

## The Patelian Tradition of Indian Unity: Makings, Manifestations and Misrepresentations

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The rethink on Indian nationalism in general and the 'freedom' movement in particular has taken so many twists and turns that far from arousing greater interest and curiosity the theme has lost some of the intensity of its impact on the Indian audience both in general and scholarly terms. The particular ire with the subject stems from an overriding and ever-succumbed-to temptation by analysts, despite newer perspectives and slants, to view the heritage of the freedom movement as a source for arguments that reinforce concepts about national solidarity and identity that no longer impress or convince. Sufficient scholarship exists that is both well equipped and prepared to disturb such perceptions and interpretations of this period which seek all manner of imagined, conjectured or constructed unities in the period leading up to independence. Such scholarship would rather focus on those differences and 'disunities' (or smaller 'unities') of peoples and ideas, of histories of fragments that make a substantive contribution towards making this episode significant and momentous for the historian and for history.

The basic problematic around 'national unity' and solidarity has been discussed repeatedly in the historiography that has surrounded the 'national movement': problems of the present and the future seen within the constraints of conjectured interpretations of the past, social harmony desired in the present sought and derived from 'traditional' ideas of a supposed stability in the past, or identity of interests being emphasised simply to the extent of tossing away conflict as a non-existent or at least a surmountable stumbling-block in the Indian tradition of 'unity'. Each position has led to a rather awkward juxtaposition between past and present images of conflict in Indian society and polity which have been treated variously by those who have been called upon to pronounce on such themes particularly during times of change, transition, or crisis.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about Gandhi's and Nehru's ideas about conflict, whether and how it

might be resolved and what kinds of patterns of unity would emerge as a result of these so-called resolutions. Gandhi has been referred to as one of the most creative innovators in the field of conflict management, a contention that many among us might like to take issue with. Nehru's ideas of national unity based on his interest in and emphasis on history and the historical process produced visions suggestive of changes in structures and the discussion has focused on particular agencies that could be instrumental in effecting such changes. The state is considered one such effective agency.

This paper deals with Patel's attitude to conflict and 'unity' or unities, with a primary focus on political unity, the kind of unity that Patel was more concerned about and engaged with at the transitional moment referred to as the national movement leading to Indian independence. It was Patel's view that striving for 'sameness', 'equality', 'uniformity', 'homogeneity' in social, cultural and economic spheres was a fantasy, a fiction. Political unity was the nearest one could come to by way of 'national consensus' and that was all that might be worth pursuing. Other kinds of unity (sought by Nehru and Gandhi for instance) were unreal and unachievable and therefore superfluous for that historical moment.

The origins of this attitude go back to Patel's early years and its most obvious manifestations appeared after 1934. Gandhi viewed conflict as peripheral disturbances in an underlying harmony and unity in society, disturbances that were perfectly capable of being handled and resolved, particularly by a satyagrahi whose capacity to discover and understand this underlying harmony was greater than that of an ordinary mortal. This was so because of a heightened sensitivity and understanding, a property directly attributed to the rigour, discipline and training which a satyagrahi inevitably underwent simply by virtue of being a satyagrahi. To suffer and yield were inherent parts of his training; the outcome was always conquest and victory; the suggestion being that confrontation, social and political could be avoided if such a method was employed.

These are not images that Patel subscribed to; and the burden of this paper is that despite all the limelight thrown on the Gandhian and Nehruvian visions of unity against the backdrop of a general quest for the national, it is the Patelian tradition of larger unity being a sum of smaller unities that has informed (and misinformed) the more prevalent postures and stances

adopted in the realm of political conflict and political unity in 'modern' India. These postures with their capacity to facilitate or hinder any real quest for unity contribute more realistically to our historical understanding of a wide range of images of unity, whether they are ideally palatable or not. Nehru's images for instance sprang from the mind, Gandhi's from the spirit; Patel's were from the gut.

