STEEL AND SOUL: PATEL'S VISION OF NATIONHOOD BEYOND THE WEST

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Abstract

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, a key architect of modern India, played a decisive role in shaping the nation's political unity and ideological foundations, which also underscores his unique perception of the concept of 'Nation'. It's in this context that this paper seeks to discuss Patel's idea of the nation, which stands in contrast to Western notions, which often define the nation in terms of legal-rational authority, individual rights, and state-centred sovereignty. Rather than viewing the nation as a contractual or purely political entity, Patel drew upon indigenous concepts such as Dharma (moral order), Swaraj (self-rule) and Samaj (community). For him, India was not a new creation but a historical and civilizational entity rooted in shared cultural practices, ethical values, and collective memory. His most significant contribution—the integration of over 560 princely states—was a monumental achievement that required strategic diplomacy and an unwavering sense of national duty, and this showed Patel's vision of emphasizing on integration without erasing diversity, promoting a form of unity based on mutual respect and social cohesion. His nation-building efforts combined administrative realism with cultural sensitivity, making him a symbol of both strength and inclusivity in the Indian political imagination. This study uses a theoretical-exploratory method to identify alternative conceptions of nationhood beyond dominant Western paradigms. It also presents Patel's positioning within the broader discourse on global political thought and the evolving idea of the nation from an Indian perspective in contemporary times.

Keywords: *Patel, Nation, Indigenous Tradition, Global Order*

Introduction

Partha Chatterjee (1993) critiques the application of Western 'modular forms' in defining the 'Nation' in India and in this context, questions where Anderson's concept of the 'imagination' fits. Imagining 'Nation' in the context of India, one turns to Indian political thought, which surprisingly itself cannot be separated from political philosophy,[1] and as such, it's interesting to note that India's perception of Nation heavily relies on the spiritual domain[2], citing terms like Danda, Dharma, Swaraj, etc.

One important gap that exists is why these philosophical underpinnings have not been converted into political moorings.[3] Thomas Pantham (1986) cites one of the reasons for it being rooted in the bias related to epistemological lenses with which Indian knowledge is attached to being under non-dualistic and philosophical tags. Thus, it becomes relevant for us to bring out the imagination of Indian nation by studying the perspectives of nationalist thinkers like Patel, who have not only used their imagination on 'Nation' based in indigenous understanding of the land but at the same time helped in carving the political thought out of vast philosophical debate that one finds in Indic history.

Contemporary discussions on the nation-state are largely shaped by Western paradigms emphasizing legal-rational authority, state sovereignty, and individual rights, often neglecting indigenous

understandings of nationhood. This theoretical-exploratory study seeks to look into Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's vision of 'Nation', which offers a contrasting framework, grounded in Dharma, Swaraj, and Samaj rooted in the Indian perspective.

Vallabhbhai Patel's first major entry into national politics began with the Kaira Satyagraha of 1918, where his ability to mobilise peasants against unjust revenue demands established him as a skilled organiser. He joined the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919, circulating Gandhi's banned writings and upholding non-violence even after Jallianwala Bagh. In the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), Patel raised funds, expanded Congress membership, and promoted the spinning wheel before focusing on grassroots organisation in Gujarat. His leadership in the Nagpur Flag (1923), Borsad (1924), and Bardoli (1928) satyagraha's earned him national fame and the title of "Sardar." During the 1930s, he strengthened Congress organisation, played a key role in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and emerged as a firm administrator. Arrested in the Quit India Movement (1942), his stature grew further, and by the 1940s he was central to negotiations over independence. On the eve of 1947, Patel was recognised as both a trusted mass leader and a decisive administrator, qualities that shaped his crucial role in integrating the princely states after independence. Despite his pivotal role in integrating over 560 princely states, Patel's conception of the Nation—as a historically rooted, civilizational entity—remains underexplored in political theory. This study addresses the gap by examining Patel's ideas, demonstrating how his approach combines administrative realism with cultural sensitivity, and highlighting their relevance for rethinking nationhood. It provides a distinctive framework for understanding nationhood and political integration beyond dominant Western frameworks in contemporary global discourse.

