Many Facets of Sardar Patel's Legacy

Mains: *GS-I – History | Important Personalities*

Why in news?

The 151st birth anniversary of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel falls on October 31, 2026.

Who is Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel?

- **Vallabhbhai Patel** – He was an Indian barrister (a type of lawyer who specialises in courtroom advocacy) & statesman.
- He was one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress during the struggle for Indian independence.
- He was India's 1st Deputy Prime Minister & 1st Home Minister.
- **Birth** – He was born in Nadiad, Gujarat, on October 31, 1875.
- **Career** – He completed law studies in England and returned to India as a barrister in 1913.
- **Ideology** – He was strongly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of nonviolence and peaceful protest.

To know more about Patel, click here

How is Patel seen as relevant in many ways beyond the image of Iron Man?

- **A Leader seen in many ways** – For some, he was the robust foil to Jawaharlal Nehru's gentleness and urbane eloquence.
- For others, he was a son of the soil who deserved to be Prime Minister but sacrificed his ambition for the larger good of the nation.
- For some, he was a "unifier" who played a major role in integrating 500 princely states into the Indian Union, making a cohesive modern India possible.
- For others, he was a right-wing proponent in a centrist party.
- **Patel's continuing relevance** – In the new edition of Patel: A Life, biographer Rajmohan Gandhi argues that Patel remains highly relevant even after 75 years of his death.
- Notes that modern India is very different from the era in which Patel lived. However, contemporary politicians, media commentators, filmmakers, and others continue to invoke Patel, often drawing him into present-day political debates.
- **Political Appropriation of Patel** – One notable irony is that Patel is often associated today with political forces linked to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), despite the fact that he banned the RSS after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

- **A Deeper Look at the Man** – The biographer provides fresh insights into Patel's life and career, tracing his rise from a middle-class family in Gujarat to one of India's foremost national leaders.
- Biographer R.N.P. Singh, in Sardar Patel: Unifier of Modern India, even compares Patel to German statesman Otto von Bismarck because of his role in national integration.
- **More Than an Iron Man** – While Patel is often celebrated for his firmness and administrative skill, Rajmohan Gandhi presents a broader picture. Rather than portraying him only as a tough unifier, Gandhi depicts Patel as a compassionate humanist whose political actions were guided by concern for people and national harmony.
- **Patel's response to partition violence** – Discussing the violence of Partition, as a Hindu, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was naturally more affected by reports of Hindu and Sikh suffering. However, Gandhi emphasises that Patel remained fair and impartial in his actions.
- **Justice above community** – Although Patel deeply felt the pain of Hindus and Sikhs, he did not allow personal sentiments to influence governance. He acted firmly against offenders from his own community and upheld the rule of law regardless of religious identity.
- **Patel, Not a Champion of Religious Supremacy** – The author states that it is misleading and troubling to portray Patel as a supporter of Hindu dominance over Muslims.
- He argues that using Patel's legacy to justify a politics of Hindu supremacy and Muslim subordination distorts both the leader's beliefs and his actions.

What about Patel's relationship with Gandhi?

- **National interest above personal interest** – Patel was a hero not merely because he had an independent view of India's age-old pluralism, or because he used his powers of persuasion and intimidation to make the princely states fall in line.
- He was a hero because he put the word of the Father of the Nation ahead of all else; even ahead of his own desire to lead the newly independent nation.
- **Choosing to work with Nehru** – Although Patel had the stature and popularity to seek the top position, Gandhi urged him to remain alongside Jawaharlal Nehru.
- At a time when the Constitution was being drafted, and the integration of princely states was still unfinished, Patel believed national unity was more important than personal aspirations.
- Mergers of states were incomplete. India needed to see Patel and Nehru together.
- Rather than stepping aside or expressing resentment, he chose to continue serving the country and work closely with Nehru.
- **Loyal Follower of Gandhi** – The dogged fighter that Patel was, he followed Gandhi's advice out of respect for him. As he said in Benares in November 1948, "I was Gandhi's obedient soldier. I followed him because our convictions tallied."
- **Reaction to Gandhi's assassination** – Unsurprisingly, when Gandhi fell to Nathuram Godse's bullets, Patel not only termed it "an everlasting blot", but also moaned that "we can never forget or forgive ourselves that it was one of our own misguided young men who did it."

- **Patel and the RSS** – Although Patel admired the discipline of the RSS, he did not hesitate to act after Gandhi's assassination. He imposed a ban on the organisation because of concerns surrounding the atmosphere that had led to the tragedy.
- The ban was lifted when the organisation agreed to respect the tricolour as the national flag ahead of the Bhagwa dhwaj, the saffron flag, and devote itself to cultural activities.

What about Patel's idea of shared living?

- **Opposed religious nationalism** – Sardar Patel strongly rejected the idea of India becoming a Hindu Rashtra.
- According to Rajmohan Gandhi, he dismissed the concept as a "mad idea." His views reflected his belief that India's identity should not be based on the dominance of any one religion.
- **A vision of communal harmony** – Patel consistently urged Hindus and Muslims to coexist peacefully.
- In a speech at Hyderabad, he appealed to Hindus to move beyond past grievances and asked Muslims not to harbour bitterness.
- He warned that tensions between India and Pakistan could easily create a cycle of action and reaction within India, making communal harmony essential for national stability.
- **No place for intolerance** – Patel believed that people of all faiths, whether Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, or Parsees, should live together with mutual respect. He maintained that no religion could flourish if it was based on intolerance and hatred.
- **Unity as the foundation of nation-building** – For Patel, unity and peace were essential for building a strong and free India. He argued that Indians should rise above caste, religion, and sectarian divisions and remember their common national identity.
- He emphasised that all citizens were equal and that national unity depended on recognising this equality.
- **Criticism of the demand for a Hindu state** – Patel openly criticised demands for a Hindu Rajya.
- He pointed out that millions of Muslims continued to live in India after Partition and made it clear that they were an integral part of the nation.
- He warned that any attempt to exclude or marginalise them would be harmful to India's future.
- **Opposition to religious politics** – Patel also criticised claims that "Hinduism is in danger."
- He argued that the real weakness lay not in external threats but in people failing to live according to the values of their own faith.
- He believed that forming political parties or movements on a religious basis was dangerous and that independent India should move beyond religious bigotry.

Conclusion

- With his clarity of thought and width of vision, Patel, as Singh writes, “left his mark not only on the map of India but also on the minds of her people”.
- Sardar Patel advocated an India where people of all religions could live together as

equal citizens.

- He rejected the idea of religious supremacy, opposed communal politics, and viewed unity in diversity as the cornerstone of a strong and stable nation.
- His legacy reflects an inclusive vision of Indian nationalism built on peace, equality, and mutual respect.

Reference

[The Hindu | Sardar Patel and the many facets of his political legacy]

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