To understand the shape and direction of Patel's images of unity we want to look first at the formation of his own images of differences, of conflict and resolution (we shall call it 'the small canvas' comprised of smaller unities); then at the translation or transfer of these images on to the wider political arena ('the large canvas'—with larger unities) and finally at the resulting and product—a supposed national unity. The idea is to try and see if the result is a distinct tradition of some kind—what is it based on and does it have some historical value?

## I

The cumulative effect of superior Patidar, moffusil lawyer and municipal councillor was the inculcation in Patel of such qualities as enterprise, manoeuvrability and the ability to manipulate procedures and persons, all attributes of the community of which he was a part and the profession that he had adopted. Migrants over an extended time period, Patidars did not come to the particular areas as rural elites, nor were they able to displace existing elites (Brahmanical landlords) in the areas to which they migrated. Most of the literature on Patidars and their origins emphasises their capacity to transform from ordinary cultivators to enterprising farmers, and then to elevate their social status by setting for themselves norms and standards that would define their 'Patidarness'. This differentiated them from other Kanbis and also produced categories of 'inferior' and 'superior' Patidars. Kheda district soon abounded in well-to-do Patidars who almost surpassed the Vantias as Gujarat's most enterprising community. Many had become traders, received education and went into professional jobs in their local areas and in more distant places like Ahmedabad, Baroda and even East Africa.

Vallabhbai imbibed many of these traits from his family and community background, which was also the source for some aversions and inhibitions. His father's religiosity turned Patel

away from ritualistic religion, and any excessive preoccupation with religion usually elicited indifferent and disdainful responses from him. His mother's courtyard-gatherings of local women who came to share personal, family and community problems struck a positive note in him. This form of social interaction seemed a more useful exercise and formed a natural part of his style of exchange and discourse. As a 'superior' Patidar unaccustomed to servility, his encounters in lower courts and later in the municipality contributed visibly to the shaping of particular features of his style of functioning and dealing with colleagues and superiors. Clients, fellow magistrates, judges, officers (including police) all adopted postures and attitudes in their dealings that differed from person to person, group to group, and that revealed features like caste or class prejudices, or highhandedness and assertion of official power, or quite simply indifference. Patel drew many lessons from his observations in these areas.

The Ahmedabad Municipality experience was a particularly educative area offering lessons in confrontation and coexistence. It would be time-consuming to narrate such incidents and events that occurred in Court or the Municipal Board or Committee and which formed a part of the crucial process of the gradual formulation of his political style and method—particularly in the area of dealing with supporters and adversaries.<sup>2</sup> First hand exposures and encounters in local politics, and his brother Vithalbhai's activity in the Bombay Legislative Council reinforced Patel's idea about the vitality of appropriately encased power and authority as an instrument for achieving change, or even preventing it.

Patel joined Gandhi as an apprentice rather than a disciple; there seems little evidence of the '*guru-shishya*' relationship at any point. Only a few years younger than Gandhi Vallabhbai approached him with measured reluctance and with most of his basic ideas on society and politics fairly clearly formulated. In February 1918 he discarded the English dress and adopted the *dhoti-kurta*, symbols of the prevalent 'nationalism' and for him also parts of his new politicisation. This received its first exposure in the Kheda Satyagraha. In the present context (i.e. tracing the development of Patel's idea of unity) the three Satyagraha campaigns in Gujarat—Kheda, Borsad, and Bardoli—and the Flag Satyagraha in Nagpur provide ample evidence of such ground rules as Patel considered essential for the formulation of any equation between political participants in the quest for a

national outlook.<sup>3</sup>

The first rough and ready rule was 'like-mindedness'. Translated into action in the first instance this meant agreement on immediate goals and the methods to be adopted for their procurement. Starting out with a measure of similarity of approach would mean an overall reduction in dissimilarities, assuming that some disagreements and disputes were likely to appear along the way. Those conflicts that did appear could be 'ironed out' easily by giving the dissident the chance to either fall in line or quit. Working through lieutenants who shared the same regional or community background made the task of weeding out recalcitrants relatively easy.

