
Revisiting Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: Pragmatic Institutionalism, Social Justice, and National Unity in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's vision of social justice and national unity within the context of India's constitutional founding and early nation-building process. While Patel is widely recognized for his role in integrating princely states, his contributions as a constitutional thinker remain relatively underexplored. Drawing on a historical-analytical methodology and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, including nation-building theory, social justice theory, and institutionalism, the study reinterprets Patel's approach as a form of pragmatic institutionalism. It argues that Patel sought to reconcile the demands of social justice with the imperatives of national cohesion through constitutional design and administrative realism. He supported equality before law, abolition of untouchability, and safeguards for marginalized communities, while opposing separate electorates and excessive identity-based political arrangements that could fragment the polity. His approach to reservations reflected a cautious and integrative perspective, emphasizing their role as temporary corrective measures. By evaluating Patel's ideas through the lenses of equality, unity, institutional stability, and pragmatism, the paper highlights the



enduring relevance of his thought in contemporary debates on identity, inclusion, and democratic governance in India.

Introduction:

The pursuit of social justice and national unity has been a defining challenge in the making of modern India. At the time of independence in 1947, the newly formed nation faced deep social inequalities, communal tensions, and the immediate task of political integration. The trauma of Partition, coupled with the existence of more than 560 princely states, created a fragile political environment where unity and justice appeared as competing priorities. In this context, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged as a central figure whose political thought and administrative actions helped shape the foundational principles of the Indian state.

Sardar Patel is often remembered as the “Iron Man of India” for his decisive role in integrating princely states into the Indian Union. However, his contributions extend far beyond territorial consolidation. As the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, and Tribal and Excluded Areas in the Constituent Assembly, Patel played a crucial role in shaping the constitutional framework that sought to balance equality, justice, and unity. His approach reflected a deep awareness of India’s social diversity and historical inequalities, while also emphasizing the necessity of a cohesive national identity.

The central dilemma that confronted the framers of the Constitution was how to ensure justice for marginalized communities without fragmenting the political community into competing identity groups. Patel addressed this dilemma through what may be described as a pragmatic and institutional approach. He supported the abolition of untouchability, equality before law, and safeguards for disadvantaged groups. At the same time, he strongly opposed separate electorates and excessive communal representation, viewing them as colonial instruments that had deepened divisions in Indian society (Austin, 1999).

Patel’s vision of social justice was thus embedded within a broader commitment to national unity. He believed that justice must be pursued within the framework of a shared citizenship rather than through permanent group-based political arrangements. His cautious approach to reservations and minority rights reflected a concern that excessive reliance on identity-based policies could undermine administrative efficiency and national cohesion (Guha, 2007).



This paper argues that Patel's political thought represents a unique synthesis of social justice and national unity grounded in pragmatic institutionalism. Unlike purely ideological approaches, his vision sought to reconcile competing objectives through constitutional design and administrative realism. By examining his role in the Constituent Assembly and early governance, this study aims to reinterpret Patel not only as a nation-builder but also as a significant political thinker.

The study adopts a historical-analytical methodology and engages with both primary debates and secondary scholarship. It also situates Patel's ideas within broader theoretical frameworks such as nation-building theory, social justice theory, and institutionalism. In doing so, the paper highlights the continued relevance of Patel's vision in contemporary Indian politics, where tensions between identity, equality, and unity remain central.

Aims and Objectives of the study:

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's ideas on social justice and national unity within the broader context of Indian nation-building. It seeks to analyse his role in the Constituent Assembly debates, particularly concerning on minority rights, equality, and constitutional safeguards. The study further aims to evaluate Patel's approach to key issues such as reservations, identity politics, political representation, and the concept of citizenship. In addition, it attempts to situate his political thought within wider theoretical frameworks in political science, including nation-building and institutionalism. Finally, the study assesses the continuing relevance of Patel's vision in contemporary Indian politics, especially in relation to ongoing debates on identity, inclusion, and national integration.

Research Questions:

This study is tried to answer the following research questions:

1. How did Patel conceptualize the relationship between social justice and national unity?
2. What was his position on identity politics, minority rights and separate electorates?
3. How did he approach affirmative action and reservations?
4. Can Patel's thought be understood as a form of pragmatic institutionalism?

Review of Related Literature:

Scholarly literature on Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel has largely focused on his role in political integration, often overlooking his contributions as a constitutional thinker. Early works such as V.P.



Menon's *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (1956) highlight Patel's administrative skill and strategic acumen in unifying princely states. Similarly, Rajmohan Gandhi (1990) presents a comprehensive biography that emphasizes his leadership qualities and political pragmatism.

