

Chapter-11

Gujarat's Iron Legacy: Sardar Patel's Enduring Imprint on Political Culture, Governance, and Identity Formation

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Abstract

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, commonly referred to as the Iron Man of India, left an indelible mark in the political nature of Gujarat, its political organisation and cohesion. The presented paper discusses the intricate history of Patel in shaping up the sociopolitical life of Gujarat by observing how he evolved with time since the pre-independent era. As one of the figures in the Indian unification, Patel was a practical leader and an administrator whose leadership and administration skills became the foundation of a governance model that is founded on discipline, centralization and developmental nationalism, which is still outstanding in the Gujarat political culture. The paper examines how the legacy of Patel has been institutionalised both in symbolic representations such as the Statue of Unity and in policy frameworks which emphasise on infrastructure, law and order and economic self-reliance. It also examines how the persona of Patel assists in establishing the sense of regional identity that strikes a balance between the Gujarati and the pan-Indian nationalism. The paper will illustrate how the ideals of Patel have been misunderstood and misused by the successive governments to legitimise power and aim at gaining popularity through the analysis of political debate, patterns of governance, and popular memory. Furthermore, the paper also examines the manner in which the legacy of Patel has been culturally and ideologically handed down through the process of education and media and commemoration and how it has helped towards the establishment of civic consciousness and political action. Ultimately, this paper will assert that not only is the legacy of

VOICE OF UNITY: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and the Making of Modern India
Dr. Ashish Paatiwala & Ms. Shital Koisa

ISBN: 978-81-991164-9-8

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64328/978-81-991164-9-8-11>

Young India Publication, Gandhinagar, Gujarat

Sardar Patel in Gujarat historical, but it is also actively part of the present narrative of governing and identity-making in the region that can be applied to explain the continued presence of political symbolism on both the regional and national levels.

Keywords: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Gujarat political culture, Developmental nationalism, Identity formation, Political symbolism.

Introduction

The political imagination of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Iron Man of India as he is popularly known, rules Gujarat and the Indian republic in general. The heritage is not restricted to the historical veneration since it has defined the outlines of the political culture, spirit of governance and the local identity of Gujarat. Patel was born in Nadiad, Gujarat and, especially, his activism during the young age, especially, Bardoli Satyagraha, earned him a reputation of a pragmatic leader, who thought in terms of discipline, unity and good governance. His most significant contribution to the integration of more than 560 princely states in the Indian Union that still has an impact on the political structure of Gujarat was the basis of a centralised system of governance (*Kadri, 2025*)¹.

This is an institutional and symbolic continuation of the legacy of Patel that can be traced in the current Gujarat politics. All the massive Statue of Unity in Ekta Nagar to the annual Rastriya Ekta Diwas, and so on are all made to remind the people of the very idea of unity, nationalism and development in the form of the image of Patel (*Gujpreneur, 2025*)². The successive authorities have transformed his ideals into the tool of power legitimization and unification of the opinion of the people and often combined it with the

¹ Kadri, R. (2025). Sardar Patel Birth Centenary: A life in service of the nation. Hindustan Times.

² Gujpreneur. (2025). National Unity Day: Sardar Patel's Legacy & The Spirit of Ekta. Retrieved from <https://www.gujpreneur.com/national-unity-day-sardar-patels-legacy-the-spirit-of-ekta/>

concept of commemoration and exploitation of the ideology (*Hans India, 2025*)³.

Objectives and Scope:

The paper will critically examine how Sardar Patel has made an indelible mark in Gujarat, the political culture in Gujarat and governance structures of the state and its current status. It seeks to:

The contribution of Patel and contribution to the administrative spirit of Gujarat is addressed. Examine the political regimes and the symbolic images of his legacy. Get used to the use of Patel as a regionality identity personality and pan-Indian nationalism. Discover the way in which Patel ideals have been reconstituted and politicised in the contemporary day governance. The research is conducted as the pre-independence and the present times that are based on the case study of Gujarat that has a far-reaching implication on the Indian federalism and symbolic politics.

