

# SARDAR PATEL'S VISION OF A UNITED BUT DIVERSE INDIA: FROM HISTORICAL INTEGRATION TO PRESENT-DAY APPROPRIATIONS

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## Abstract

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, widely regarded as the architect of India's political integration, envisioned a nation unified not through cultural uniformity but through institutional strength and respect for diversity. This research paper explores Patel's foundational role in uniting a fragmented post-colonial landscape, particularly his strategies for integrating princely states and advocating a centralized yet cooperative federal structure. The study delves into his interpretation of nationalism as a civic, duty-bound commitment to the Indian state, rather than a homogenizing force. In the contemporary context, Patel's legacy has been reinterpreted and politically leveraged, especially by dominant political narratives seeking to promote a vision of strong central governance and cultural unity. Through an analysis of political speeches, public memorials such as the Statue of Unity, textbook representations, and policy rhetoric, this paper examines how Patel's image is used to support current nationalist and federal debates. It raises critical questions about whether these modern appropriations stay true to Patel's constitutional ideals or selectively reinterpret his vision to serve present-day agendas.

The paper tries to study the following.

1. this paper focuses on examining Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's vision of a unified yet culturally diverse India.
2. Relevance and distortion of Patel's legacy in shaping India's evolving national identity and federal structure.

**Keywords:** National Integration, Nation-Building, Contemporary Indian Politics.

## Introduction

After the end of British rule in India in 1947 and the creation of the new country of Pakistan, which was carved out of India, the country faced two main challenges: first, to integrate more than 500 princely states into the Indian Union; and second, to prevent as many princely states as possible from joining Pakistan—in other words, to maximize gains and minimize losses. Sardar Patel was one of the key leaders who played a significant role in the integrating more than 500 princely and self-ruled states into Indian union. He served as India's first deputy prime minister and home minister and his role in building a unified, yet a federal country mostly through peaceful means; earned him the title of the 'Iron Man of India', a feat unmatched in the history of the modern India and probably the world.

Sardar Patel in one of his speeches remarked that "*There is no other country in the world that is as diverse as India, and it is this unity in diversity that has made us a great nation*" (Team Newsable, 2021) but the word 'unity' here doesn't mean uniformity of the beliefs, standardization of culture, traditions, norms, ethics, value system etc. Sardar Patel laid emphasis on building a unified, yet a diverse country without tempering the pluralistic structure of the Indian society which is central to understanding his vision of nation building. The pluralistic structure of the Indian society could have served as a perfect recipe for the balkanisation of the Indian subcontinent but the strategy, policies and the ideas of Sardar Patel averted this tragedy.

His role in the freedom struggle and in mending a fragmented nation into one country/state was extraordinary, and this established him as an outstanding statesman and administrator. The challenges he faced in uniting India ideologically and territorially, and the tactics or strategies he employed to navigate through these challenges, were commendable. His indomitable spirit has left a deep imprint and a profound influence on the country. His role in nation-building has often been sidelined by mainstream scholars, media and politicians, as his contribution has been largely overshadowed by other leaders of his era.

His vision, his ideas, his humility, his operational capability, his widespread acceptance, his chivalrous leadership skills, his role in building a united, secular and diverse India brick by brick and his contribution as a statesman after

independence made him the 'best Prime Minister we never had'. He was an Iron Man with nerves of steel—his courage, his principles, his deeds, and his journey are awe-inspiring. Yet, he has never been given centre stage in modern academic discourse and many a times his actions, ideology, and principles are often misused, misunderstood, and misinterpreted.

The idea of political and territorial unification of India was unimaginable for many at the time of independence, as the Indian subcontinent was divided into hundreds of princely states. Society was fragmented into classes and the culture and language of the people varied from place to place. Sardar Patel aroused political and territorial consciousness among the rulers of the princely states, offering sympathetic counselling, offering privy purses and at times taking strict administrative measures.

