

Chapter-15

The Statute of Unity: A Tribute to Symbolism and Debates

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Abstract

The Statue of Unity, which opened in 2018 in honor of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, commonly known as the Iron Man of India, is not only an extraordinary construction project. It symbolizes nationalization, cultural identity and developmental ambition, but also creates the controversies of its economic price, community displacements, and political mobilization of historical memory. This paper looks at the role of the monument as a symbol of nationhood in putting Patel in cultural memory and in the way in which national monuments make leaders into a lasting icon. Meanwhile, it analyzes the scandals of the building of the statue, in which pride and progress mixed with social and ecological issues. After all, the Statue of Unity is represented not only as a monument to the leadership of Patel but also as a multi-faceted and disputed symbol of the desires and contradictions of modern India.

Keywords: Statue of Unity, Nationhood and National Identity, Cultural Memory, Developmental Ambition, Socio-political Controversy

Introduction

Monuments are always not innocent as political theorist *Sudipta Kaviraj (2010)* has commented, monuments are the face of power and imagination. This concept brings out the fact that the monuments are not just about the physical structure,

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but also about cultural memory and an expression of those things a nation prefers to exalt. This can be illustrated in a very graphic way by the Statue of Unity which was opened in Gujarat on 31 October 2018. It is 182 meters high and it beats other great symbolic structures like the Statue of Liberty and Christ the Redeemer. In addition to its record size, the statue symbolizes the technological power of India and the desire to make a great impact in the world arena (*Larsen and Toubro, 2019*).

The Statue of Unity is used to honor Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister of India. It is a persistent reminder of how important he was in uniting over 560 princely states into the Indian Union following the year 1947. His go-getter leadership and political vision not only won him the popular nickname of Iron Man of India, but also played him off to the Bismarck of India (*Gandhi, 1991*). Patel was famously referred to by Jawaharlal Nehru as the builder and consolidator of the nation, thus his legacy, according to Nehru, would always be a part of Indian history (*Nehru, 1950*). Thus, the monument can be viewed as a long-lasting contribution of Patel who will always be remembered in the political and cultural life of India.

The Statue of Unity was a huge project that had to be planned and brought to a very precise implementation. The creation of the renowned sculptor, Ram V. Sutar, the structure is a heterogeneous composition of a steel core and strength concrete with the outer layer of bronze envelope. The bronze panels were produced in China and the installation was done in India where thousands of engineers, artisans and laborers worked together to complete the project within a duration of only four years (*Patel, 1999; Brown, 2006*). It is further symbolically loaded by being close to the Narmada River, right in front of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which connects the historic mission of Patel to unite the nation with the current themes of growth and development (*Gupta, 2020*).

The Statue of Unity was introduced to people as a participatory and symbolic project. The scrap iron in their tools was collected

through the Loha Abhiyan campaign which made farmers around the country to participate in the project in a very large scale. The statue would be constructed not only using stone and metal, as Narendra Modi (2013) pointed out, but also the unity and goodwill of the people. Though much of the iron donated was not part of the structural iron, the incorporation of its use in the foundation was a very potent ceremony, as it provided the monument with a sense of popular support and legitimacy.

Monuments, as Kaviraj points out, are never dispassionate things. They not only bear the political force but the imaginative meaning as well; they entangle history, ideology, and governance. This fact is mirrored in the Statue of Unity: although the statue brings Patel to the level of unifier and places India in the world arena, it also creates controversy when it comes to its financial cost, impact on the environment, and relocation of the community, as well as the selective influence of the historical memory. By doing so the statue is not just a beautiful construction piece but a disputed landmark at the cross-section of history, growth, the political and the cultural identity.

Social thought, cultural memory and Patel.

In the collective memory of the modern India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is not only considered to have been a master strategist, but also a culture figure whose influence continues to be significant (*Brown, 2006*). Leading the unification of over 560 princely states following independence in 1947 was a political achievement in addition to a symbolic display of unity as a nation (*Chopra, 2012*). This was the breaking of the neck achievement that gave him the name of Iron Man of India because of his firm determination of consolidating and stabilizing the weak newborn republic (*Patel, 1999*). According to *Jan Assmann (2011)*, societies have an inclination to revive historical figures to a higher level than the history and make them their representatives of universal ideals. This is an indication of the legacy that Patel left behind since the latter is still recalled as a symbol of unity, perseverance, and endurance.

The image of Patel in the public has changed. In the first few years after independence, he was regarded as a pragmatic leader who collaborated with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to lead India through its painful independence process (*Brown, 2006*). Later accounts, though, have depicted him more and more as a realist and set up in opposition to the idealism of Nehru (*Desai, 2015*). This opposition strengthened the image of Patel as a little-known author of the Indian nation who was respected due to his decisiveness, pragmatism, and concentration on government matters (*Yadav, 2020*). These changing images are also indicative of the construction of an imagined community as developed by *Benedict Anderson (1983)* as national identity is maintained not only based on institutions, but also through the way the legacies of its leaders are selectively retold.

