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Amitesh Raj
2nd Year Student of MA -
Politics and International
Relations, Pandit Deendayal
Energy University,
Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India

From fragmentation to federation: Sardar Patel's legacy in nation-building

Amitesh Raj

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Abstract

The Research paper titled “From Fragmentation to Federation: Sardar Patel's Legacy in Nation-Building” explains the important work done by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in consolidating post-Independent India into a unified federal republic. In the immediate events after the partition, the newly independent India faced unavoidable challenges to which Patel emerged as a key guiding personality who attempted to make India a unified nation-state. The paper examines the immediate situation after the independence of India and the challenges faced by the country. The paper also discusses the attempts made by different Indian political leaders, especially Sardar Patel, in the unification and integration of princely states. Apart from this, the paper also deals with the vision and efforts made by Sardar Patel in having a strong centralised administration paired with democratic federalism. His political philosophy, the formation of the All-India Services and the need for having a strong neutral institution have also been discussed in the paper.

Patel's support for territorial distribution along linguistic and administrative lines and his pragmatic governance approach have also been reflected in the paper. This paper also highlights his pragmatic approach to building Social Cohesion, belief in the spirit of secularism and promoting communal harmony.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the strong and committed impact of Patel's leadership is reflected in modern India through initiatives like Rastriya Ekta Diwas and the Statue of Unity. His broad vision and strategic thinking continue to influence contemporary political issues.

Keywords: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, nation-building, princely states integration, partition of India, federalism, All India services, communal harmony, national unity, statue of unity

Introduction

On August 15, 1947, when the whole of India was celebrating the joy of independence, there was another side of the country that was facing immense political, social, and economic challenges. Widespread communal violence, Displacement and humanitarian crisis were on the headlines of the newly formed nation-states of India and Pakistan.

Talking about politics, Jawaharlal Nehru and his newly formed interim government had to manage the paradoxical and divided subcontinent, which was full of instability. The story of this chaos started when British India was partitioned, and over 565 princely states were left to their discretion to either join the dominion of India or the dominion of Pakistan. They were also given the choice to retain their sovereignty and claim independence. This opportunity to the princely state put the envisaged integrity of India as a nation into question and created a hanging sword which was capable of further fragmentation, especially with the princely states like Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir, which were delaying or resisting accession.

India, at the time of independence, also suffered from the lack of a centralised national bureaucracy, which created a scarcity of trained civil servants and a lack of administrative interoperability among the diverse territories.

The colonial exploitation, frequent famine and the forced consequences of World War II had shaken the economy of India. It was the same India whose share in the global trade estimated to be around 25% before the advent of the British was now left with only 4% of the share in the global trade market. Poverty, Underdeveloped infrastructure, and disrupted trade routes (due to partition) were the colonial legacy of India in 1947.

The vast land, which was once called as ‘Tenjiku’ (The land of heaven) by the Japanese, has

Corresponding Author:
Amitesh Raj
2nd Year Student of MA -
Politics and International
Relations, Pandit Deendayal
Energy University,
Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India

become a land that was divided along the lines of Caste, religion, and language. Communal tensions were at their peak as it seemed like it had become the fortune of the land. The task of rehabilitation millions of refugees and promoting the spirit of communal harmony put further pressure on the government and resources.

In this unpredictable and chaotic environment, leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged as key figures in unifying the nation, maintaining internal security, and building the foundation stone of the stable Sovereign Indian union, which promises the guarantee of liberty, equality and fraternity to its citizens.

Sardar Patel's political philosophy

Sardar Patel's Political beliefs were fundamentally rooted in realism, pragmatism and strong nationalism. He was from the background of Law and has developed his leadership ability from the freedom struggle itself. He believed quick, firm and confident action is a very important pillar in nation building. Apart from it, administrative discipline and strong internal security play an important role in building a strong nation. From the independence itself, he prioritises the integration of the fragmented princely state into a unified Indian union. He believes diplomacy, strategic pressure and when necessary, force are the tools to accomplish these targets. He wanted a strong central authority to preserve unity and prevent the ongoing chaotic situation in the newly independent India. He gave importance to the civil service as the 'steel frame' of the Indian government and bureaucratic system, to be neutral and efficient, so that it can uphold a strong nation-building process. Although he believed in the spirit of secularism in public life, Patel's cultural orientation was more inclined towards traditional Indian values. He believed that national identity to be strengthened through a shared civilisation ethos rather than ideological uncertainty.