The British failed to extend their jurisdiction over the entirety of India, so they introduced the scheme of paramountcy, under which the British Crown was the ultimate suzerain and the princely states were considered subsidiary allies. Under the scheme of paramountcy, the British government provided protection and managed the external affairs of its allied princely states. Thus, the nation that even the British could not fully rule or control was now being unified and this process of unification was undoubtedly a Herculean task, the weight of which could have been borne by someone no less than an extraordinary individual.

Sardar Patel's vision behind establishing the All India Services was to provide an integrated, unified administrative system for the whole of India, which has played a catalytic role in transforming the country's social fabric and has contributed to India's development. The All India Service helped the congress to negotiate with the princely states and became a backbone of Patel's efforts of forging a united India.

### Literature Review

The article "Unifying India: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's Vision for All-India Services and Its Impact on Nation-Building" by Ramanathan Srinivasan explores Sardar Patel's role in creating a unified administrative system through All India Services that unified India ideologically and administratively. It highlights Patel's commitment to meritocracy, national integration, and efficient governance through a professional, ethical, and centralized bureaucracy. The author argues that the All India Services played a crucial role in the integration of the princely states with the Indian Union and the smooth transition from a balkanised nation to a union as solid as rock of Gibraltar. It also addresses challenges such as corruption and lack of inclusivity, while emphasizing Patel's enduring legacy in shaping India's administrative and political landscape.

Dr. Kapoor Singh's article "A Study About the Role of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in Development of India After Independence" (2022) analyses Sardar Patel's instrumental role in the political unification of India following independence. It delves on his pragmatic leadership in integrating over 560 princely states into the Indian Union through a combination of diplomacy, strategic pressure and policy tools like the privy purse. The paper highlights his collaboration with V.P. Menon and his success in peacefully resolving complex accessions including those of Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir. The author concludes that Patel's statesmanship, administrative skills and firm resolve were central to shaping a unified and stable Indian nation-state.

Dr. Yadavendra Dubey's work titled "Assessing Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's Role in India's Unification" explores the pivotal role of Sardar Patel in shaping post-independence India. It highlights his instrumental role in integrating over 560 princely states into the Indian Union, overcoming political, regional and communal challenges through strategic diplomacy and firm leadership. The paper also examines Patel's contributions to the Indian Constitution particularly in the areas of minority rights, untouchability, citizenship and the establishment of the All India Services. Emphasizing his pragmatic approach and nationalistic vision, the article presents Patel as a decisive statesman and architect of modern India, justly earning the title "Iron Man of India."

The article titled "Socio-Political Ideas of Sardar Patel: Focus on Nation Building" by Sonia talks about how Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel helped shape modern India after independence. It shows how he worked hard to unite the country, not just by merging princely states but also by promoting values like democracy, equality and unity among all communities. The article highlights Patel's belief in discipline, honesty and the importance of local self-government through the Panchayati Raj system. He also supported women's participation in society and worked towards their emancipation. Overall, the article presents Patel as a strong and practical leader who believed in action and helped lay the foundation for a united and democratic India.

## The Eklavya of Indian Politics

Sardar Patel Could also be seen as the 'Eklavya of Indian Politics'. The way Eklavya was sidelined by his own teacher in favour of others with more privileged access, Patel was also despite being an Ace leader—a chivalrous statesman, an excellent strategist and brilliant administrator was denied Prime Ministers post, although he was the popular choice of the congress leaders. Like Eklavya from the Mahabharata who mastered the art of archery through self-discipline and dedication but was denied formal recognition. Patel too, demonstrated unmatched administrative skills, political foresight and leadership in uniting a fragmented nation. Despite being the tallest warrior leader in Indian politics during that era, he stepped aside on the insistence of Gandhi to make way for Jawaharlal Nehru for prime ministership, upholding party unity and Gandhiji's preference. His sacrifice, humility and unwavering commitment to the national cause reflect the spirit of Eklavya- loyal, capable, silently monumental, never complained about anything or called himself a victim.