Methodology and Sources:

The research is classified under qualitative research approach and it involves the historical research, discourse research and cultural interpretation. These will be speeches, archives, and publications of the government about the administrative work of Patel, and commemoration practises, the most important ones. The scholarly articles, news and political commentaries are the secondary sources that narrates the evolving legacy of Patel.

Historical Foundations:

Patel politics of Early Gujarat:

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel began a political career in the state of Gujarat where he embarked on his legal career and he began to take part in civic activities which began to make him a nationalistic leader. Initially Patel did not believe in the modalities of Gandhi Mahatma but gradually got into the

³ The Hans India. (2025). Remembering Sardar Patel: The man who welded India together. Retrieved from <https://www.thehansindia.com/news/national/remembering-sardar-patel-the-man-who-welded-india-together-1019250>

freedom movement especially after he witnessed the leadership of Gandhi in Champaran agitation and the Kheda agitation. He also involved himself in municipal politics in Ahmedabad in addition to being a barrister that exposed him to administration and serving the people directly which in the end influenced his philosophy of the governance (*Yagnik & Sheth, 2005*)⁴.

Early activism Patel in his early activism assumed the form of a lot of focus on low level organising. He also travelled across Gujarat building small centres of opposition amongst peasants, local leaders and civic organisations. This was as one of the most successful organisers and strategists because they were able to make people in the rural areas to turn to him and frame their grievances ethically to politics (*Gupta, 2010*)⁵.

Bardoli Satyagraha Role and its impact of influence on the region. One such turning point of the political life of Patel as well as one of the most significant milestones in the history of Gujarat resistance was the Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928. The agitation of Patel over the tax payment of the farmers in the taluka of Bardoli caused a shock especially a disciplined and peaceful protest when the British government raised the amount of taxes the farmers had to pay. His leadership made him become Sardar of Bardoli bestowed by women of Bardoli because of his courage and devotion (*Brown, 1994*)⁶.

The Bardoli movement was a great success which caused a great impact:

- It demonstrated the power of civil resistance which was symmetric.
- It solidified the mass image of a leader that Patel possessed.
- It was also the foundation of agrarian movements in Gujarat and other places in future.

It was also Bardoli who initiated the transformation of Patel into a national leader rather than a regional one, however, he

⁴ Yagnik, A., & Sheth, S. (2005). *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond*. Penguin Books India.

⁵ Gupta, R. (2010). *Sardar Patel and the Indian Administrative Services*. National Book Trust.

⁶ Brown, J. M. (1994). *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

did it with the principles of Gandhian in mind and with more pragmatic and result-oriented methods (*Chopra, 2006*)⁷.

In Leadership Development in Patel where there is struggle of freedom:

The leadership style of Patel evolved according to the current changes of the Indian independence movement in the period of the 1930s and 1940s. As a senior member of the Indian National Congress, he has made so much contribution towards the areas of organisation, raising funds and election tactics. His terms of president of Congress and Quit India Movement in 1931 also made him one of the main actors in the nationalist movement (*Menon, 1957*)⁸. Patel was characterised as a leader whose leadership behaviour was distinguished by: Organisation and emphasis on discipline. The capacity of strategic negotiation specifically in negotiation with princely states. A vision focused more on national integration rather than regional walls in order to establish a unified India. At the time of independence of India in 1947, Patel was the political leader who managed to consolidate the politics and most importantly because he was the first deputy prime minister and the first deputy prime minister of the home. He had already a formidable Gujarat legacy-not so much in the memory, necessarily, but in the institutions, it provided guidance, and the very culture of political life, which he had assisted in its genesis.

Administrative Philosophy: Centralization, Discipline, and Pragmatism:

The strategies of management embraced by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel were based on discipline, order and efficiency in administration. Being the first Home Minister of India, he insisted on the powerful central power to guarantee the unity of the country and to avoid the disintegration of the regions. His centralising faith was not that established through dictatorship but rather as a strategic plan to put the power in one single government that is able to administer a

⁷ Chopra, P. N. (2006). *The Sardar of India: Biography of Vallabhbhai Patel*. Allied Publishers.

