reach half its original scope.

As per the original blueprint, a chartered plane was supposed to fly India's freedom fighters who worked along with Sardar Patel to New Jersey on the occasion of the statue's inauguration. Also, former President Bill Clinton was expected to be present at the occasion.

On top of this, India's Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani had accepted the invitation to formally inaugurate the statue. However, Advani's planned visit jammed the grand wheel of plans. Actually, it was a play of individual egos that persuaded Advani to restrict his abroad visit to the UK alone.

As per Jassani's camp insiders, the bigwigs in the Overseas Friends of Bharatiya Janata Party were unhappy with the fact that Jassani alone would have hogged the mileage out of his tall statue. If Advani had actually unveiled the statue, Jassani would indeed have scored a major scoop in his term as the president of the Federation of Indian American Associations.

The OFBJP and others envoys of Jassani - a Gujarati Khoja Muslim - brought the statue into the vortex of communal politics and attributed under-

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 world connections to Jassani, claimed his friends, on the condition of anonymity.

Dr. Mukund Mody, who is the founding president of OFBJP, denied that anybody associated with the OFBJP was against Advani's visit. "It is not a fair allegation. We were fully supportive of Advani's visit as we firmly believed that the statue is a great honor to Sardar Patel," added Mody who claimed that he was cooperating fully to bring Advani here.

However, Mody said, he had suggested to Jassani and his associates that it would be better to postpone the inauguration to October 31 as it would give enough time to arrange high-powered meetings for Advani in Washington DC.

Since it was Advani's first visit to the US after he was elevated as the Deputy Prime Minister, Mody said, the OFBJP wanted it to be high-profile. "Also, some of Jassani's friends made it sound to be a FIA function. But it seemed to be Jassani's private function to inaugurate the statue," Mody said.

All semblance of a community's effort to honor who many see as the 'Bismarck of India' was removed when the reception committee set up for this purpose earlier this year was dissolved. The statue of the Sardar Patel Foundation that had es-

tablished the committee comprising virtually the who's who of Indian American community in the Tri-State itself is questionable, said Ramesh Patel, chairman of the National Federation of Indian American Associations, Patel faction.

Although the reception committee was dissolved due to undisclosed reasons, the project continued under Jassani's leadership.

"Jassani should have taken along everybody. But he did not...." said Patel who was among the attendees for the August 23 function.

Or rather, some said, Jassani didn't have the experience or the maturity to take along everybody. A school drop-out, he generously opened his function hall doors to community events and closed the deal of getting the president's post.

Whatever was the case, Advani dropped out of the US visit after confirming it. The official explanation was that he didn't want to stay out of the country when Gujarat elections were round the corner.

So, the Royal Albert Palace where the statue was installed were no festivities. A few lights dimly lighted up the area. There was no music nor any crowd. Only friends of Jassani were at hand for the installation of the statue.

A long line of friends came up

to profusely praise Jassani's efforts to bring the statue single-handedly. Dr. Parikh, a philanthropist and president-elect of the Indian American Forum for Political Education, said Jassani has done a "priceless contribution" to the community. Similarly, others who sang praises of Jassani included H. R. Shah, Ramesh Patel, J. P. Patel, Yashwant Patel, Mangal Gupta, Subash Dalal and Rajendra Patel.

The freedom fighter who was associated with Sardar Patel was neither given a proper introduction nor allowed to complete his speech at the Friday function. The power to his mike was abashedly switched off even before he could finish his talk. "I don't want to get into politics anymore. After my term as FIA president, I want to be left alone," a beleaguered Jassani told India Tribune when asked the story behind this tame 'installation.'

"No actor or politician, I don't want anybody to inaugurate the statue," said Jassani.

The statue of Sardar Patel who single-handedly persuaded more than 530 princely states and is seen as a symbol of India's unity couldn't bring together the Indian community. On the other hand, it only revealed how deeply the community was divided, an observer said.