## Sardar Patel and the Integration of Princely States

Sardar Patel was chosen to negotiate with Mohammad Ali Jinnah over the division of resources during the time of Partition, as no one was considered better than him in diplomacy, not even Jawaharlal Nehru, despite having been controversially chosen as the first Prime Minister of India. Sardar Patel, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nehru were all trained lawyers, but Patel was regarded as an undefeated one. Gandhi once said that "the problem of the States is so difficult that you alone can solve it (Singh, 2022, p. 937)." He proved his mettle again by ensuring that the majority of the resources remained with India, including most of Pakistan's financial share. Patel agreed to give Pakistan only ₹75 crore out of the ₹400 crore India held at the time of Partition, refuting Jinnah's demand that the amount should be equally divided between the two countries. Of the ₹75 crore that India was supposed to pay Pakistan, only ₹20 crore was initially transferred, while the remaining amount was deliberately delayed. This delay prevented Pakistan from strengthening its army and integrating neighbouring princely states by force that were not meant to accede with Pakistan, such as Jammu & Kashmir. Sardar's presence of mind averted the complete occupation of Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan, as he sent in the army to J&K on time without waiting for Prime Minister Nehru's approval.

The Kashmir's episode highlights Patel's exceptional strategic foresight and his ability to balance diplomacy with hard-nosed realism. His firm stand under pressure showed his deep commitment to safeguarding India's sovereignty. Patel's decision-making was rooted in national interest, guided by political wisdom and a sharp understanding of ground realities. He combined administrative firmness with calculated restraint, proving himself not just as a statesman but as a master tactician in a fragile, post-Partition India.

To Unite the princely states, he used the time-tested age old diplomatic tools such as *Sam*, *Dam*, *Dand* and *Bheda*, which basically means persuasion, reward, punishment and creating divisive tendencies.

***Sam (persuasion)***- First, he persuaded the princely states and convinced them to join the Indian Union by instilling a sense of nationalism in the rulers, explaining the benefits and the need to unify the nation using his powerful reasoning style and calm, respectful conversations. He appealed to their sense of duty toward their motherland and explained them why joining the Indian Union would bring peace and stability to the Indian subcontinent. He emphasized that their cooperation was crucial for the future of the country. This is how many princely states—such as Mysore, Baroda and Bikaner agreed to join India through peaceful discussions and thoughtful deliberations.

***Dam (offering Incentives)***- When words weren't enough to convince some of the rulers to accede their princely states with Indian Union, Patel offered them incentives to sweeten the deal. This included provisions like the Privy Purse, which was an annual payment promised to rulers even after they gave up power (accession). Many of the rulers were also offered seats in Parliament, high-ranking positions in the government, etc. This made them feel respected and gave them assurance that they wouldn't lose everything after accession. So, many rulers merged their princely states with the Indian Union because they knew they would be taken care of financially and would be treated with dignity.

***Danda (use of force)***- When the diplomacy failed and the rulers refused to cooperate or acted against national interests, Patel didn't hesitate to use military force to punish them and teach them a lesson. For example, Hyderabad wanted to stay as an independent state, even though it was right in the middle of India. Patel sent in the army (Operation Polo) and the princely state of Hyderabad was merged with the Indian union

**Bhed (creating divisive tendencies)**– Patel didn't rely on a single method, he used whatever worked best for each state to handle difficult situations. He sometimes took advantage of divisions within royal families or used local leaders and public opinion to pressure rulers—thereby sowing the seeds of dissension in the rival's camp. For example, Nawab Mahabat Khanji of Junagadh acceded his state to Pakistan citing its sea link despite Mountbatten's objections. In response, the rulers of Mangrol and Babariawad the vassal states under Junagadh declared their independence and joined India. Patel then pointed out the protests and unrest to demonstrate that the Nawab's decision did not reflect the will of the people. A plebiscite was eventually held and the result favoured accession to India.