Integration of the princely states

During 1947-1950, the subcontinent was not a single integrated nation but a fragmented land of 565 princely states, which were semi-autonomous regions ruled by the local rulers under the suzerainty of the British crown and the mainland British India, which was divided into the Dominion of India and Pakistan. The semiautonomous regions after the independence of India had to decide their future status by either merging with the state of India or with the state of Pakistan; they were also given the option to remain Independent and uphold their sovereignty.

Jawaharlal Nehru, being the Prime Minister of the newly formed government, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, as his Home Minister, took the responsibility of unifying the country on their shoulder. In this task, a civil servant named V.P. Menon undertook the historic mission to convince and integrate the princely state into the Indian Union.

Most of the rulers of the princely states, realising the demand of the time, signed the instrument of accession for joining the Union of India (Gwalior, Baroda, Bikaner, etc.). However, some states like Junagarh, Hyderabad and Kashmir posed challenges in this effort made by the Indian government.

Case study of Junagarh

The integration of Junagarh into India in 1947 was the earliest and most important challenge for the newly independent India. Junagarh was a princely state located on

the Kathiawar peninsula of present-day Gujarat. Junagarh, being a Hindu-dominated Princely state, was ruled by a Muslim monarch named Nawab Muhammad Mahabat Khan III. After the independence, the monarch decided to accede Junagarh to Pakistan (even though 80% of the population in Junagarh was Hindu and there was no geographical contiguity with Pakistan, and it was surrendered by Indian territory). This decision surprised the Indian Government as well as the people inhabiting in Junagarh, and soon the revolt started in the region, which built pressure in front of the Nawab. As a result, he fled to Pakistan in Late October. As the revolt started in the region, Sardar Patel, being India's Home Minister, took a decisive decision and saw Junagarh's accession to Pakistan as both strategically and politically unacceptable. Patel demanded a Plebiscite (Public vote) to determine the will of the people. After the Nawab went to Pakistan, Sir Shah Nawaj Bhutto (Father of future Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto) invited the government of India to take over administration. India agreed to the situation and conducted a plebiscite in February 1948 in which 99% of the voters chose to join India. Junagarh's accession to India was thus formalised through a democratic process, seeking a precedent for handling other princely states. Seeing the incident of Junagarh, the neighbouring princely state of Mangrol and Babariawad declared accession to India.

Case study of Hyderabad

The merger of Hyderabad into the Union of India was one of the most complex and interesting chapters in India's post-independence journey. Hyderabad, being the largest and the wealthiest princely state in 1947, was ruled by the Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan. The societal situation of Hyderabad was more or less same as Junagarh; here also, the population of the citizens was dominated by 80% Hindus, and the monarch was a muslim. Everything was going well until Nizam made the decision to maintain Hyderabad as an independent sovereign state and refused to go for merger with either of the newly formed dominions. The Nizam not only refused to merge with India, but he simultaneously started to approach to United States and tried to establish diplomatic relations with foreign powers, which was viewed by India as a direct challenge to its sovereignty.

These decisions of Nizam raised the tensions for the people of Hyderabad, and the government of India sharply. Soon, communal violence spread, and Law and order started to deteriorate very rapidly. The rising tension in the region soon became a major national concern. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Saw Nizam's decision as a serious threat to national integration and internal stability. He started negotiating with Nizam on behalf of the Government of India, but soon he realised that this issue would not be resolved just through negotiations, he took the decision to act. In September 1948, India launched "Operation Polo", a swift military action to annexure Hyderabad. In just five days, Indian troops entered the state and defeated the Razakars (a radical group led by Kasim Razvi, which used violence to suppress dissent and intimidate the Hindu population) and took control of Hyderabad. On 17th September 1948, Hyderabad was formally integrated into the Indian Union. The integration of Hyderabad, apart from resolving major secessionist challenges, also showcased Patel's strong leadership, India's resolve to maintain territorial unity and the necessity of

combining diplomacy with decisive action when National interest is at stake.

Case study of Kashmir

The Jammu and Kashmir integration issue was one of the most sensitive and strategically important episodes in the history of Independent India. In 1947, when India gained independence from the British, Kashmir was under a Monarchy ruled by a Hindu ruler named Raja Hari Singh. Although the state population was dominated by a Muslim majority, the Maharaja initially decided to remain independent, hoping to avoid accession from India or Pakistan. However, October 1947 brought a dramatic situation in front of the Maharaja administration when the tribal militants from Pakistan, supported by the Pakistani Army, invaded Kashmir to forcibly annexure it.

Facing the aggression, Maharaja Hari Singh wanted military assistance from India. The then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Home Minister Sardar Patel clearly conveyed their message to the Maharaja that military assistance could only be provided if Kashmir formally acceded to India on 26 October.

