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## SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF SARDAR VALABHAI PATEL'S ROLE DURING THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reflects on the political role of Sardar Valabhai Patel in the independence movement of India. Very few political leaders in the history of South Asia played their role exclusively along the ideological lines. Sardar Valabhai Patel was one among them. He contributed his services to the independence of India without any material and institutional interests. He seemed to have facilitated the process of political integration seemed to be facilitated by him and hence its analysis is one of the purposes of this work. This article probes the consistency and harmony between his ideological inclination and other situational requirements which emerge during the course of political developments in pre-independence India. Such inquiry warrants the analysis of his position in ensuing leadership patterns of Indian independence movement. For this particular purpose of research, leadership approach has been adopted to scrutinize his political role during the movement in enrichment of growth and level of politics in India. Methodology employed for the inquiry is historical interpretative. It is worth analyzing that his position as an associate of All India National Congress party never impeded his commitment to the independence of undivided India from stranglehold of colonialism. Although India was divided at the end but his struggle as a political activist had left behind an anti-colonial legacy.*

**Keywords:** Political role, colonialism, political Integration, party politics of congress party, leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was born in Nadiad, a small village in Gujarat. His exact date of birth is not known to anyone but in matriculation examination certificate his date of birth is October 31, 1875(Gandhi 1990). His father name was Jhavarbhai and his mother was Ladbai. His father was a poor farmer. Patel was one of the most important politicians in modern Indian history. He occupied several leading positions in Indian government including the portfolios of Home minister and Deputy Prime Minister. He had three brothers, Somabhai, Narsibhai, and Vithalbhai Patel. Sardar Patel helped his father in fields when he was young. His father, Jhavarbhai participated in the War of Independence of 1857 for the freedom of India. When Patel became eighteen years old, he married Jhaveria, a young girl of thirteen years from a nearby village. It was a custom that the young bride would continue to live with her parents until her husband started earning and could establish their house. Vallabhai Patel passed his matriculation examination at the age of 22. At that time, he was generally regarded by his elders as an ambitious man. Patel's ambition was to become a barrister but in order to fulfill his desire, he had to go abroad which was impossible for him at that time because of poor conditions of family. His elder brother, Vithalbhai was a lawyer. Vithalbhai, his elder brother became a member of Indian Legislative Council. Beginning his political rise from Bombay political spheres in the 1910s, Vithalbhai became a prominent figure in moderate Congress circles and was eventually elected President of the Central Legislative Assembly in 1925. Vallabhai's real entrance into Indian politics came after a short and thin khadi-clade. His brother, Vithalbhai attended coaching classes before entering himself for examination, but Vallabhbhai Patel did not attend coaching classes. He borrowed books from lawyers and studied their judgment. He listen argument of lawyers and passed the examination of law as a private candidate. He had no money to begin his practice of law. He borrowed some money from his friends and hired a room in Godha town where he started his practice.

As Vallabhbhai Patel wished to become a barrister, he started saving money and making preparation to go to England for Bar-at-Law. He went to England and studied wholeheartedly. He stood first in the class and completed his Bar-at-Law within two years(Krishna 1997). As soon as he returned to India, Vallabhbhai Patel set up practice as a barrister at Ahmadabad and as a result, his influence increased as a barrister. During that time he was not interested in politics.

Vallabhbhai Patel played an important role in Indian politics. His role is appreciated for integration of polity of independent India. He is remembered as Sardar Vallabhai Patel in many places of India and other countries where the word Sardar is understood as Chief in conversations among common people. Patel was forerunner of movements of dispossessed faction of the society. That dispossessed faction included peasants belonging to Kheda, Bardoli and Borsad in Gujrat. Those movements were pursued through civil disobedience without use of violence. Such non-violent civil disobedience as means of running the movement made him an unsurpassed influential leader. Such influential leadership traits and ability to organize the followers rose him to leading position in All India National Congress at that time when Congress was passing through difficult time defined by internal cracks and divergent tendencies. He gathered the centrifugal orientations in the party and transformed it into an impacting force in 1934

and 1937. Great deal of Congress victory in 1937 elections could be attributed to Patel's organizing capabilities. Likewise, such cohesive and coalescing characteristics of Patel were instrumental in Quit India Movement. His popular political posture put him behind the bars from 1931 to 1934 and from 1942 to 1945. One can see the repetition of Patel's role as uniting actor in Indian politics during his tenure as Deputy Prime Minister of India and Home Minister after Independence, when he successfully rehabilitated riot-ravaged Punjab and Delhi. His leading relief efforts restored the overall situation of Punjab and Delhi to normalcy.