Granville Austin's seminal work *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (1999) provides important insights into the Constituent Assembly debates, including Patel's role in shaping fundamental rights and minority provisions. Austin argues that the Constitution reflects a "seamless web" of justice, liberty, and unity, a vision in which Patel played a key role. Bipan Chandra (2004) also situates Patel within the broader nationalist movement, highlighting his commitment to secularism and national integration.

Scholars such as Ramachandra Guha (2007) and Sunil Khilnani (1997) have examined the broader context of Indian nation-building, where Patel's emphasis on strong institutions and centralized authority is seen as crucial. Guha notes that Patel's approach was marked by realism and a deep understanding of India's socio-political complexities.

On the question of social justice, B.R. Ambedkar's writings (1945; 1947) provide an important counterpoint to Patel. While Ambedkar advocated strong safeguards and structural reforms for marginalized communities, Patel preferred gradual and integrative measures. This tension is further explored by Christophe Jaffrelot (2003), who analyses caste politics and affirmative action in India.

Recent scholarship has begun to reinterpret Patel through theoretical lenses. Scholars like Narayan (2016) and Mehta (2015) emphasize the importance of institutionalism and state capacity in achieving social justice. They argue that Patel's approach reflects a pragmatic understanding of governance, where justice must be supported by strong institutions.

Other relevant works include Paul Brass (1991) on ethnic politics, Yogendra Yadav (2000) on electoral behavior, and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2003) on constitutionalism. These studies provide a broader framework to understand Patel's rejection of identity-based politics and his preference for civic nationalism.

Overall, the literature reveals a gap in systematically analysing Patel's ideas on social justice within a theoretical framework. This study attempts to fill that gap by integrating historical analysis with political theory.

**Theoretical Framework:**

This study adopts a multi-dimensional theoretical framework to interpret Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's political thought. It draws upon the idea of civilisational diplomacy to understand his emphasis on unity as a value emerging from India's long-standing pluralistic traditions. Nation-building theory is used to explain his belief in the importance of strong institutions and a shared sense of citizenship for ensuring political stability. The framework also incorporates social justice theory, highlighting Patel's recognition of structural inequalities, while underscoring his preference for constitutional and gradual remedies rather than radical transformation. Central to this analysis is the lens of pragmatic institutionalism, which captures his effort to balance normative ideals with administrative practicality. Taken together, these perspectives present Patel as a pragmatic constitutional realist who sought to harmonize justice and unity without resorting to ideological extremes.

Analysis and Discussion:**1. Patel and the Context of Nation-Building:**

The years immediately following independence were marked by profound instability, communal violence, mass displacement, and political fragmentation. The Partition of India in 1947 not only created a humanitarian crisis but also raised fundamental questions about the viability of a unified Indian state. In this turbulent context, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged as a central architect of political consolidation, prioritizing national unity alongside institutional stability. His role in integrating more than 560 princely states into the Indian Union was not merely administrative; it represented a decisive effort to transform a fragmented subcontinent into a cohesive political community (Menon, 1956).

However, Patel's contribution to nation-building extended beyond territorial integration. Within the Constituent Assembly, he played a pivotal role in shaping debates on fundamental rights, minority safeguards, and political representation. His interventions in the Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD, Vol. V, 1948) reveal a consistent concern for balancing justice with unity. He argued that political arrangements must avoid reinforcing divisions inherited from colonial rule, particularly those based on religion and communal identity. This suggests that for Patel, nation-building was not only about creating a sovereign state but also about fostering a shared political identity grounded in common citizenship.

Furthermore, Patel's approach reflects a broader theoretical insight aligned with nation-building literature: that political stability in newly independent states depends on the simultaneous consolidation of territory, authority, and legitimacy (Khilnani, 1997). His emphasis on unity was therefore not merely



ideological but deeply pragmatic, rooted in the recognition that a fragmented polity would be unable to sustain democratic governance. This perspective highlights his understanding of the interdependence between political integration and institutional development.

2. Social Justice: Constitutional Equality and Reform:

Patel's approach to social justice was grounded in a firm commitment to constitutional equality, yet tempered by a pragmatic understanding of India's socio-political realities. He strongly supported the inclusion of fundamental rights such as equality before law, non-discrimination, and the abolition of untouchability, which were eventually enshrined in Articles 14–17 of the Constitution (CAD, Vol. VII; Austin, 1999). These provisions reflected a recognition of the deep structural inequalities embedded in Indian society, particularly those arising from caste hierarchies and social exclusion.