The second guideline was some form of structural framework to hold up this scheme in order to facilitate the exercise of authority and make possible some feedback. This was very much the prerogative of the leader. Areas that posed problems of cooperation, unity or discipline were either compelled (the ways were subtle) or abandoned (a punishment that turned out more damaging than blatant coercion). Cooperators learnt the value of falling in line and following 'the Sardar' unquestionably; they constituted 'the team'. In such situations as the satyagraha campaigns presented, with an easily identifiable adversary (the colonial state) this kind of forged unity did well. How it would fare when carried to the expanding political horizon of the national remained to be seen.

The part played by these satyagraha campaigns in making the link and transition from the local to the national has been discussed at some length in a larger work on Patel—by 'harnessing local political problems to the national political activity which Gandhi had made possible'.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion here is that on his own Patel would have had difficulty in making the jump from the local to the national stage, and that in these satyagraha movements he organised and supervised local talent, formed strong enough links and bonds with local men, and was able to attract enough political attention to be an asset and a vital part of the larger 'national movement'. The satyagraha carried out outside Patel's home province (the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha) in fact threw up some challenges that stumped Patel for a while—the province was a Hindi and Marathi (as opposed to Gujarati) speaking belt; it was a Swarajist stronghold. Patel's first reactions to Nagpur are significant:

For the first two days nobody would come near me. Nagpur is

absolutely cold. There is no response and I had to rely on outside help.<sup>5</sup>

Patel first brought bands of his own followers from Gujarat to keep up the average of fifty volunteers available for arrest. He then requested Rajendra Prasad with whom he worked closely, to send a steady stream of volunteers to Nagpur from Bengal and Bihar. He had to rely on the powers of the leaders of other regions over their own supporters for the sustenance of the movement. It was a first lesson in national net-working. It was also an occasion when he saw what the lack of like-minded followers could do at a time when concerted action was imperative:

If only the people are united, it would be possible to make the government yield within a week.

But here we have an orchestra in which every player plays whatever tune he likes.<sup>6</sup>

This was one satyagraha where the issue of loss of face has been actively debated. The first 'sell out' point was Patel taking active supportive help from the Swarajists (Vithalbhai, B.S. Moonje, Cholkar) to win local support and confidence. The second was the method of negotiation between the Central Provinces' government and the Patel brothers. Related to this was the reaction of local newspapers, one of which said:

The truth appears to be that the so-called non-co-operators think it below their dignity to seek unity with their own countrymen differing in political views, but are ever ready to try for compromise with the government with the help of their intermediaries.<sup>7</sup>

Patel and Jannalal Bajaj were both disturbed about the experiences in Nagpur, and the lack of control over Congress institutions in the 'Maharashtran Province'. The satyagraha following this one (at Borsad) was an exercise in meticulous military-like planning and organisation with a 'Commander' (Mohanlal Pandya) at the top, a headquarters at Ras and eighteen centres in different areas. Existing rural elites were relied upon to gather support. Meetings were held community-wise and Vallabhbai addressed the people as members of particular communities. Patanvadias and Baraiyas (who had turned dacoits) were more sympathetically treated than the downtrodden Ujliparaj and Kaliparaj. Appeals made to the farmer emphasised their

kshatriya status and their prosperous jagirdari and thakur backgrounds. The lower castes were accused of ignorance and lacking in community spirit and to them appeals for unity were considered fruitless.

In the legendary campaign in Bardoli, Patel tightened up many of the loose ends of earlier campaigns. He would not come forward to assist the farmers' representatives while the council-wallahs' were still trying their methods of resolving the question of enhancement of revenue. Once he took on the leadership among other things his methods of achieving unity became apparent. Once again the emphasis on an identity of community-interest was visibly dominant. Patidars as a community worked together often to distinguish themselves as a 'superior' class. Vantias who had much at stake financially in the land and in the crops trade, and also had closer relations with government officials, were embarrassed by the consequences of non-payment of revenue. Anavil Brahmins did not join initially and displayed reluctance right till the end. Parsis were cool; so were the Muslims. Dublas, who constituted half the population of the taluka, were debtors and workers and saw little reason to fight. Patel's strategy was based once again on discipline and on links with leading peasant groups—community-wise and class-wise (Patidars and later vanias; and with the 6-25 acre groups of landowners).<sup>8</sup>