Sardar Patel never held any grudge against any princely state that hesitated or resisted to join the Indian Union. After accession, the rulers of these princely states were proportionately rewarded and their needs were taken care of by the government. For example even after the forceful annexation of Hyderabad, the Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan, was entitled to receive an annual privy purse of ₹50,00,000, exempt from all taxes (Mukherjee, 2022). Which proves that he maintained cordial relations with everyone regardless of their ideological leanings and their political stance and sought to unite the nation through territorial nationalism using the age-old diplomatic tools mentioned above (Sam, Dam, Danda, Bhed), promoting a shared territorial identity that binds all citizens together.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi abolished the privy purses in early 1970's and the titles of India's former rulers of the princely states through the 26th Amendment act to the Indian Constitution. She defended it by saying that these hereditary privileges were in inconsonance or opposition with an egalitarian and democratic system and therefore these provisions need to be revoked to promote and foster social equality and reduce fiscal burdens (Mukherjee, 2022). Patel incentivized unity through respect and dignity and This act of Indian Govt to tighten its grip over the feudal elements was complementary to Patels vision in Theory but was divergent in Practice.

Sardar Patel believed in inclusion of all, but he also believed in preserving certain ceremonial privileges temporarily to maintain stability and goodwill. But Indira Gandhi's actions signal radical shift, aiming for equality and abolition of feudal remnants. While Patel's strategy focused on institutional integration by maintaining the diversity and therefore Indira Gandhi's abolition of Privy Purse could be seen as aligning with the egalitarian principles that Patel valued but executed in a way Patel never envisioned. Thus, this move corresponds with the Patels vision of modern India, but it deviates from Patel's methodology of achieving unity, that is without immediate eradication or tampering of social and legacy structures.

### **Sardar Patel and Hindu Mahasabha**

The Hindu right-wing political organisations like Hindu Mahasabha and leaders such as V.D. Savarkar strongly backed the Hindu princely states in their struggle to remain independent even after the India's independence. V.D. Savarkar called the Princely States dominated by Hindus as the 'Bedrock of Hindu Power' and defended their despotic rule and their stance of non-accession to Indian Union by referring to them as 'Citadels of Organised Hindu Power' and praising them as 'Progressive Hindu States' i.e., the State of Mysore, Travancore (The Southern Indian Maritime state), Oudh and Baroda State in Particular (Bapu, 2013, pp. 32-33). But Sardar Patel did not allow that to happen like Abraham Lincoln in the United States. Secondly, he was a critic of the idea of a Hindu Rashtira, a homogeneous nation and cultural nationalism (i.e., India becoming a Hindu state) due to his commitment to the idea of territorial nationalism, secularism, inclusivity, and the principle of "unity in diversity."

Had Hindu right-wing organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha succeeded in fulfilling their objectives like that of Muslim League, then some of the aforementioned Hindu princely states might have become separate countries as these right-wing organizations were power-hungry, as is evident from the role they played in crushing the Quit India Movement and running coalition governments with the Muslim League during the second world war in provinces such as Bengal, Sindh, and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Despite this, Sardar Patel never detested Hindu Mahasabha and recognized their contributions to the country, whether big or small. This is evident from the inclusion of Hindu right-wing leader and member of Hindu Mahasabha like Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee in the Constituent Assembly and in the first government of independent India, reflecting a respect for diversity of thought and a commitment to the inclusivity of all political and cultural streams. And for this, many people accuse him of being a Hindu nationalist or being soft towards Hindu nationalists, which is not true.