To a large extent, the way he has been remembered and celebrated has contributed to Patel remaining in the collective memory of the people of India. Monuments, rituals, even school lessons are used as anchors in which history is transmitted and remembered, what *Pierre Nora (1989)* terms *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory. In that regard, statues, memorials, and annual commemorations not only celebrate Patel but also make his legend ever-present in people's minds. But such reminiscences are never impartial. Patel has long been a local hero in Gujarat, a figure of Gujarati pride, which imparts to his memory a unique cadence on a larger national narrative (*Deshpande, 2018*). This local adoration has over the years been generally mixed up with broader nationalist histories, and ultimately resulted in the development of the Statue of Unity (*Shah, 2019*). Beyond being a national monument, the statue is a monument to the ability of local memory, politics and pride to merge to form a symbol that has a worldwide presence.

Outside politics, he has a wide influence in the cultural and moral areas. Discipline, simplicity and duty are things that ordinary citizens relate to and as a result, he is a moral guide and a political leader (*Joshi, 2020*). Such ethical framing makes

him a leader of national resilience and also one of civic duty and upright leadership. By doing so, his legacy has the room in between politics and culture, not only to be remembered as a united India, but also as a perpetual example of power, sacrifice, and integrity.

The Indian cultural memory shows the way society can uplift past personalities to icons of societal belonging and the story about Patel is one of the most bright examples. The legacy has always been renegotiated and transformed to meet changing political and social demands. The Statue of Unity is the most dramatic example of such a process that turned his symbolical meaning into an everlasting monument. This demonstrates that memory and history are not passively maintained but are very much being remade, and this guarantees that he is relevant to all generations and entrenched in the monumental landscape of the nation.

Symbolic Dimensions: Unity and Nationhood.

The Statue of Unity is not merely a building of physical characteristics; it is a representation that flows ideas of national cohesiveness, power, and identity. All elements such as its design, its location, and its incredible size have a message concerning the history of India and its future dreams. Monuments, according to *Kaviraj (2010)*, are never neutral; they are power and imagination (p. 214). By so doing, the historical impact of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is transformed into a strong, physical expression of political as well as cultural meaning.

One of the Figures that depicts the political unity.

Sardar Patel is remembered as the person who united more than 560 princely states to the Indian Union after independence in 1947, which saved the young nation that would otherwise have disintegrated (*Chopra, 2012*). This achievement made him gain the title of Iron Man of India and established himself as a part of the political consciousness of the country. The Statue of Unity embodies such a legacy and presents Patel as the nation-creator and nation-unifier as Jawaharlal Nehru (1950) referred to him (p. 6). The forward-

striding pose of the statue indicates that national unity continues to be the work in the Indian democracy and not a landmark of the past.

A Monument and its International aspirations.

The Statue of Unity is the tallest in the world, at 182 meters, topping the Statue of Liberty (93 meters) and the Christ the Redeemer (38 meters). The intentional focus on the scale accentuates the Indian goal to be listed among the major countries in the context of engineering capacities and cultural self-assurance. The construction company *Larsen & Toubro (2019)* mentioned that the project consumed 70,000 tonnes of cement, 18,500 tonnes of reinforced steel, and 1,700 tonnes of bronze cladding, which made it one of the most complicated engineering works in the Indian history. The height also allegorically represents 182 constituencies of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly, and the fame of Patel on a global scale is associated with the local and regional pride (Shah, 2019). In that meaning, the statue functions simultaneously as a nationalist and regionality monument.

Correlation of Unity and Development.

The Statue of Unity is the tallest (182 meters) statue in the world, higher than the Statue of Liberty (93 meters) and Christ the Redeemer (38 meters). This grand scale indicates an ambition of India to demonstrate its engineering capabilities as well as the confidence of its culture in the world platform. The building was constructed with 70,000 tonnes of cement, 18,500 tonnes of reinforced steel, and 1,700 tonnes of bronze clad, and it was among the most complicated engineering projects in the Indian history (*Larsen and Toubro, 2019*). The height is symbolic as it is equal to 182 seats of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly, linking the international fame of Patel to the local and regional sense of pride (*Shah, 2019*). By so doing, the statue is itself a monument of national and regional unity.

Curated Memory and Dynamics of National identity.

The statue contributes to another description of how selective memory constructs national histories as well. Although Patel was instrumental in integrating India after independence, the

manner in which he has been remembered have been interpreted to suit the current interests. He is also portrayed in opposition to Jawaharlal Nehru, who was portrayed as a realist pragmatist with the idealist vision of Nehru (*Desai, 2015*). Through the establishment of such an unprecedented monument, the state brings out such aspects of discipline, decisiveness, and order- values, which are compatible with the existing political discourses. The past according to *Sunil Khilnani (1997)* is never simply recalled as it is recreated to serve the interests of the present (p. 12). The Statue of Unity represents this redefinition, in which Patel is proposed as a long-lasting symbol of power and unity within a multicultural country.