### **Sardar Patel's role in Integrating Princely States into India:**

Patel took charge of the assignment to sustain a united India from byproduct of semi-independent princely states, colonial provinces and possessions. He made full use of diplomacy as a mechanism to initiate and drive political negotiations. Diplomacy as a mechanism, was supplied with optional use of military action to forge unity in nation and keep it intact. His matured leadership made smooth and harmonious embracement of 565 princely states into vicinity of Indian Republic. He threatened the rulers of princely states to join India otherwise; they will face bad consequences. Patel invited many rulers of princely states one day before independence to join India and as a result, most of the rulers due to fear from India decided to join India. His political approach towards pluralism in India planted roots of democracy deep in Indian society slowly and gradually. Such inclusive and multi-dimensional approach enabled him to reorganize princely states for transformation of India into a federal republic which can compete with other modern federal republics of the world. His followers call him the Iron Man of India because he integrated 565 princely states in India. He is also remembered as the "patron saint" of India's civil servants for his defense of them against political attack, and for being one of the earliest and key defenders of property rights and free initiative in independent India(Tahmankar 1997).

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged from uncertain origin and occupied several leading cabinet positions in the Government of India including the portfolios of Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Although, he was nearer to Mohandas.K.Gandhi from the beginning of his political career in Gujarat, but at the same time he was closely associated with Hindu right-wing elements within the Indian National Congress. His perceptions of Indian Muslims (and indeed other minorities) were rather negative for years earlier to the transfer of power.

### **Sardar Patel's Attitude Towards Muslims and Other Minorities:**

During the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements, Patel was preaching Hindu Muslim unity in the early 1920s, but later on his opinion changed and started to believe that Hindus and Muslims could not live together at least in the provinces of Bengal, Punjab and Sind twenty-five years later.

Indian communalism focuses mostly on incidents of Hindu-Muslim conflict. This overwhelming focus on Muslims and Hindus inclines to turn attention from other areas of communal conflicts particularly between Hindus and other religious minorities such as

Parsis and Christian. Hindu society is generally portrayed as 'an open and tolerant' society willing to accommodate people of different faiths like the Parsis, the followers of Zoroastrianism (Hopfe 1991). Parsis came to South Asia and settled mainly along the Malabar Coast in cities such as Bombay and Karachi. They were a small but extremely wealthy community by the early twentieth century because of their involvement in many commercial activities such as alcohol production, cotton textile production and trade. From early 1910s, Parsis were a prominent community amongst the organization's leadership of Congress in which leaders such as Faroz Shah Mehta (1845-1915), Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) and Dinshaw Wacha (1843-1936) were at the peak. Gandhi has emerged as a leading figure by the late 1910s and his social program became a significant part of his campaigns to strengthen Indian society. Prohibition of wine sale and use was a major facet of his social reform and hit at a source of revenue for Parsi alcohol manufacturers. Gandhi's methods of mobilization and radical ideas of reforming Indian society did not persuade many Parsi politicians and socialites, who were predominantly westernized and geared more toward reforms obtained through negotiation and the constitutional methods of old style Moderates like Mehta and Naoroji. Given their prominence in urban centers such as Bombay, the capital of the Presidency and a major political and commercial center of British India, their influence as a minority seemed to strengthen feelings of suspiciousness amongst other communities seeking to climb the socio-economic ranking. This hostility also manifested itself in the political arena. Patel's family belonged to the Patidar community, a landholding cultivator caste. His parents, especially his father, provided a particularly religious upbringing.

#### **Gandhi's Influence on Patel:**

Vallabhai Patel's real entrance into Indian politics came after a short and thin khadi-clade. Gujarati named Mohandas K. Gandhi delivered a speech at a club in Ahmadabad in 1915 from which Sardar Patel influenced and soon he has become one of the most important political activists in Gujarat by late 1910s, who then organize the Kheda Satyagraha of 1918 (Hardiman 1951). In mid-1920's decade, Patel emerged as Mahatma's main lieutenant in Gujarat and Western India. After joining Gandhi's camp in 1917, Patel clarified his goals and discovered methods for attaining them. From this contented position he could carve out his career in agreement with his personality and ideology. During the years 1916-17 Gandhi introduced a whole new consciousness into the politics of Gujarat and of India. He emphasized the role of education in the nationalist movement, and the use of the mother tongue in education. He started his struggle to create political awareness among people in India, to include internal reform as well as confrontation with the British. He called on people to take pride in their selves (Spodek 1975).