It must be remembered that the province was a more constant area for political activity at this stage than the national level where the British presence and colonial policy played a pivotal role in terms of political direction. Bardoli gave the Sardar the status of a national leader but he continued to address himself to the local and the provincial. His preoccupation was still specific limited issues. The approach was still conservative. Even with increased pressures from the left to widen the debate into areas and spaces so far ignored or neglected, Patel adhered to his own vision of the national which was a sum of parts rather than a fusion of ingredients. By the end of the Bardoli movement there was a well-defined style; and there were well defined goals

What is Patel's idea of the national and how does it develop further with an increasing demand for nationalism (in the face of a further confrontation with the colonial)? For Patel national assertion was not to be confused with nationalist feeling. United protest over the appointment of the Simon Commission for instance was a nationalist assertion; so was the 1930 Civil Dis-

obedience movement. But that did not suggest nationalist feeling and it mattered little because Patel's objective was far removed from a single-minded search for nationalism in the manner of a meltingpot into which differing stakes and claims could be suberged to come up with the nearest thing to an identity of interests. The pursuit of differing interests and the retention of differences based on them was valid so long as the particular (immediate) goals accepted (by those in charge) were not put in jeopardy. Merger, fusion, amalgamation—these were not Patel's interpretations or translations of the process of nationalism, even while confronting a colonial adversary.

As a sum of parts rather than an organic whole nationalism translated into a coming together for the achievement of defined and 'agreed' purposes and goals without the actual shedding of such social features that distinguish groups and communities from each other. Patel was acutely aware of the reluctance of most groups to caste off any part of their group identity or modus operandi for that clearly constituted their *raison d'être*, their life force. It seemed futile then to exhaust one's energy in trying to achieve the impossible. In practical terms this worked out as a proposition with some contradictory features. Individual differences and disagreements posed less problem in terms of being 'ironed out'; social differences however had to be regarded as sacrosanct and not tampered with indiscriminately in the interests of wider goals.

Patel had problems with this position at various junctures of his political life, including the difficulty of fitting in with the Gandhian and Nehruvian images in which narrower loyalties and stances were expected to merge into wider configurations, in the one (Gandhian) case towards humanitarian and in the other (Nehruvian) towards socialist goals. And if one were to go by the 'proof of the pudding' axiom, political developments certainly demonstrated that Patel's image of the national received greater support and subscription than the more encompassing 'meltingpot' images. Ironically the retention of differences, theoretically a weakness perhaps, became in practical terms its strong point.

## II

With the title of 'Sardar' and the laurels obtained during the Bardoli satyagraha firmly conferred upon him Patel moved more confidently on to the national political scene. Some

analysts regard the 1920s as that crucial period of change. They see in the record of this decade, 'some "highly significant patterns of adjustment"... in the relations of Indians to each other and the British, in the Indian perceptions of their identity and the right framework for their lives, and in India's connections with the world beyond her shores.'<sup>9</sup>

The most obvious readjustment according to Brown was 'the breakdown of Congress unity and the reorientation of its component groups to the political context following the failure of its agitational strategy'. While the 1920s contained some of the seeds of the problems of unity and reorientation I would like to suggest that the real potent 'readjustments' came in the decade following. It is in the 1930s that one can locate the quantitative and qualitative changes—of organisation and ideas, of resources and opportunities, of machinery and alliances—that might be regarded as the fruition of that proficiency at adjustment and readjustment which had been developed in the earlier decade. The 'long-standing material of local politics' that had facilitated openings for emerging leadership and produced differences in style and direction in the 1920s also produced pressures that prevented leaders and policies from gravitating towards a national or all-Indian complexion.