On Nationalism:

Despite India's deep socio-philosophical cohesion, it has historically lacked a concrete political unifying vision, a tension highlighted by Bhikhu Parekh (1986):

"Prima facie, it appears paradoxical that a culture with a rich and critical tradition of philosophy should have a relatively poor and uncritical tradition of political thought."[4] and this presents a very intricate problem that India has to face, which continues till date being resonated in the following words:

"This very cleavage between the inherited philosophic-social system and the political system based on the Westminster model is one of the most important political problems facing India."[5] Thus, in light of the above argument, we can see the political unification of India could be cited as one of the most important facets that got India the status of 'nation' in the world's eyes. (read west's eye). It's important to note here, though Patel's idea of nation was intricately based in the civilisational continuity of India, but for its survival, he believed in its institutional unification, a political unity was thus seen as necessity, where he spoke for rights of women, protected rights of SCs & STs, voted for Indianisation of education, believed in constitutional democracy and ensured sound institutional set up in the form of Indian civil services for internal security, law and order.[6]

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's conception of the nation was fundamentally rooted in his understanding of the Indian ethos—an enduring cultural and civilizational spirit that persisted among the populace despite centuries of colonial domination and foreign invasions. His vision embraced the Indian civilizational principle of unity in diversity, which allowed for pluralism and multiplicity without compromising the coherence of the nation-state.

Patel rooted his ideas of nationalism in Indian civilizational continuity not in modern constructs like homogeneity of religion, caste, creed etc while forming the concept of Nation, as is projected by Westphalian concept of 'Nation'. Though it must be understood that the Western concept of nation in itself is not that homogenous in terms of language, race, culture as the prevalent diversity found in the existing nations of the west. But the important thing is that they have been laid on the foundation of homogeneity, territorial integrity, a sovereign whose power is exhibited by legal-rational institutions and a population which must be culturally similar.

While the idea of 'nation' is presented as a contractual unity, emphasizing political principles like secularism, equality, liberty, and equal citizenship, Patel's vision transcended this by integrating India's

civilizational ethos into the state's functioning. A fully sovereign state, in this view, is tasked with embodying the nation's political consciousness and safeguarding the material welfare of its people. Historically, this role was at the heart of conflicts between kings and the church in the West, where the people's allegiance to their rulers challenged ecclesiastical authority. The western model evolved among other things, through conflict between state and church, leading to the rise of a secular, mechanistic, and desacralized nation-state. Consequently, the Western nation-state evolved by distancing itself from cultural and civilizational roots, becoming a secular, mechanistic institution devoid of soul, as described by Gandhi. One could argue, the presence of episcopal order in the West led to an intense conflict for power between church and king, and this "…. emergence and consolidation (of episcopal order), however, created dual power centres and conflict for dominance over the temporal and mundane domains. The sovereignty of the state became divisible between the pope and the king, representing two factions of the ruling class."[7] Hence, in the nation-building concept of the West, the religion and state have been completely kept segregated. But we find a different framework in India.

"In India, this duality of power and the resulting conflict for dominance rarely occurred. In the absence of an Episcopal order, the sovereignty remained absolute and indivisible and was located in the monarchy."[8]

And hence we find in India, the religion has not been kept aloof from the nation-building concept but respectfully incorporated within it. It's the land where religion doesn't seek to make its temporal power but rather directs how to lead the functioning of the temporal power, as " unlike the European priesthood, the Brahmins established no church organisation by which to contend for temporal power."[9]

Thus, in contrast to Western liberal separation of ethics and state, reuniting public responsibility with spiritual-moral order is the characteristic of nation-building found in Patel's ideology, which is exhibited in his ideology. The Indian state, in his conception, should represent both political authority and cultural consciousness, safeguarding both material welfare and ethical responsibility

Thus, it's not strange that many of the ideas of the Nationalist leaders are directly attached to the values that were taught by their religion[10], and it has nowhere meant to form any kind of limitation when it comes to the concept of nation-formation. Rather, it has only strengthened their efforts to carve a nation suited to the Indian conditions, and one could trace its roots to non-temporal desire for acquisition of land and lack of duality of power separation in the special context of India.

 For example, Patel's respect for diversity and trust in dialogue were not strategic conveniences but principled commitments rooted in Indian thought. This shows moral restraint in statecraft — a crucial difference from Western models that often prioritized centralization through force. His framework resonates with the Indian civilizational paradigm: deeply ethical, plural, and dharmic.

Indian leaders across ideologies drew on core civilizational values—karma, non-violence, spirituality, and ethical duty—favouring integrity and selfless service over material gain. Patel stands as one of the distinguished luminaries impacted by 'first principles'[11] of this enduring civilizational tradition, drawing upon indigenous concepts both implicitly and explicitly, like Dharma, Swaraj, Samaj, that reflect his shared civilizational outlook while playing his active role in the formation of an 'Indian Nation'.