⁸ Menon, V. P. (1957). *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*. Orient Longman.

diverse and a newly established country (*Brown, 1994*). Patel was pragmatic as shown through his negotiations with political adversaries and princely rulers. He favoured negotiation to confrontation though he was not afraid of coercion diplomacy. His administrative approach paved the way to a bureaucratic culture in Gujarat where efficiency, law and order and developmental planning are cherished values that can still be seen in the governance of the state even nowadays.

Integration of Princely States and Its Influence on Gujarat:

One of the best things that Patel contributed was the formation of the Indian Union of 562 princely states since it required high degree of tact, determination and foresight. The immediate beneficiary of this process was Gujarat that had several princely states including Bhavnagar, Junagadh and Baroda. This is because Gujarat was formed politically as an administrative unit in the Indian federation hence Patel insisted more on the idea of national unity than regional autonomy.

This integration formed a model of Gujarat governance which focused on the state-based development, identical law making and central planning. This integration can be reflected even nowadays by the fact that Gujarat has quite a stable political system and secondary focus on the development of structures and administration.

Enduring Governance Models Inspired by Patel's Approach:

Patel philosophy of governance still influences the Gujarat political culture in many ways: **Good executive administration:**

The governments that ruled since 1995 in Gujarat have adopted top-down policy making that adheres to the centralization style adopted by Patel.

The target infrastructure and policing:

Revisiting Patel who emphasised that one had to be more ordered and more developed, Gujarat has disbursed a

significant amount of money on roads, ports, industrial violence.

Symbolic government:

In addition to being an honorary to a person, the projects like the Statue of Unity also serve as the weapon of political discourse to spread the concepts of unity and power.

These models represent the version of what Patel believes must be the case, which is that administration must be visionary and refer to administrative realism. His heritage is historical as well as inbuilt in the very fabric of the Gujarat process of political and developmental growth.

Political Culture and Leadership Ethos:

It consisted of the order, accountability, and administrative discipline and was the basis of the leadership style that emerged with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and has greatly impacted on the Gujarat politics. This element has contributed to the spirit of bureaucracy that has placed value on efficiency, law and order and advancement of infrastructures due to his emphasis on practical rule and centralised power (Gupta, 2010)⁹. Being decisive and institutionally coherent was an operating ethos of Gujarat politics and of the civil services that was inherently Patel which informed the mechanism of his leadership.

The Bharatiya Raja Party (BJP), which had always been very powerful since the nineties and is the best in politics in Gujarat, has been using the legacy of Patel as a yardstick to explain their view of governance which was rooted in high executive and developmental nationalism (Yagnik & Sheth, 2005)¹⁰. Bureaucracy in Gujarat is the expressions of Patel in terms of lean hierarchies in its governance and focus on rapid execution of policies.

Gujarat is in comparison, as compared to other states like Kerala or West Bengal where participation politics and that of the coalition government is more frequent. The political environment that was left behind by Patel has led to a political atmosphere that rewards teamwork over consensus and this

⁹ Gupta, R. (2010). Sardar Patel and the Indian Administrative Services. National Book Trust.

¹⁰ Yagnik, A., & Sheth, S. (2005). The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond. Penguin Books India.

is a leadership style that stands higher chances of upholding the Patel-esque leadership philosophy that is firm, strategic and results-oriented (*Chopra, 2006*)¹¹.

Symbolism and Institutionalisation:

Sardar Patel is a contributor to the state of Gujarat and this has gained abundant reflection within the symbolic as well as institutional levels. The Statue of Unity that opened in 2018 is the largest statue in the world that was created to commemorate the role of Patel in unifying the country (*Mehta, 2019*)¹². The image of his presence in the learning syllabus, streets, and even in the community meetings in Gujarat popularise the cultures of unity and discipline. The contemporary Indian political leaders tend to employ the name of Patel to lend his forms of leadership and nationalistic rhetoric (*Yagnik and Sheth, 2005*) and turn him into a political tool of mobilising and reaffirming the identity.