What had been a facility a decade ago became in the 1930s a limitation to be contended with. Pressures and tensions from below had found a significant place in political organisations, in the political functioning of individuals and groups, and in ideological confrontations. Differences of locality, region, caste, faction, religion, community, ideology, tradition, economic interest, either found political space with relative ease, or were accommodated at a pinch. Whatever the method the result was a crystallisation of various patterns that emerged to confront colonialism. Nehru had particular problems with these patterns; striving hard to portray an all-encompassing classless egalitarian image of the Indian nation he was uncomfortable with these trends. Gandhi accommodated them even as he proclaimed that they were anathema for a society striving for self-respect for one and all. Patel found them the least problematic; reconciling these differences with the nationalism that was needed at that time for the goals of that juncture Patel was able to work them into the national picture with skill and dexterity. The decade of the 1930s is Patel's decade. It demonstrated his particular ability to satisfy the needs of entities smaller than the nation (groups.

regions, communities) by galvanising them in the political field under the Gandhian banner and meshing them with the 'national' without causing apprehensions and misgivings among these entities Patel was not looking for too many uniformities and universalisms.

To that end and to enable Congress to avail of its big political opportunity for participation in the benefits that would accrue from the next set of constitutional reforms, he started shaping the Congress in his own image. At the first AICC session under Patel's Presidentship on 1 April 1931 Gandhi and Patel prepared a list of new members of the Working Committee in accordance with Patel's plans for designing a Congress that would do his bidding. Bose was dropped from the Working Committee and certain provinces were not represented. Gandhi voiced Patel's reservations when he observed, 'If you want work from Sardar Patel you must not put in any man on the Working Committee who might strike a discordant note.'<sup>10</sup>

The same kind of sentiment was expressed by Patel in his Presidential address when he suggested to restless revolutionaries that until the right time came the settlements formulated by moderates would have to be accepted and the orders of 'Commander Gandhi' would have to be obeyed.

It might be mentioned at this point that the disciplinary 'unity' that Patel was able to engineer was not always effected with 'orders' and 'obedience'. Reassurances were given to peasants about the return of lands forfeited during satyagraha campaigns. Support was forthcoming to mill owners of Ahmedabad and Bombay that the movement for Swadeshi did not imply the closing of the Bombay Cloth Market. A statement was communicated to the Bombay merchants through Purshotamdas Thakurdas, that 'What Congress wants is, as is well known, the stoppage of import of sale of foreign cloth. As far as I am aware even the Bombay PCC is not against the sale of mill-made cloth.'<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, assurances were even provided to merchants who had large stocks of foreign cloth. While dispelling any hopes the merchants might have had of selling such cloth later after the boycott movements were suspended Patel was able to guarantee to them that if they had not already taken such cloth to Delhi to burn it, they should make an inventory of their stocks and seal them; they would be paid back every penny when a national government was established in the country. General hartals, he

went on to say, were to be treated purely as symbols of protest and not as impediments to commerce and trade. Patel took pains to protect his allies.<sup>12</sup>

These equations brought dividends soon enough. In March 1933 the White paper with detailed constitutional proposals for the future of India's political development had been published. Following the suspension of general civil disobedience in April 1934 and with elections to the Central Legislature due in November, by mid-1934 began that period in Patel's relation with Congress when discipline and obedience were expected of all Congressmen:

You might have your own view on the political situation in the country. But forget it as long as you are volunteers. You are supposed to know nothing but service.<sup>13</sup>

There is no dearth of instances and evidence to demonstrate that it was Patel's initiative that was operative in restoring Congress's prestige and giving it the 'right' direction at this somewhat crucial juncture, beginning with Gandhi's retirement from Congress (a decision taken with Patel's approval and in fact after consulting with him) to working out details about how to tackle the provincial elections in 1937, it was really Patel's show all the way. The ascendancy of the socialists (in and outside Congress) and of other groups needed an urgent rethink on the part of the Gandhian Congressmen. Gandhi had ceased to mean the singular Gandhi now; there were others who represented Gandhi and who were restive. To deal with them required not an ideological Gandhian but a pragmatist. Patel was the obvious choice—not Gandhi's personal choice but the inevitable choice that would keep Congress united (which meant in control and of one mind albeit moulded) and would also fashion Congress in the image that had been proven to be the most effective to combat the colonial power as well as Indian opponents.<sup>14</sup>

