

## Book Review

# The Sardar's Legacy

Shantanu Chakrabarti

*RNP Singh*

*Sardar Patel: Unifier of Modern India*

*New Delhi, VIF & Vitasta 2018*

'Sardar' Vallabhbhai Patel's legacy and stature as one of the leading Indian nationalist leaders has been analysed from different ends of the spectrum. Adulated as the 'ironman' who had ensured unity of India through the integration and organisation of the princely states and a rather smooth transition of power, in comparison to many other decolonised countries in Asia and Africa, through his organisation of the key institutions of the nation state. More critical assessments of him, while acknowledging his role in ensuring the much needed stability and order during the transition and the early years after independence, would, however, try and paint him as a conservative leader not sharing the Nehruvian secular-liberal ethos which would increasingly be projected as the official legacy of the Congress after Patel's death in 1950.

What is particularly surprising, as the author himself notes in the preface of this book, is the relative silence on the legacy of Vallabhbhai Patel until recent times. This particular book, in this context, is a welcome step in the right direction. Instead of being a biography of Sardar Patel, the book primarily focuses on his administrative feats and achievements mainly through his integration and organisation of the five hundred and fifty four princely states within the body politic of the nascent nation

---

Shantanu Chakrabarti, PhD, is Professor, Dept. of History & Convenor, Academic Committee, Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, University of Calcutta.

state. Vastly detailed in its scope, the author provides detailed information on the complexities involved in the process of negotiations and the contested notions of legality and paramountcy which had severely taxed the ingenuity and the iron will of Vallabhbhai Patel along with his trusted officials involved in the process like for instance, VP Menon. Major part of this massive operation was achieved through prolonged negotiations without resorting to overt violence and bloodshed. Integrating the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh required coercive operations, but apart from Jammu and Kashmir, which developed into a much more complex problem due to a number of external and domestic factors, the other two were firmly integrated within India within a short period of time. The record of correspondence of Sardar Patel with Pandit Nehru and other important personalities included in the appendices also reflect the remarkable sagacity and farsightedness of the person in dealing with several issues. Perhaps the course of South Asia's contemporary history would have been different if his advice on the issues related to Jammu and Kashmir and India-China border had been appreciated by the concerned sections of the government and appropriate action had been taken within time.

The author does not go for a detailed analysis but also mentions in several pages Patel's role in framing up of the all India services particularly the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service firmly bypassing the objections and hostility reserved for their earlier colonial avatar in the form of the Indian Civil Services (ICS) within sections of the nationalist discourse which wanted complete snapping of any links with the colonial legacy. Patel, along with several of his other colleagues, realised the importance of continuity in administration and nation building particularly in terms of personnel and institutions. This was particularly important as the author notes the sudden void created in 1947 as nearly seven hundred European and Muslim officers out of a total of one thousand and hundred fifty had left the service or had joined the Pakistan's civil service (p.221).

Overall, Vallabhbhai Patel's legacy perhaps could best be analysed in the context of certain new theories which have become popular in the scholarly discourse concerning the nature of India's nation building process. The Indian subcontinent is an ancient civilisation but her legacy as a modern nation state is of recent origin which would include nearly two hundred years of evolution as the colonial state and seventy one years of post-independence experience since 1947. As a result of the dichotomies, there exist several fissures between the Indian 'state' and 'nation',

making nation building a primary task of the state. It could be argued that Sardar Patel was one of the earliest national leaders to have a clear idea that this state building process would require strong state institutions which need to be pan Indian in their approach and this was what he had sought to achieve as a part of the government. Given the short period of time he lived in post independent India (1947-1950), it is indeed remarkable to look at the range of his achievements.

Vallabhbhai Patel's legacy can also be analysed in the context of the theory of India being a 'state nation' rather than a nation-state. The concept of the 'state-nation' introduced as a part of analytical research on the nature of state ideologies and nationalism in decolonised countries of the global South has been further explored by some political scientists in recent years. A state nation is projected as a multicultural or multinational country in which the state prioritises the task of nation building to engender strong identification and loyalty from their citizens, identification and loyalty that proponents of homogeneous nation states perceive that only nation states can engender.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the scholars referred to India being one of such state nations as India made significant gains in managing multinational tensions through skilful and consensual usage of numerous consociational practices. State-nations essentially focus on the political-institutional approach and though the scholars are yet to highlight it in greater details, we know the prime role played by Sardar Patel in ensuring this as a part of the Indian state's internal policymaking. Patel's much neglected legacy needs to be highlighted and further researched as recent approaches towards governance and policymaking focus on some of the relevant themes which were highlighted by him almost seventy years back.

The present book by RPN Singh is a great effort by the scholar to focus on one of the crucial achievements of Sardar Patel, i.e., the integration of the princely states. Very comprehensively, yet lucidly written, this book would be a ready reference for students, scholars and anyone interested in a very crucial period of India's contemporary history. One hopes it would set a trend for more research on the legacy and continued relevance of this great nationalist leader and his ideas.

---

1. For details on the concept of 'state nation' see, M. Rejai and C. Enloe, 'Nation-states and State-Nations' in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol.13, Issue, 2, 1969, pp. 140-158; Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav. *Crafting State Nations: India and other Multinational Democracies*(Baltimore: John Hopkins), 2011