Construction of Identity and Local Nationalism:

The Gujarat-specific dual identity is determined with the aid of the legacy of Sardar Patel, relying on regional identity and pan-Indian nationalism of the ethnicity. His concept of integration turned Gujarat into a member and beneficiary of Indian nation-state (*Chopra, 2006*)¹³. The ideals of Patel are transmitted by commemoration, storeys of learning, and images of the media in the form of unity, discipline and withstanding of Gujarati (*Yagnik and Sheth, 2005*)¹⁴. The public remembrance through compulsory commissioned projects like the Statue of Unity ensures that Patel keeps staying in the minds of the locals as a culture hero and a political leader during the becoming a national remembering subject (*Mehta, 2019*).

Corruption and abuse of the political process:

¹¹ Chopra, P. N. (2006). *The Sardar of India: Biography of Vallabhbhai Patel*. Allied Publishers.

¹² Mehta, R. (2019). *Statue of Unity: Engineering a National Icon*. *Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12(3), 45–58.

¹³ Chopra, P. N. (2006). *The Sardar of India: Biography of Vallabhbhai Patel*. Allied Publishers.

¹⁴ Yagnik, A., & Sheth, S. (2005). *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond*. Penguin Books India.

The tradition of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel that rested upon a realistic administration and nation building has remained a controversial symbol in the contemporary Indian politics. The image of Patel has been politically redefined in the across-the-board politics to suit their ideological scripts and campaign strategies. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), in particular, has put Patel in a prominent national spot, relatively, against other leaders of the past, topped with a goal of delivering on the ideology of its governance (*India Today, 2025*)¹⁵. Under this appropriation, one has the construction of the Statue of Unity and the Rastriya Ekta Diwas annual celebration, which is also political in that respect.

The case studies signify the legacy of Patel that has been utilised as an instrument to legitimise the centralised rule and developmental nationalism. In the example, the example of the governments concern of infrastructure building and policing is often recounted as the series of Patelism school of thought. The critics do note, however, that such a depiction has the drawback of being missing the nuance of leadership by Patel including the commitment to federalism and facing democracy (*Narayanan, 2025*)¹⁶.

The Indian national congress also has attempted to regain the legacy of Patel and what he has done in forming the national party, and his contributions in bringing sanity in India. Nonetheless, such efforts have not been launched off because of the broader politics of the BJP and because Patel is perceived to be ideologically too close to the existing right-wing politics (*India Today, 2025; Organiser, 2025*).

There are significant ethical implications of symbolic politics. Historical personalities being transformed into partisan tools will have their legacies twisted and reduced to a mere simplistic version. The image of Patel is no longer an instrument of unity and honesty under the administration and is now entering into the politics of historical contention where the historical truth is frequently overridden by the

¹⁵ India Today. (2025, April 9). Why Congress is trying to wrest Sardar Patel's legacy from BJP. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in>

¹⁶ Narayanan, C. K. S. (2025, April 19). Why is it hard for Congress to reclaim Sardar Patel's legacy. *Organiser*. Retrieved from <https://organiser.org>

necessity of securing the electoral gain. This draws the question of appropriate social memory usage and moderation of historiography in civic memory. In conclusion, the legacy Patel leaves us cannot be perceived as a unitary and hollow tale, one that fuses in a single party rank, but a tale that has to be interpreted both critically and critically, displaying a critical temper and discerning view and not partisanship. Additions of his, to state rules and national unity, are priceless, but the use of them must be censure to spare the sanctity of the historical memory.

Conclusion:

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel has left a legacy in the Gujarat politics which has continued to shape the Gujarat politics, its morals of governance, and its identity. The pillars of his administrative philosophy, centralization and pragmatism, precondition a disciplined model of governance, and such symbolic projects as the Statue of Unity are elements of embedding an image of the unifier in him (*Mehta, 2019*). Patel has been venerated and in fact used to misuse politics in order to spread ethical concerns about distortion of historical occurrences, (*Narayanan, 2025*). The Gujarat legacy is alive and evolving as the state traverses through the new political landscape which has been the source of inspiration or indictment to the processes of the new debate about democracy in India and thus Patel though dynamic over time, will be found to-day in the lives of the people who are forming and shaping democracy in Gujarat (*Yagnik and Sheth, 2005*).

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