This period provides ample evidence of what Patel really intended when he talked of national unity. In many speeches he used 'discipline' interchangeably with unity. It often meant simply the observance of his (coterminous with Congress's) dictates and succumbing to his (also Congress's) will. He commented, 'In the midst of a great struggle if every soldier wants to think and act for himself, the war cannot be carried on much less won...we must accept some limits to democracy of

thought and action'.<sup>15</sup>

The changes proposed in the Congress constitution in October 1934 ensured complete power to the Working Committee, reduced delegates from six thousand to two thousand (the figure recommended was one thousand), gave the President complete power to appoint his colleagues, thus making the organisation compact and manageable. Centralisation at the top and ruralization below were expected to meet such threats as might be posed by regional, communal or ideological dissidents. The new Working Committee had no member from Bengal (Maulana Azad represented Bengal); the only new name was Gangadharrao Deshpande, a strong supporter of Patel. The neglect of Bengal rancoured and was duly noted in the minds of opponents.<sup>16</sup> Election propoganda for the November Assembly elections saw Malaviya exploiting fully the sentiments of Bengali Hindus in Bihar and Bengal by pointing out that Congress was not interested in safeguarding Hindu interests, nor Bengali interests, for no Bengali Hindu had been included in the Working Committee.

Patel meanwhile toured in different provinces to give verbal assurances that Congress would safeguard the interests of all—*minorities and majority*. Mobilization however was through existing elites and the result was the development of rivalries in areas where Patel had least expected them, including Gujarat. Government observed the differences between Patel and Gujarati leaders closely and believed that Patel had been given too free a hand on the political stage, and that Gandhi seemed powerless to intervene; 'one may perhaps be permitted to speculate and wonder if the tail is now wagging the body'.<sup>17</sup> By June 1935 Patel's hold on Gujarat was more than restored; in fact he received a more demonstrative reception than Gandhi during their visits to the area.

Confrontation between right and left, between Patel and Nehru, indiscipline in Provinces, and factional in-fighting in regions—all this had to be handled carefully to achieve the one object that Patel was hell-bent on achieving: Congress's capture of the legislature and government. While he talked a great deal about unity being the greatest need he also suggested that the platform for that unity seemed inadequate and inconducive for achieving that goal. The goals of unity and nationalism could sound like so much rhetoric; so that in actual fact Patel made political activity itself the vehicular goal for getting the national

act together. The crucial aim was to speak in one voice. In March 1937 after the provincial elections, and at a time when the Working Committee had been called a 'fascist Grand Council' by socialists, Patel boasted about the lack of difference of opinion between leaders and members of the Congress. 'The Congress today is absolutely of one mind'. 'Discipline for unity' was all very well; but the India he was dealing with contained other unities, some of which he commended, some he took as they came, others he had ignored, and still others he rejected if they interfered with his idea of (political) unity.

Nariman, Khare and Bose were the three personifications of this approach and the unfolding of Patelian power over these three adversaries belonging to areas and/or communities that he had little control over or empathy with is an index of a trend of dealing with differences that brought out more rigid approaches on either side.<sup>18</sup> This was not confined to individual differences; individuals were only a front for more deep-seated differences, and methods used to put down one could very well be used to suppress the other. 'Suppression for unity' thus seemed legitimized as a method; no definition of either suppression or unity having been given, a blanket use of the method was more than likely to be dangerous. While it is true that the immediate goal had been clearly defined as that of wresting control of the government machinery from the colonial power, and to that end a forged unity even at the cost of suppression of liberty was considered acceptable, the fact was that translated into practical terms the methods could be interpreted both as nationalist as well as undemocratic. In a country with a strong tradition for unquestioning obedience and deference to many authorities expressed in myriads of ways the exposition of this political style and method contributed little by way of fostering wider perceptions that overcame narrow and confined identities. Whereas in civil disobedience differences had to merge but loosely in a flexible agitational framework, once government structures were involved inclusion and exclusion became clearly demarcated along identifiable lines of division and disagreement.