## In the Middle Ground: Patel, the Congress and the RSS

The ban imposed on the RSS for their alleged involvement in Gandhi's assassination doesn't necessarily reflect Sardar Patel's dislike for the organisation as Home Minister, it was the Nehru government's assessment of the RSS that was flawed. The Congress government banned RSS in February 1948 and the ban was lifted almost a year later, citing a lack of evidence regarding the RSS's direct involvement in Gandhi's assassination. There were many RSS volunteers who were part of the INC at the time of the ban. If Sardar Patel had not been the Home Minister at that time, the ban likely wouldn't have been lifted so soon. He was neither a supporter of the RSS nor a critic he always maintained a neutral approach towards it. Therefore, in October 1948, by which time he had figured out that the RSS was not involved in Gandhi's assassination, Patel offered RSS cadres the option to join the Congress, fearing the organisation might transform into a political party. However, this created a divide between Patel's supporters and Nehru's supporters within the Congress. Eventually, Nehru convinced the Congress Working Committee to block RSS members from joining the party, unless they first gave up their membership of the RSS (EPW Engage, 2018).

This shows that Patel had respect for people from all intellectual and ideological streams, regardless of their affiliations. His approach was guided by pragmatism and nation-building, not personal or political bias. By offering RSS members a place within the Congress, he aimed to integrate divergent voices into the democratic fold rather than isolate or radicalize them. Patel believed in inclusion over alienation, understanding that long-term unity required engagement, not exclusion.

So today, when Congress leaders claim "Patel was the one who banned the RSS and called it a clear threat," (Business Standard, 2022) they often overlook the broader context and nuance of his actions. Patel's decision was based on the government's assessment at the time and not on personal bias. It was his role as a Home Minister to uphold fairness and due process. Misrepresenting his actions today not only distorts history but also disregards his deeper commitment to unity, engagement, and institutional stability.

Secondly, for decades especially during the Congress era, the government treated the RSS as a political organization and imposed restrictions that barred government employees from associating participating in its activities. These restrictions were based on conduct rules introduced in 1949 and later formalized through circulars in 1966, 1970 and 1980 under the belief that the RSS had political leanings. However the RSS maintained it was a cultural, nationalist organization with no political agenda. These restrictions also extended to IAS, IPS and other services under the 1968 All India Services Rules (Vajiram Editor, 2024).

In a significant policy shift, the Narendra Modi led BJP government has now removed the ban allowing officials to engage in RSS activities without facing disciplinary action (Yadav, 2024). This move aligns more closely with Sardar Patel's vision of inclusive nation-building, where individuals from various ideological backgrounds could contribute to the democratic process, provided they upheld national unity and constitutional values. Patel believed in engaging, not alienating such organizations and his neutral stance toward the RSS reflected his commitment to integrating diverse voices into India's democratic fabric. This step may be seen as a return to that inclusive and pragmatic approach.

## Sardar Patel and the Muslims

Patel was not a supporter of the idealistic notion of Hindu-Muslim unity as he always employed a pragmatic approach and his idea of unity was rooted in territorial nationalism. He would not go the extra mile to prove himself to any individual or community. The only thing he expected from Indian Muslims was to distance themselves from the Muslim League and denounce its cause, as cracks within Indian society were already visible created by this party and the Partition of the country had almost become inevitable. At certain points, Patel was accused of being anti-Muslim an allegation that was entirely baseless. He was simply intolerant of the sentiment "Hanske liya hai Pakistan, ladke lenge Hindustan" ("We attained Pakistan with ease; we shall win Hindustan by force") (Kothari, 2023). Once Sardar Patel was defended by the Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the court between in early 1920's in a fund misapplication case and the verdict of that case was given in Patels favour, (Sharma, 2009). So this incident is one such example that shows Sardar Patel didn't had any problem with Jinnah and the Muslim League initially, when their aim was to protect the interest of the Muslims by securing enhanced political representation for them, challenging the colonial rule, taking part in nationalist movements launched by INC, demanding a self-government for India and even separate electorate for Muslims because it aligned with their goal of increased political