At the same time, Patel's position was marked by a cautious approach to the implementation of social justice measures. He acknowledged the necessity of corrective policies for marginalized communities but emphasized that such measures must operate within a unified constitutional framework. His speeches in the Constituent Assembly indicate a concern that excessive reliance on group-based entitlements could weaken the development of a shared national identity (CAD, Vol. VII, 1949). This reflects an underlying tension between the imperatives of justice and cohesion.

Analytically, Patel's approach can be interpreted as an integrative model of social justice, in contrast to more redistributive or radical frameworks. Rather than advocating structural transformation through extensive group-based rights, he emphasized gradual reform and inclusion within existing institutional structures. This position aligns with what scholars describe as "moderate egalitarianism," where equality is pursued through legal and institutional mechanisms without fundamentally restructuring social relations (Mehta, 2003).

Thus, Patel's vision of social justice was neither conservative nor radical; it represented a calibrated attempt to address historical injustices while preserving the integrity of the political community. His approach underscores the importance of balancing moral imperatives with institutional feasibility.

3. National Unity: Rejection of Identity Politics:

Patel's conception of national unity was deeply influenced by his critique of colonial policies that had institutionalized communal divisions. His firm opposition to separate electorates, articulated during



the Constituent Assembly debates (CAD, Vol. V), reflects his belief that such arrangements had historically fragmented Indian society and undermined the emergence of a unified national identity. He viewed separate electorates not merely as a political mechanism but as a structural reinforcement of communal consciousness.

Instead, Patel advocated joint electorates, equal citizenship, and a common political framework that would encourage cross-community interaction and integration. This approach reflects a clear commitment to civic nationalism, where political identity is defined not by religion or caste but by shared citizenship. As Bipan Chandra (2004) argues, this model was central to the nationalist project of building a secular and inclusive state.

Moreover, Patel's position reveals a deeper normative concern: that identity-based political arrangements could entrench divisions and hinder democratic consolidation. His rejection of communal representation suggests an understanding that democracy requires not only representation but also integration. This aligns with broader theoretical debates on multiculturalism and nation-building, where excessive emphasis on group identities can sometimes conflict with the goals of political unity (Brass, 1991).

Therefore, Patel's vision of unity was both institutional and normative. It sought to create a political community in which diversity was accommodated but not allowed to fragment the state. This perspective remains significant in contemporary discussions on identity politics and national integration.

4. Reservations and Pragmatic Balancing:

Patel's stance on reservations provides a particularly revealing insight into his pragmatic approach to social justice. He supported the provision of reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as necessary corrective measures to address historical injustices (CAD, Vol. IX). However, he consistently emphasized their temporary and remedial character, arguing that such policies should facilitate integration rather than create permanent divisions.

In contrast to B. R. Ambedkar, who viewed reservations as instruments of structural transformation, Patel adopted a more cautious and integrative perspective. His concerns centered on the potential long-term consequences of institutionalizing group-based entitlements, including dependency, administrative inefficiency, and the erosion of meritocratic principles (Guha, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2003).



This approach can be conceptualized as pragmatic egalitarianism, where the state intervenes to correct inequalities but does so within limits designed to preserve institutional stability. It reflects an attempt to balance redistributive justice with the functional requirements of governance. As Sunil Khilnani (1997) notes, the early Indian state faced the dual challenge of promoting social transformation while maintaining administrative coherence, a balance that Patel sought to achieve.

Importantly, Patel did not deny the moral urgency of addressing caste-based discrimination. Rather, he framed reservations as part of a broader strategy of national integration. This suggests that for Patel, social justice policies were not ends in themselves but means to achieving a more cohesive and equitable society.

5. Institutional Stability and Administrative Realism:

A defining feature of Patel's political thought is his emphasis on institutional stability and administrative realism. As India's first Home Minister, he played a crucial role in consolidating the administrative apparatus of the state, particularly through the reorganization and conservation of the civil services. His insistence on maintaining a strong and independent bureaucracy, especially the Indian Administrative Service, reflects his belief that effective governance is essential for the realization of democratic ideals (Menon, 1956; Austin, 1999).

Patel's approach was grounded in the recognition that rights and policies require institutional mechanisms for their implementation. His often-cited assertion—implicit in his speeches—that a weak state cannot deliver strong rights encapsulates his realist understanding of governance. This aligns with institutionalism theories that emphasize the role of state capacity in ensuring policy effectiveness and democratic stability (Mehta, 2015).

Furthermore, Patel's prioritization of law and order must be understood in the context of the immediate post-Partition crisis. Faced with communal violence and political uncertainty, he viewed stability as a prerequisite for reform. This perspective suggests that his emphasis on order was not conservative but strategic, aimed at creating the conditions necessary for long-term democratic development (Guha, 2007).