As supervisor and overseer of the functioning of Congress Ministries in the Provinces and of the conduct of agitation in the States, Patel did not in fact demonstrate any vision of a long term plan for greater unity or a scheme to contain differences and diversities. But, and this is crucial, while allowing for intermediary group affiliations as points of focus for mobilisation or

association there is nothing to suggest that he had particular value for caste, group, religious, or regional loyalty per se. These affiliations had some, albeit limited value and as such did not need the demolition treatment, nor could they be wished away. They were capable of being used without becoming ends in themselves. For Patel this was sound policy, for their demolition which some socialists advocated, was not likely to be achieved in a hurry; and even less likely was their replacement by larger affiliations that were unrelated to existing social relational patterns. It is in this light that we have to view his role in the decade that followed—the decade of independence and partition, of freedom and constraint, of unity and disunity, and integration and disintegration.

### III

The first experience of Congress as Government—'the First Congress Raj'—was ominous.<sup>19</sup> It endeared many, it also alienated many. To the extent that it was a success story meant for British consumption, it was also a failure domestically. Congress might and power had been exhibited for all to see; that had one kind of impact on the colonial power and quite another on rival political groups whose antennas now went up out of fear, jealousy, or plain insecurity.

Perhaps reassurance might have helped. There has been enough debate and speculation on that point and it is difficult to conclude at the end of it that placating and assuaging the political fears of opponents would have (i) achieved a more desirable end product and (ii) enabled Congress to maintain the kind of prestige it aimed for in the eyes of the colonial power, in the Provinces and in the States. To the extent that the patterns set in this provincial episode might serve as a trial run of how Congress's political gains at the Centre might be fortified, uniting and making common cause with opponents seemed unlikely to help. Patel sought a unity the he had fashioned in his own image, on terms that he had defined as he went along, and which was aimed at political efficiency and stability. Quick to see what kinds of issues, interests or alliances would destroy the basic modicum of unity necessary for sound political functioning he was not about to invite trouble by unnecessary gestures of inclusion.

Fifty years ago Congressmen carefully avoided comment and

involvement on such issues as would threaten the fragile unity they had effected. Questions about religion (cow-killing for instance) and social reform were considered potentially divisive and best skirted around or simply kept at bay. In the 1930s Congress was already at the deep end, as part of the government structure and unable to avoid much of the nitty-gritty of socio-economic reform which inevitably threw up divisions and protests. To open the floodgates further by inviting opponents to participate in policy making and thus dilute whatever little unity had been forged with considerable persistence, meant paying a price Patel considered too high. The result was that while he had used group loyalties earlier to feed into Congress political mobilisation and general organisation any truck with them in formalised Government structures where there were enough precarious problems was not acceptable. Increasing avenues for exercising political power control and influence were likely to cause excitement among all aspirants. The last thing that Congress would do was accommodate opponents in a share-and-share alike spirit. The prestige that the exercise of power brings has quantitative and qualitative dimensions which are jealously guarded for fear of dilution resulting from distribution.

All in all in assessing the brief Congress-in-office period in terms of performance the one feature that stands out is the relative stability in most of the Congress Provinces. The credit for it could be given to the party 'elders' and Patel in particular, who albeit under Gandhi's banner was able to perform more balancing acts than the best performers. Initiative may have been curtailed and the styles of many hampered, but the nervous postures of opponents are indicative of the extent to which it was a 'success' story.