representation. It was the shift in the political stance of the Muslim League—marked by its turn toward extreme communalism after its poor performance in the 1937 provincial elections and thereafter its demand for a separate Muslim nation, culminating in the Lahore Resolution of 1940, placed Sardar Patel and Jinnah along with his party the Muslim League, on opposite ends of the political spectrum. So, it is only because of this he distanced himself from the Muslim League and also expected the Indian Muslims to do the same. Had the Muslim League not pursued the Partition of India after 1937, then Sardar Patel might have maintained cordial relations with them—similar to the way he engaged with the Hindu Mahasabha, despite ideological differences. If he had been anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu, he would not have taken action against Hindu rioters at the time of partition, nor would he have provided a safe passage to Muslims from West Punjab migrating to Pakistan by keeping the enraged Sikhs at bay. He was neither a messiah of Hindus nor a suppressor of Muslims; he never took sides. His sole concern was the solidarity of the nation and its territorial and administrative unity and not the Nehruvian idealistic notion of Hind Muslim unity.

### **Present Day Appropriations**

- ***Language Politics: Imposition of Hindi vs Linguistic Autonomy***

Patel insisted on administrative unity and always respected linguistic and cultural diversity. He was never in favour of imposing any one language on everyone or mandating its usage across India, owing to his commitment to the principle of Unity in Diversity. The ongoing North–South language divide in India would have concerned or troubled him deeply and he would have undoubtedly defended linguistic federalism, while promoting Hindi only as a link language, not as a tool of domination, control or cultural unification. Imposing a language on someone, he believed is like imposing an alien culture upon them, which does not foster unity but instead creates division and resistance.

- ***Viewing Regional Linguistic Conflicts Through Patel's Lens***

Patel firmly believed that India couldn't be united through linguistic dominance or forced homogeneity. For him, language was a part of cultural identity that needed respect and acceptance, but it should never become a tool for cultural disputes. The recent incidents in states like Karnataka and Maharashtra, where outsiders are sometimes harassed, discriminated against, their businesses targeted or even beaten up for not being able to speak the local language. This would have deeply disturbed Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. He believed that while people have an emotional bonding with their mother tongue, language should never be weaponised or used as a tool to divide society nor should it become a political instrument to create distractions or serve the selfish ends of political leaders.

Patel's idea of territorial nationalism ensured that every Indian regardless of their language, caste, creed, culture or ethnicity should feel equally at home anywhere in the country. He supported the reorganization of states on linguistic lines to respect local cultural and linguistic identities, as this aligned with his principle of unity in diversity. However, he would have rejected linguistic chauvinism, as it is the antithesis of his idea of territorial nationalism. It breeds hostility towards so called "outsiders" and thereby betrays the spirit of unity in diversity, erodes national solidarity and creates the kind of fragmentation of Indian society that he fought so hard to prevent during the integration of the princely states.

From his perspective protecting and preserving the dignity of local languages could only be achieved through promotion and not through forceful imposition, and by fostering a spirit in which learning and respecting local languages is encouraged without turning them into political or violent tools. Secondly, Patel would have advocated strong administrative action against violence and discriminatory practices carried out by anti-social elements on the basis of language because every Indian citizen has the right to live, work and settle in any part of the country and this right is non-negotiable.

- ***Separatist movement: a threat to territorial nationalism***

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel would have viewed separatist movements like Khalistan and the ongoing unrest in Kashmir as serious internal threats to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity—similar in nature to the princely states of Junagadh and Hyderabad, which challenged the unity of the newly independent nation. To him, the idea of fragmentation of the country based on religion, ethnicity, language or regional identity would have been totally unacceptable, as it comes in direct conflict with vision of a united, pluralistic India.

To deal with such type of situations, Patel would not have relied on a single strategy. Instead he would have adopted his time tested approach, which involves using the traditional Indian statecraft principles of Sam (persuasion), Dam (incentives), Dand (punishment), and Bhed (division) to navigate complex political terrain. He would have cracked down on extremist elements that pose a serious threat to national security, suppressing down the militancy and secessionist propaganda with strong administrative measures. At the same time he would have worked to strengthen local governance and institutions, ensuring that legitimate grievances of the population were addressed through democratic and constitutional means.