Excerpts from his speeches reflect his grounding in India's civilizational values, though these are often dismissed as philosophical; however, it is these values that formed the core of a great statesman like Patel, who played an extremely important role in institutionalizing the 'Indian state' to uphold the spirit of the 'Indian Nation'.

Guided by his faith and the Gita's philosophy of karma, he lived by the principle of performing actions without attachment to their outcomes. His deep faith in the philosophy of karma—especially the idea expressed in the Gita as "Karmanye vadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana" (You have the right to perform your actions, but not to the fruits thereof)—is evident in his words: "If you are selfless, work selflessly, you will get your reward. This is a universally accepted principle." [12]

Patel believed public service required detachment from personal gain, seeing selfless duty as essential for ethical integrity. In one of his   statements, he marked: "To forsake materialism is to make our life worthy.

People in public life need to do so. If they indulge in materialism, there is always the danger of losing morality and ethics in public life."[13]

Patel held that neglecting dedicated work fosters petty politics, echoing the karma principle. He warned that ignoring this leads to jealousy and quarrels, harming the very cause one aims to support.

"But if you do not follow this principle, you will involve yourself in mutual jealousies and internecine quarrels, and in such a situation you can only do damage to the cause which you profess to uphold."[14]

Patel's leadership in Bardoli and similar satyagraha's was guided by his belief in dharma (moral order), as he stood firmly against the exploitation of farmers. For him, swaraj went beyond freedom from colonial rule—it meant self-sufficiency, freedom from poverty, and self-reliant education, forming the basis of genuine empowerment. These efforts were ultimately aimed at strengthening the samaj, fostering upliftment across communities, and rising above the sectarian divides that fractured the country.

His nationalism emphasized commitment and duty, not inherited identity. Patel's idea of the Nation was based on embracing pluralism, unity in diversity depicted in the cultural-spiritual unity of Indian civilization, which found its remarkable expression in Patel's efforts to culminate it into the political unity of India. This approach of Patel could also be cited as an example where there was an echo of realism tempered by moral-cultural responsibility, which prioritises national cohesion over rigid ideological lines and thus, Patel's viewpoint marking difference from many presents a Hindu civilizational world view which does not collapse in majoritarianism.

Patel's vision of nationalism transcended religion, caste, or creed, calling on every Indian to contribute to the nation's rise. He actively promoted unity, encouraging the RSS to join the Congress, saying, "No good will is served by remaining aloof." He opposed sectarian politics, cautioning Hindu extremists that "Hinduism preaches a broader outlook on life," and criticizing Indian Muslims for their silence during Pakistan's aggression in Kashmir. He believed India must secure its rightful place among the world's nations, particularly in Asia and he supported India's membership in commonwealth and at the same time to maintain warm relations with the west. While his world order was based on 'Vasudhaiva kutumbkam' but he recognised the need for a strong institutional and political framework as non-negotiable and thus India acquired its external expression of political unity through Sardar Patel's realist-rationalist approach, a legacy that endures to this day, which is explored in the following paragraph:

Unification of Princely States:

When the British left India, they took a very peculiar stance of providing the princely states with the tripartite option of either accepting India or Pakistan or remaining free. This colonial strategy was definitely aimed at fragmenting the subcontinent, expecting that a cohesive Indian nation would fail to emerge. This was a sure recipe for disaster, whereupon if it were concretised, India could never have become a nation as it is today, so realising the words of John Strachey:

"The first thing which the civil servants need to understand is that India was never a nation…"

These views were corollary to the fact that unity in India has never been as politically pervasive as philosophical unity. But it is important to note here, the concept of 'Nation' in India has been looked in a different manner, owing to the lens of the indigenous conditions, rooted in its historical factors where,

"The philosophical and social unity of the Indian civilization far preceded political unity. This philosophical unity has assumed different forms in diverse customs and cultural practices, structures, and languages and modes of social living, though all have an underlying unity as if they were different branches of the same tree."[15]

Similarly, Partha Chatterjee (1993) endorses this perspective, while subtly highlighting the challenges in terms of building the 'Nation' concept of India within this framework:

"… it becomes necessary to understand that the Indian concept of unity runs much more in depth than the external-political world where sovereignty was won over us by the colonial masters, to the deeper spiritual depths for which we remained our masters, our sovereign."[16]

However, despite focusing on the 'internal sovereign domain,' it remained a problem as this socio-philosophical unity was *"yet to find a meaningful expression in the political field."*[17]

And thus, the departing conditions of the Britishers created a vacuum where the possibilities for a political unification of India were made bleak. Here, we find the untiring efforts of Patel, also equated to 'modern Chanaya' or 'Bismarck of India', that we united as a Nation politically. The challenge of nation-building in postcolonial India was immense. Patel's approach to this complex task was primarily grounded in persuasion and diplomacy, with the use of force reserved as an exceptional measure—as seen in the cases of Junagarh, Hyderabad, and a few others. Notably, although Patel advocated for the military integration of Jammu and Kashmir into the Indian Union, prevailing practical constraints rendered such military action unfeasible at the time. His actions throughout this period reflect a pragmatic and strategic mindset that combined negotiation, diplomacy, and calibrated coercion where absolutely necessary. Patel—revered as the "Iron Man of India"—displayed exceptional diplomatic acumen, political realism, and unwavering determination. The 28 states (&8 UTs) constituting present-day India encompass numerous former princely states. For example, the state of Maharashtra included princely states such as Kolhapur state, Bhor state, among others, while Odisha similarly incorporates multiple princely entities like Talcher, Ranpur, Keonjhar, etc, within its contemporary boundaries. Likewise, Rajasthan was historically the domain of many Rajputana princely states like Mewar, Marwar, Bikaner, etc., and so was true of southern states as well. These princely states were often organized under colonial administrative agencies, including the Madras Agency, which managed clusters of semi-autonomous territories. Against this backdrop, the unification of India as a nation, despite its considerable internal diversity and the autonomous status of its princely states, was achievable largely due to Patel's strategic acumen. He successfully persuaded the rulers of these states that their own prosperity and the broader progress of India were inextricably linked, and that genuine advancement could only be secured through integration into a unified Indian Union.

At independence, India's heuristic comparison with pre-Westphalian Europe illustrates the fragility of this task, while the contexts differ, Patel's peaceful consolidation stands apart from Europe's violent state formation. Here, with princely states rooted in distinct histories, identities, and traditions, each capable of becoming a sovereign nation, the rulers conflicting ambitions, coupled with complex demographics, deepened tensions, while the Two-Nation Theory sharpened divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Several princely states posed challenges due to a ruler–population religious mismatch, such as Kashmir's Hindu ruler over a Muslim majority and Hyderabad's Muslim Nizam over a Hindu majority.

But even while decisively unifying the nation, Patel maintained goodwill, treating resistant states like Bhopal with respect and a conciliatory approach. In a letter dated September 1, 1947, he wrote to the Nawab of Bhopal:

"I do not look upon the accession of your state to the Indian Dominion as either a victory for us or a defeat for you. It is only right and propriety which have triumphed in the end, and in that triumph, you and I have played our respective roles."[18]

This shows Patel's approach reflected unity without triumphalism, offering friendship and emphasizing a shared duty rather than conquest or humiliation. He sought the cooperation of even mutually ideologically opposed groups when the situation arose, showing his deep commitment to unity over factionalism. For him, the nation could not be reduced to a mere aggregation of interests or institutions, but a collective march towards a common goal.

Conclusion

Moving beyond the Westphalian framework, which is rooted in a particular European history of state formation, it becomes important to listen to alternative understandings of nationhood from the Global South, including India in the changing global order. As such, we must take inspiration from our own history and see vision of our nationalist thinkers for answers. For example, here we discussed how Patel's idea of the nation, grew out of India's rich civilizational heritage, shared values, and collective memory, rather than being defined just by territorial borders. He saw political authority as inseparable from moral and spiritual responsibility, emphasizing pluralism, unity in diversity, and the welfare of all, rather than

competition or uniformity. This exercise does not claim to present an entirely new perspective, but creating space for these voices is an important first step. It opens the possibility of recognizing a non-dualistic Indian conception of the political, rather than dismissing it as purely metaphysical or irrelevant in global discussions.

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[8]ibid

[9]ibid

[10]Religion, here is to be understood as the embodiment of spirit, dharma, and the moral vision it imparts to humanity, *as rooted in Indian cultural traditions.*

[11]'First principles' term as used by Prof. Liah Greenfield

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