The project of the statue was initially publicized by the Gujarat government in 2010, targeting not only to rupture the history of uniting India but also to put Gujarat on the map with the help of the world record object (*Desai, 2015; Shah, 2019*). In 2013, the chief minister at that time, Narendra Modi, laid the foundation stone, which indicated that the state was keen to turn the legacy of Patel into a monument project that will intertwine history, politics, and regional development (*Gupta, 2020*).

Unity at What Cost? Debates and Disputes

Despite the ensuing popularity surrounding the Statue of Unity as a national pride and unity symbol, the statue has encountered a lot of controversy. The project is priced above [?]3,000 crores (approximately USD 430 million), and has been questioned as economically justified, having environmental effects, the removal of local communities and with political motives. These discussions highlight the strains of monumental schemes, in which the symbolic aspirations of the scheme usually overlap--and occasionally conflict with--practical and social reality.

Monetary Repercussions and National Docket.

One of the biggest criticisms has been made towards the staggering price of the Statue of Unity. Since millions of Indians continue to live in poverty, malnourishment, and have

restricted access to education and healthcare (*World Bank, 2019*), some claim that the allocation of such a huge amount of money on a monument is questionable priorities. Economist *Jean Dreze (2018)* proposed that the money could have been better spent on welfare initiatives, rural development, or subsidies, especially in the areas affected by drought and suffering farmers. Contrary to it, the proponents argue that the statue is a long-term investment in the tourist industry and the national image, and the possible revenue is generated through job creation and the creation of income over the long term (*Larsen and Toubro, 2019*).

Environmental Concerns

The position of the statue by the Narmada River has drawn significant environmental apprehensions. It was built by deforestation and massive landscape alteration increasing the threat to the local ecosystem (*Gupta, 2020*). Opponents note that the tourist invasion also exacerbates the fragile ecology of the river and that current controversies over the Sardar Sarovar Dam nearby point to displacement of communities and environmental disturbance (*Baviskar, 1995*). In this sense, the statue has been regarded as a strategy towards development that tends to support grandeur and spectacle to the exclusion of environmental sustainability.

Dislocation and Tribal demonstrations.

One of the most vocal opponents of the project has been tribal groups in Kevadia and other neighbouring villages. The building involved acquiring agricultural land and forest cover which displaced the inhabitants and affected their normal lifestyles (*Choudhary, 2019*). The lack of proper compensation and proper rehabilitation of affected families has come under the focus of protest. Ahead of the opening of the statue in October 2018, a group of tribal factions organized protests with banners that contained the following text, We do not want a statue, we want our land (*The Hindu, 2018*). These incidents bring out the collision of national symbolism and local realities by illustrating that local communities that were nearest to the monument tend to suffer its indirect expenses.

Political and Ideological aspects.

The sculpture has received its share of criticism as being politically colored. Proclaimed in 2010 by Narendra Modi in the position of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, the project is seen by many as an endeavor to influence the political memory of India. The project however turns Patel, who has so frequently been portrayed as a practical realist and opposition to the idealism of Nehru, into a monumental figure, a move that to some has been viewed as homogenizing his legacy with the idealism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Yadav, 2020). According to scholars, this partial celebration can be seen as an intentional re-narration of the national history to attain modern political goals (Chatterjee, 2019).

The Pride of a Nation vs. The Politics of Nation.

Nevertheless, the Statue of Unity has overcome these criticisms as it has become one of the most popular tourist locations with millions of people visiting every year and enhancing the economy of Gujarat. To many, it is not a representation of extravagance but it represents a symbol of national pride and the Indian culture within the international arena (Shah, 2019). It is this duality that demonstrates that monumental projects are never solely about their concrete existence- it is also an elaborate game of pride, politics, and protest. According to historian Kaviraj (2010), monuments are the visible side of power and imagination and the Statue of Unity represents not only the vision of unity and grandeur by the state but also the debates that remain unresolved by the society concerning its cost and its effect.

Conclusion

The Statue of Unity was created to prove that a monument is much more than stone, steel, and bronze. It is a monumental ode to the history and the future of India and a tribute to the central figure in the Indian unification Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Its elevated features and global recognition are also an indication of the desire of India to stamp its presence as a confident and modern state.

But the statue is not beyond dispute. There is never neutrality about monuments, there is admiration and tension. To some it

is a national pride and inspiration, to others, it is a question of economic priorities, ecology and politics. Arguments about its price, the relocation of local populations and the selective history paint a picture of the idea of unity having its own complexities and contradictions.

Finally, rather than a monument to Patel, the Statue of Unity is a mirror of modern-day India. It represents national aspirations, social and political struggles and the struggle to come to terms with the past and present, nationalism and equality. In the same sense, similarly to the vision of Patel, it also challenges us to think about what a real unity is in a democratic and diverse nation.

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