The First World War carried together a short friendship between Indian nationalists and British officials. The British government required Indian support for their war effort and in return nationalists expected some amount of autonomy to be granted in the post-war period. Edwin Montagu (1879-1924), the Secretary of State for India suggests his administrative reforms that would make the Imperial Legislative Council more representative and would allow Indians to take control over certain government ministries in the provinces through the system of diarchy. Justice Rowlatt argued that despotic measures were needed to be taken due to the 'seditious atmosphere' existed in India. The Government of India passed the Rowlatt Acts which permitted for government

oppression, a continuation of the *Defence of India Act* which was in effect during the First World War. These repressive measures included press censorship also. Apart from infuriating Indian nationalists, many of whom were Hindu, the British managed also to aggravate Sunni Muslims throughout India. Due to the Ottoman Emperor's alliance with Germany in World War One, the British Government reduced the Ottoman Empire, taking control over the holy lands of Islam in Western Asia. By the end of the war, Gandhi's popularity gained strength, due to his involvement in khilafat movement particularly after the Champaran Protest in 1917. Despite his smaller movements at the regional level against the British and their supporters, on the national stage, Gandhi believed that Hindu-Muslim unity needed to be sheltered in order to stand an effective movement against the Government of India. British rule in Southern Asia was often justified on the belief that without its presence, the subcontinent would descend into an orgy of communal bloodshed. Gandhi believed that if Hindus wholeheartedly supported Muslims in their religious cause to restore the Turkish Caliphate's suzerainty over Islamic holy lands, the latter would naturally, seeing this 'outpouring of fraternal love', come out and support their Hindu colleagues in the Congress and abjure activities deemed offensive to large sections of the majority, especially cow slaughter(Nanda 1989).

### **Role of Sardar Patel In Hindu-Muslim Unity During Khilafat Movement and Non-Cooperation Movement :**

During the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement of the early 1920s, Hindu-Muslim unity reached to its peak. Individuals like Patel, who were not in favor of Muslims, now began preaching Hindu-Muslim unity. He asserted "The Hindus cannot remain neutral when the Muslims are in such a sorry state. If the Hindus want the friendship of the Muslims, they must share their troubles"(Tahmankar 1970). However, prominent Hindu leaders such as Tilak were uncertain to support the Khilafat movement because they considered it as an external issue, outside the real concerns of most Indians. Nevertheless, Gandhi insisted on insertion the Congress agitation with the Khilafat Movement and many of his supporters followed the Mahatma's line. Another problem was that when agitations took place collectively between Congress and the Khilafatists, Muslims tended to incline toward the Khilafat committees and Hindus toward Congress committees, thereby minimizing the chances of possible interaction between the two groups.

In the 1920s decade, Hindu-Muslim unity on various occasions assumed violent forms, including attacking Parsis and Christians. In 1931, in the city of Bombay some violent confrontation between Hindu and Muslim prohibitionists on one side, and Parsi and Christian Liquor vendors and consumers on the other happened. Liquor stalls were looted and several Parsis and Christians were killed during the *melee*(Kumar 1977). Ban on wine was not only a central component of Gandhi's social development scheme to regenerate India, but was also a stab in the government's income through its sales tax on alcohol. For Muslims, the drinking of alcohol was *haram* according to Islamic law while many Hindus deemed it a social evil. Many of the alcohol shops and other drinks throughout India and the city of Bombay were owned by Parsis. Gandhi was sure that if he could persuade them to give up their westernized lifestyle, wearing pre-dominantly western dress, speaking Gujarati instead of English and other alien habits, he would find "Ideal" Indians out of them. Some Parsis supported Gandhi's cause, while others refused

to give up their profession of their earnings and a cherished aspect of their lifestyle. Their resistance annoyed some of Gandhi's right-wing Hindu supporters such as the Sardar.

Patel's Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 laid a major impact on Congress and he was given the title of Sardar. In Bombay Presidency, land revenue was collected under the Ryotwari land settlement which taxed peasant proprietors directly. Under this settlement, the Government claimed ownership over lands and failure to submit taxes could result in confiscation.

### **Patel's Attitude Towards Muslims During Congress Ministries and Partition:**

Sardar Vallabhai Patel's attitude towards Muslims and other minorities was very aggressive and biased. By the late 1930s, Jinnah and his Muslim League were opponents and were agitating against policies of the Congress Ministries, accusing them as biased and even atrocities against Indian Muslims. While accusations of bloodsheds were unconfirmed, the behavior of Congress politicians and workers was indeed questionable. Rajendra Prasad (1894- 1963), an important member of the Congress Working Committee, wrote to Patel criticizing the behavior of Congress politicians sitting in opposition benches. Instead of scrutinizing the government's policies, he argued that they were trying to lure government ministers over to their side to secure a victory and were ultimately soiling Congress's good name. Prasad asserted that the *Musalman*s as a body have been alienated and in spite of all that Congress Ministries have been doing to be just and even generous to them, there is not only no recognition but positive opposition to even a good scheme like the Wardha Scheme. Prasad further said that the Muslim League propaganda has gained much strength on account of this attitude of Congress in Muslim majority provinces. Tahmankar(1970) quoted Patel frankly replying:

*"In Our country where the constitution is based on communal electorate, we cannot expect to have peace with the minority, which is aggressive and which is bent on coercing the majority and to compel it to accept its own terms. The Muslims are opposing even our good schemes because they have not been able to prevent the formation of Congress ministries in Indian provinces. They expected to rule the country but they have been sadly disappointed".*

Sardar Patel Vallabhai blamed the British government for implementing a constitution which allows the minority a greater chance to compel the majority to accept its terms. His ideas towards Muslims were biased and predetermined. His prejudice towards Muslims was clear by his assertion that Muslims were aggressive, perhaps characteristically. Hence, the minority rejected Congress's good schemes because they had no sense, were unnecessarily delaying and being infused with a religious fanaticism which prevented them from seeing clearly. Lastly, due to their lust for power, Muslims were annoyed over their failure to seize power nationwide. Hindus at the district level helped the communalism and separatism of Muslims at the local level while Patel evidently did little to prevent, or perceived no need to restrict, similar occurrences at the higher strata of power. This eventually gave Jinnah an opportunity to condemn Congress as a Hindu organization. He asserted, "No settlement with the majority is possible, as no Hindu leader speaking with any authority shows any concern or genuine desire for it"(AICC Papers B-8/1938).

### **Independence, Partition and Loyalty:**

The result of the Second World War and the election of Clement Attlee's (1883-1967) Labour Government in 1945 witnessed the promise for the independence of Indian nationalists. Attlee's government was committed to give Indian independence and announced the deadline for British withdrawal from India as June 1948. To handle negotiations between rival Indian politicians, Attlee selected Viscount Louis Mountbatten (1900-1979) as the last Viceroy of India. With the growing potential for a Congress-led government at the center, Jinnah and his Muslim League doubled their struggle to show that the two parties could not co-exist politically. The growing communal atmosphere, particularly the League's Direct Action Day in August of 1946 and the wave of partition bloodshed the following year contributed in great part to Patel becoming outwardly communal in the last years of his life (Patel to Mahatma Gandhi, 14 May 1939, CNSVP, Vol. 1.8, 91.). Patel believed that Muslims were savage, uncivilized human beings; a lot grew to become more solidified with the League's intensified propaganda and advocacy for violent methods.

Patel's language reveals that he considered Hindus as innately, capable of being reasoned with, agreeable to persuasion, and more often lacking of fanaticism. The behavior of Bihari Hindus was the culmination of League-induced atrocities elsewhere. Therefore, Hindus were not entirely to blame as they were retaliating. Furthermore, Patel suggested that "the mild Hindu also, when driven to desperation, can retaliate as brutally as a fanatic Muslims." Patel viewed Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League as India's version of Hitler and the Nazi party (Mountbatten to Cripps, 9 July 1947, *Transfer of Power*, Vol 12). He was highly sensitive about the conditions of Hindus and Sikhs living in Pakistan under Jinnah's government.

### **Conclusion:**

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, though highly offensive and ruthless in his politics towards Muslims, is one of the most powerful Indian political figures in the past century. He was a leading symbol of Congress's moderate communalism. This form of communalism was not virulent in its views about minorities as other more extreme groups who advocated extermination or expulsion. However, this moderate communalism deemed minorities, particularly Muslims, as savage, intolerant and unreasonable groups that needed to be contained and given little or no power. His these views made him unable to see and feel the situation and various socio-political problems of minorities in general and Muslims in particular.

He started his career with Gandhi and Congress at a time when Hindu-Muslim unity was part of the accepted political mainstream, he toed the party line. However, from the beginning of his political career, he still viewed Muslims as national zealots. As the years leading up to independence which marked with growing violence and communal conflict, Patel became increasingly convinced that the fault lay more with Muslims than with Hindus. Like many of his co-religionists, his ideas were becoming more and more pro-Hindus.

He was enormously affected by the partition massacres and the refugees' tales of grief and consequently generalized that since Muslims had been the instigators of the blunders, those who remained in India were to be mistrusted. Patel shifted his political colors when it suited him. When it was convenient to him, he would stress Hindu-Muslim unity as he did during khilafat movement. Closer to independence, he realized that he was often viewed as the 'Hindus' savior' and played to that audience very well. Moreover, with Nehru as his main political adversary and rival for the Mahatma's ear, he sensed that his base lay with conservative Hindus afraid of Nehru's growing socialism and 'pandering' to the needs and safety of the minorities whom they considered troublemakers.

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