Patel was very well known for his practical wisdom and persuasive communication style. He would have used his powerful reasoning style to engage and negotiate with the community leaders, youth and civil society in the troubled regions. He would have emotionally appealed them to support the cause of national unity and would have posed these conflicts not as religious or ethnic struggles but as geopolitical and administrative challenges. Since he knew the importance of winning the trust and loyalty of the people before winning a territory, his strategy would have included large-scale public engagement,

Patel would have changed the popular narratives surrounding these separatist movements, presenting them as geopolitical and administrative challenges rather than allowing these issues to be reduced to religious conflict, as they often are seen in public discourse. He would have completely weakened these movements by shifting the focus of the civil society from religion to security, failure of democratic machinery and constitutional responsibility. He would have stripped the separatist movements of their emotive appeal and weakened their ideological legitimacy and propaganda. In doing so, he would have built a compelling national consensus against secessionism, thus strengthening India's internal cohesion.

- ***Viewing the communal and ethnic riots i.e. Delhi riots, Kashmir exodus, Gujarat riots and the Manipur riots through Sardar Patel's lens.***

Exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, Anti Sikh-Riots, Gujarat riots Manipur riots through Sardar Patel's lens exposes deep fractures in the fabric of Indian society. If Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was still around then he would have considered these events as deep threats to India's unity and not just as law-and-order issues. Patel who championed territorial nationalism and believed in a strong and an impartial governance, would have acted swiftly to restore law and order in the riot affected areas, held politicians and officials accountable and ensured justice regardless of political fallout.

In contrast, these events have often been met with delayed action or no action at all, sometimes the policymakers allowed the conflict to take its own course, sometimes they play political blame games and show selective outrage. In many cases state machinery either failed to respond in time or acted with bias, because of the vested interest of the politicians, the vote bank politics etc. The exodus of Kashmiri Pandits for example, was allowed to happen by the then J&K government and central govt headed by the congress, without any significant national-level rehabilitation plan for decades. The government failed to take any action to provide relief or protection to the affected population of Kashmiri Pandits. Rajiv Gandhi justifying the killing of more than 3000 Sikhs in 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots in his address at the boat club in national capital saying, "when a big tree falls, the earth shakes" is a perfect example of state machinery acting with bias ([Express Web Desk, 2015](#)).

The 2002 Gujarat riots, which resulted in the death and displacement of thousands people especially from the Muslim community, shows a moment when the state machinery was widely accused of delayed or insufficient intervention. The 2023 Manipur ethnic conflict, marked by prolonged violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities, dragged on for months before it received some serious political attention. The crisis was marked by unchecked violence, months-long internet shutdowns and a total breakdown of law and order in the northeastern state of Manipur, with both the state and central governments showing an extremely slow and inconsistent response which resulted in administrative paralysis. If we look at it from Patel's lens, then allowing such internal divisions to fester would mean weakening the very idea of a united India. The duty of the govt should not be just to contain violence, but to address its root causes, be it misinformation, poor governance, political polarization or deep-seated social tensions, in other words it means tackling the underlying fractures that threaten the social fabric of the nation.

#### ***Viewing BJP Government's Approach towards Northeastern States through Sardar Patels Lenses***

The BJP's approach towards the Northeastern states through developmental projects, cultural exchanges and political engagement is presented as part of its agenda of inclusive national vision. This is similar to Sardar Patel's

method of integrating every region into the national mainstream while respecting its unique identity. Just as Patel used a mix of persuasion, incentives and firm governance to bring the princely states into the fold of the Indian Union, the BJP-led government is adopting a similar strategy to engage with the Northeastern states and bring them into the mainstream after decades of neglect. Its efforts to bring various ethnic and militant groups from India's Northeastern states to the negotiating table, facilitate agreements with them and stabilise governance and administration in the region closely mirror Patel's approach to integrating the princely states. Patel's idea of territorial nationalism perfectly aligns with the idea of giving the Northeast a bigger and stronger stake in the nation's future.