Thus, Patel's administrative realism highlights a crucial insight: that social justice and democratic governance are sustainable only when supported by strong, credible, and efficient institutions.



6. Comparative Perspective: Patel and Other Leaders:

A comparative analysis of Patel with Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar underscores the distinctiveness of his political approach. Nehru's vision was rooted in liberal modernism, emphasizing industrialization, scientific progress, and internationalism (Khilnani, 1997). Ambedkar, on the other hand, focused on radical constitutionalism, advocating strong safeguards and structural reforms to address caste-based inequalities (Jaffrelot, 2003).

In contrast, Patel's approach was characterized by pragmatic institutionalism. He sought to mediate between competing priorities, emphasizing the need for both social justice and national unity. His position suggests that neither equality nor unity can be pursued in isolation; rather, they must be integrated through careful institutional design.

This comparative perspective reveals that Patel's contribution lies not in advancing a singular ideological framework but in synthesizing multiple dimensions of state-building. His thought represents a bridging position, balancing normative ideals with practical constraints, and offering a model of governance grounded in realism and moderation.

7. Evaluating Patel's pragmatic Vision:

Patel's political thought can be systematically evaluated through four key indicators that capture the core dimensions of his approach. First, in terms of equality, he supported constitutional safeguards and legal measures to address social discrimination, particularly through the abolition of untouchability and the guarantee of fundamental rights (Austin, 1999). Second, regarding unity, his rejection of separate electorates and emphasis on common citizenship reflect a commitment to a cohesive national identity (Chandra, 2004). Third, his focus on institutional stability is evident in his efforts to strengthen administrative structures and ensure effective governance (Menon, 1956). Finally, his pragmatism is reflected in his preference for gradual reforms and balanced policies that align ethical goals with administrative feasibility (Guha, 2007).

Taken together, these indicators demonstrate the coherence and depth of Patel's political philosophy. They reveal a consistent attempt to reconcile competing objectives—justice and unity, reform and stability, ideals and realities—within a single framework. This synthesis underscores his significance not only as a statesman but also as a political thinker whose ideas continue to inform debates on governance and democracy.



Contemporary Relevance of **Patel's vision** in Indian Politics:

Patel's ideas remain highly relevant in contemporary India, where debates on reservation, identity politics, and national integration continue to shape political discourse. The tension between group-based rights and common citizenship is still evident in policies related to caste, religion, and regional identity. His emphasis on civic nationalism offers an alternative to both majoritarianism and fragmented identity politics. Similarly, his stress on strong institutions is particularly relevant in an era where governance challenges affect the delivery of social justice. Patel's cautious approach to reservations also resonates in ongoing debates about their scope and duration. His vision suggests that social justice policies must be carefully designed to promote inclusion without undermining unity and efficiency.

Concluding Observations:

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel occupies a distinctive position in the evolution of Indian political thought. While he is widely recognized for his decisive role in integrating princely states, this study has demonstrated that his contributions as a constitutional thinker are equally significant. It has argued that Patel's vision represents a coherent framework of pragmatic institutionalism, through which he sought to reconcile the demands of social justice with the imperatives of national unity.

Situated within the turbulent context of post-independence India, Patel's approach reflects a careful balancing of competing priorities—equality and cohesion, reform and stability, rights and governance. His support for fundamental rights, abolition of untouchability, and limited affirmative action illustrates a commitment to addressing historical injustices. At the same time, his rejection of separate electorates and identity-based political arrangements underscores his concern that excessive politicization of social divisions could undermine the foundations of a unified polity.

The analysis of Patel's thought through the four key indicators—equality, unity, institutional stability, and pragmatism—reveals a consistent and integrated political philosophy. Unlike purely ideological approaches, Patel emphasized the role of strong and credible institutions as the necessary basis for realizing social justice. His perspective suggests that democratic ideals cannot be sustained without administrative capacity and political cohesion.

In contemporary India, where debates over reservation policies, identity politics, and governance continue to intensify, Patel's ideas retain enduring relevance. His emphasis on civic nationalism and institutional strength offers a normative and practical framework for navigating these tensions.



In conclusion, Patel's legacy extends beyond that of a nation-builder to that of a pragmatic political thinker whose insights remain vital for understanding the relationship between justice and unity in diverse democracies. His vision ultimately affirms that a stable nation must pursue equality without fragmentation and unity without exclusion—a principle that continues to resonate in the ongoing evolution of Indian democracy.

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