

## **H.K. Thakur. Sardar Patel: an icon of India's unity**

**Bhawna Sharma & Misbahuddin Yousufzai**

The present-day political and ideological landscape of India has seen the reassessment of Indian national leadership, shaped by the post-globalisation dynamics like the identity politics, rise of populist outcry, and shifts in party dominance patterns. The emergence of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) as a vehement nationalist force in India has stirred up debates around the legacies of prominent leaders such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, V. D. Savarkar, Bhagat Singh, and B. R. Ambedkar, which has resulted in recalibration of historical narratives about India's freedom struggle and nation-building. Sardar Patel, however, has been accorded particular prominence as the "Iron Man of India," symbolising national unity, administrative rigor, and pragmatic political leadership. State-sponsored commemorations such as Rashtriya Ekta Diwas (RED) and monumental projects like the *Statue of Unity* reflect this renewed emphasis.

It is in this backdrop and the evolving historiographical and political context that *Sardar Patel: an icon of India's unity* intervenes. The volume moves beyond the conventional rhetoric of presenting Sardar Patel as the integrator of 564 princely states and presents him as a master mass mobiliser, institution-builder, adept minister, constitutional thinker, and realist statesman. Comprising twelve thematic chapters, the book examines Sardar Patel's role as a grand mass mobiliser, in secularism, education, governance, party organisation, civil services, internal security, and foreign policy, contending that his vision of unity was grounded in strong institutions, social harmony, and responsible citizenship principles central to the making of the modern Indian state.

The volume builds upon and critically extends a substantial body of scholarship on Patel. Besides the multi-volume projects like *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, edited by Durga Das (1974), *Select Correspondence of Sardar Patel* edited by V. Shanker (1974),

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and *Collective Works of SVP*, edited by P.N. Chopra (1991), the volume also draws from the biographies and appraisals by V.P. Menon (1956), D.V. Tahmankar (1970), P.N. Chopra (1977), Maniben Patel's diary (1989), Rajmohan Gandhi (1990), N.D. Parikh (1996), Vijay Tendulkar (2002), Balraj Krishna (2012), Sinha & Roy (2018) and Kothari (2019). All these volumes have variously framed Patel as a realist nationalist, a staunch mass mobiliser during the freedom movement, a stabilising post-independence force, an integrator, an inspiration behind the modern Indian civil service, a constitution maker and a strategic thinker. Thakur's edited volume distinguishes itself by integrating these strands and offering a multi-dimensional reassessment that combines institutional, ideological, ethical, and strategic perspectives.

### **Patel as mass leader, organiser, and nationalist**

Several chapters of the volume foreground Sardar Patel as a strong organisational strategist, discipline maker, saviour of Congress and mass mobiliser. Amit Dholakia's analysis of the Bardoli, Borsad and Kheda Satyagraha presents how Patel evolved as a leader, displaying his exceptional power to translate the complex political demands into accessible language and mobilise both rural and urban constituencies. Abha Chauhan's chapter traces Patel's wide-ranging ideological trajectory situating his political engagement across peasant mobilisation, the swadeshi movement, satyagraha, advocacy for women's rights, and interventions in minority and tribal affairs portraying him as a pragmatic reformer guided by civic values, secularism, and social harmony.

### **On nation, constitution and secularism**

A major strength of the volume lies in its treatment of Sardar Patel as a constitution maker and a critical constitutional thinker. Investigating the role of Patel as Chairman of the *Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights* Ranjita Chakraborty highlights his decisive influence on constitution-making, particularly his role in shaping fundamental rights, federal balance, civil services, and national security. Patel's view about the rights of minorities and individual freedom and social stability constitute the defining feature of his constitutional philosophy.

Harish K. Thakur in chapter five undertakes a critical and comparative evaluation of the conceptualizations of nationhood and nationalism articulated by Patel, Nehru, Gandhi, Tagore, and Aurobindo, thus foregrounding the philosophical foundations, and political implications that guided their notions of the Indian nation. Thakur argues that his nationalism was state-centred and closer to constitutional patriotism than

cultural nationalism. Khalid Mohammed further strengthens this idea when he contrasts Sardar Patel's secular nationalism with Marxism, communalism, and imperialism. Khalid also highlights how Sardar opposed the idea of a Hindu Rashtra and stood firm against sectarian politics, including the banning of the RSS following Gandhi's assassination.

### **Civil services, and internal security**

The volume provides a significant discussion of the debates on governance and administration. Terry Beitzel assesses Sardar's enduring legacy in public administration, critiquing contemporary challenges such as corruption, elitism, and lack of accountability. Beitzel also argues that Sardar Patel's emphasis on integrity, impartiality, and service to citizens is an ever-relevant idea. Pavithran Nambiar, relying on theories like Domestic Impact, Government Legitimacy, and Power Distance analyses Patel's view of internal security and state consolidation. Nambiar also highlights how Sardar Patel transformed the colonial civil services into patriotic national service and emphasised the interdependence of security, social justice, and transparency.

### **Strategic Realism**

Though explored scarcely, the volume consistently reflects upon Sardar Patel's strategic vision and counsel on foreign policy. Vinay Kaura explores the counterfactual possibility of Sardar Patel's becoming as first Indian Prime Minister, suggesting that his strategic realism and emphasis on military preparedness and intelligence consolidation might have altered India's trajectory on Kashmir, Hyderabad, and Tibet. Suresh R. and Rakhee Viswambharan examine Sardar Patel's view of China and Tibet. The correspondence between Nehru and Zhou Enlai, argue the authors, establish that Patel foresaw the strategic consequences of China's actions and advocated a firmer stance. Sardar Patel as a prescient thinker had a deep understanding of the long-term national security. One interesting take is by Chandrakant Langare and Charu C. Mishra who examine Patel's portrayal in Ketan Mehta's film *Sardar* (1993). The author argue that the cinematic representation of sardar Patel has played a significant role in reviving Patel's marginalised legacy. It has also enthused public reflection on the dynamics of post-independence politics in India. The chapter also notes the importance of cultural memory in shaping political understanding.

Therefore, the volume *Sardar Patel: an icon of India's unity* succeeds in presenting Patel as a great statesman whose contributions to the success

of Indian national movement, integration of Indian princely states, constitutional governance, consolidation of Indian administrative service, and strategic realism remain ever relevant. The volume's pluralistic approach avoids hagiography while offering a nuanced reassessment of Sardar Patel situating him within the broader challenges of postcolonial state-building. The volume not only acquaints the reader with the available prominent literature on Sardar but also encourages critical re-engagement with Patel's ideas, and thus book makes a significant contribution to Indian political history. The book is particularly significant for the scholars of nationalism, governance, strategic thinking and constitutional development. The volume bringing together twelve scholars with diverse areas of expertise offers a timely and valuable intervention in contemporary debates on leadership, unity, and the nature of the Indian state.