## Conclusion

Both the Congress and the BJP (India's two major political parties) love to drape themselves in Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's legacy, but when it comes to implementing his vision, both have fallen short. Congress claims ownership of Patel's ideals simply because he was a Congress leader but in practice it has failed to uphold his principles of strong governance, swift action against separatism, an unbiased approach towards all communities, protection and respect for people of different cultures, identities, ethnicities and ideological leanings and genuine national unity instead of those fancy slogans. The very party Patel helped build has, over the decades, allowed political expediency, appeasement and inertia to erode his uncompromising commitment to India's sovereignty and integrity.

The BJP on the other hand, proudly built the towering Statue of Unity as a tribute to Patel and his legacy, spending over '₹3,000 crore of taxpayers' money, yet has conveniently ignored the spirit of the man it claims to honour. Patel's vision of territorial nationalism rejected religious majoritarianism and divisive cultural nationalism and yet the BJP's politics often fans the very flames Patel worked tirelessly to extinguish. He believed in engagement over alienation, inclusivity over exclusion and institution-building over personality cults. Erecting the world's tallest statue is hollow symbolism if the political climate continues to foster division, mistrust, enmity and hostility among India's own people.

If Patel was still around, he would not have been flattered by hollow tributes to him, he would demand results. He would judge leaders not by their speeches or monuments but by whether they could unite India in both spirit and practice. Sadly both Congress and BJP have failed in this test. Patel's path was never about possession of his legacy, it was about mustering the courage to walk it.

Today Patel's name has been reduced to a political trophy, flaunted, paraded and claimed but never truly understood. Congress often waves his memory like a family heirloom it has forgotten how to use, while the BJP polishes his image into a glittering statue to mask the corrosion of his ideals. Neither has the moral courage to implement Patel's brand of uncompromising, pragmatic nationalism that puts India's unity above everything, such as vote banks, populist appeasement or sectarian rhetoric. The truth is uncomfortable: Patel would have called out both parties for weaponizing religion, language, caste and region to consolidate their own power, for letting riots, separatism and communal hatred simmer and for placing political gain over national cohesion.

National Unity Day, ironically, has become one of the most visible examples of how Patel's legacy is hollowed out for political theatre. Every year on 31st October, leaders give grand speeches, hold ceremonial runs or rallies and flood social media and Media with Patel's quotes and speeches, yet the spirit behind his work is absent in policy and action. For Patel, unity was not a day-long photo session, but it was a relentless, everyday struggle against division, mistrust and regionalism. To celebrate Patel and his ideas while tolerating or cultivating linguistic chauvinism, communal polarisation and separatist politics is equivalent to turning the National Unity Day into a cruel joke. True homage to Patel would mean rooting out the divisive tendencies that are tearing up the country, not putting a veil on them with symbolic marches and hashtags. Through Patel's lenses, unity is forged through hard decisions and good governance, not manufactured through stage-managed patriotism.

Policymakers today must move beyond symbolic tributes and engage with the substance of Sardar Patel's vision, unity built on justice, inclusion, respect and strong administration. People should hold leaders accountable for addressing the real causes of division i.e. communal polarisation, linguistic chauvinism, poor governance and the neglect of marginalised communities and the leaders should crack down on the elements that create the aforementioned tendencies. Sardar Patel's approach offers a blueprint and decisive action against violence, incentives for cooperation and constant engagement with all ideological streams to integrate them into the national fold. Instead of using Patel's name as a political shield, governments should implement policies that strengthen



territorial nationalism while protecting diversity. This requires political courage, administrative efficiency and the will to rise above party interests for the sake of the nation's long-term cohesion. Until that is realised, Patel's vision remains not a living force, but a ghost we invoke to hide our failures

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