In 1947, the maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession and legally joined Kashmir to India. Soon, the Indian troops airlifted to Srinagar and successfully repelled the invader and secured the valley.

Soon after the conflict, the India-Pakistan border Dispute over Kashmir gained international attention when Indian PM Jawahar Lal Nehru took this issue to the United Nations in 1948, after which a ceasefire was called and a Plebiscite was intended to be proposed for Kashmir, which actually never happened. Kashmir got the special status of statehood by the Indian government under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which allowed the state to be autonomous in some areas but remain legally as a part of the Indian Union.

Administrative and institutional unification

As the process of unification and integration of fragmented India was going on, Sardar Patel recognised the urgent need for a strong and unified bureaucracy, which was necessary for maintaining law and order and the implementation of policy across the fragmented nation. Due to this, he advocated for the creation of All India Services, especially Services like the Indian Administrative Services and the Indian Police Service. He believed that these services would be the steel frame of India, which would function as a nation builder and help to maintain and implement reform across linguistic, regional and communal lines. He believed that administrative efficiency and cultural coherence can exist together. Hence, he supported the formation of linguistic and administrative provinces. His vision about India's linguistic and administrative provinces ensured that India's federal structure was not just political but also administratively integrated. Sardar Patel's hard work in building the foundation for the institution of governance helped stabilize the country in the post-period and laid the groundwork for a federal but united India.

National unity and communal harmony

Soon after the partition, India was in a crisis of widespread violence, massive displacement and deep communal division. Analysing this turmoil, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel played an important role in restoring peace and stability.

Whether it comes to controlling the post-partition riots, his decision to deploy the administrative machinery to restore law and order was firm and clear. He also used his direct charismatic influence to calm the communal tension and establish peace.

He also plays an important role in the critical situation of refugee resettlement by facilitating the safe relocation and rehabilitation of millions who have fled across the newly drawn border. He tried to make sure that the refugee process must be swift, coordinated and humane, demonstrating the compassion and decisiveness necessary in the movement of national trauma.

Beyond administrative action, Patel firmly opposed communalism in all forms and advocated the spirit of religious tolerance and secularism. He was a strong supporter of basic fundamental rights and wanted Indian society to rise above religious diversity and guarantee equal rights to all citizens regardless of faith. His public appeal for unity and his insistence on constitutional secularism laid a strong foundation for communal harmony in independent India. Patel's leadership during this volatile period helped preserve India's social fabric and strengthened the vision of a plural, inclusive, and united nation.

Legacy and long-term impact

Since 78 years of Independence have passed, Sardar Patel's Legacy continue to shape India's political and administrative picture. To celebrate the spirit of unity and his indelible contribution to the nation, Rastriya Ekta Diwas is being celebrated every year on the 31st of October on his birthday. Recognised as the architect of India's territorial integration, the Statue of Unity (the world's tallest statue) stands in Kevadia district of Gujarat (also known as Ekta Nagar) as a monumental tribute to his unwavering commitment to national integration. Patel's efforts in the consolidation of 560 princely states into a single federated union led to the foundation of the modern federal system of India, which reflects the delicate balance between the central and state authorities. His administrative vision continues to influence the Governance model, especially through the support of All India services, which strengthen the institutional framework and a spirit of cohesion across the country. Further, Sardar Patel's legacy could be counted by his approach towards National Security and internal Stability, especially in this contemporary complex geopolitical situation of India.

His vision not only resolves the sudden post-independence fragmented Indian Society but also provides a long-term vision for managing diversity, federal cooperation and preserving the sovereignty of the Indian Union. His legacy, therefore, endures as a guide in the ongoing missions of nation-building.

Conclusion

The contribution of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in the making of Modern India is both Fundamental and transformative. Playing a decisive role in integrating over 560 princely states into a single federated union and preventing the fragmented political structure, he became the chief architect of India's Political unification. The vision of the All India Services and strong institutional services led Patel to lay the bedrock for strong, professional and impartial civil services which can uphold the administrative unity of the nation. His belief and commitment towards national unity, secularism,

and communal harmony in the period of partition induced violence and dislocation, highlighting his professional statesmanship and deep commitment to democratic means. In the contemporary fractured political climate marked by identity-based polarisation, Regionalism and challenges to federal cohesion, Sardar Patel's legacy holds renewed relevance. His vision of cooperative federalism, institutional integrity and national interest over parochial divisions serves as a vital lesson for contemporary leadership. Sardar Patel's legacy is not just one of historical consolidation, but of continuous nation-building that demands reflection and reapplication in present times.

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