So much so that Congress involvement in the States gathered momentum as a result of the confidence it accumulated during the period of Provincial Autonomy. The involvement was of course prompted in principle by the Act of 1935 bringing on to the Indian political scene the idea of an All-India Federation in which the British Provinces and the Indian States would participate 'together and yet separately. Congress rejected the federal provisions of the Act in principle for the importance they gave to the rulers in choosing members (not less than 52) of the Council of States. In fact it began active protests against the federal provisions after it had sorted out its stand on Provincial Autonomy. Earlier abstention in States' affairs had been prompted both by a

fear that rulers would tighten their holds on the people if Congress took an interest in them, and also that its socialist group, with such utterances as 'princes would have no place in a socialist India' would spoil Congress's chances of gaining political support and influence in a potentially crucial area. Patel and Gadgil clashed on this point and the former came in for further criticism when Jaiprakash Narayan (the Congress Socialist Party General Secretary) protested that 'right-wing' leaders could not smother the socialists opposition to Congress policy, and that if Congress policy was seen as detrimental to the interests of the masses socialists would 'work along our own lines to criticize and even oppose such policies'.

The debate about involving States' people was resumed under pressure from the left. Patel believed this was the opportunity that Congress had to seize for an active role among the States people. Mysore and Rajkot were the beginning. The culmination was the formal integration of the States in the Indian Union following independence. This early period offers an insight into the internal relations between different power groups within the States that Patel drew upon in negotiating with rulers at the time of integration. The different circumstances and equations within each State dictated the kind of policy and steps that would be taken in achieving the desired object. Some States in Kathiawar and elsewhere—Aundh for instance—had responded to Patel's suggestions and pressures in 1938 and introduced reforms embodying representation and welfare for the people.

Some rulers (of small States in Kathiawar) who resisted were brought to heel by other methods. In Limbdi Patel organised the boycott of cotton, a commodity on which the Limbdi merchants, and through them the State, thrived. The Limbdi Prajamandal executed the boycott which was supported by Bombay magnates; Patel arranged that a committee would ensure that not one bale of Limbdi cotton would reach the outside market. His word was command; he was after all part of the High Command of Congress which was in office. Even when the Congress Ministries resigned the boycott continued on an earlier momentum, and also out of fear on the part of the Bombay cotton brokers who preferred to stay on the right side of a party that had every chance of returning to power. Congress involvement in the States led the Muslim League leaders to tap support in the States; they were of course helped by the fact that many of the rulers were Muslims. This stepped-up interest in the States prompted Patel to

further accelerate Congress activity in the area.<sup>20</sup>

The stage had come (with the resignation of the Ministries, the War, and the States' struggles) when the 'tilt' that Patel had been giving to the 'national' movement in the crucial decade became more than apparent. A rejected (August) offer, the petering out of individual civil disobedience and many prominent leaders in jail till the end of 1941, all added up to the dilemmas on all sides. Tougher attitudes, clearer positions, harder bargaining—amidst all this the two concepts that were most frequently bandied about were inevitably 'freedom' and 'unity'. Leaders had differing opinions on both concepts. Almost consistently Patel's preferences had been for immediate goals rather than the visionary goals of Gandhi and Nehru. That was in a sense both his strength and his weakness. His domination on the political scene in the 1930s brought a focus on the immediate that characterized this sandwich-decade (between two vision-oriented decades) and Patel was the architect of the structural framework that housed most of Congress's plans and policies at the time.

But then came the period when visions and long term goals were in demand again. Congress was conducting negotiations on four planes—the British, the League, the Socialists and the Princes—each of which, required long term handling. Britain's principle of 'no freedom without unity' was pitched against Patel's insistence that there would be no unity without a guarantee of freedom and adequate moves in that direction. Freedom and unity underwent considerable modification as a result. The more reluctant the British seemed about giving India what it wanted the more rigid Patel became. The effects of 'Quit India' on India and on Congress also played a part. Political groups and contenders for power (other than Congress) stood outside the movement by and large and reinforced the cynicism of men like Patel whose ideas of 'nation' and 'unity' were not limited to territorial demands and fair representations in halls and chambers, to be worked out by all those who showed enough muscle to make a bid. India was a cultural unit whose politics had to reflect its existing images; giants had to take their place in the giant's row and pygmies in the pygmy's row.

British 'fairness' was all very well but Patel had an Indian image that he was reluctant to give up. He had made common cause with Gandhi for that Indian image. Their link was the Indianness they shared even as their detailed visions of that

India different somewhat. The more distant anyone's idea of India unity was from that of Patel's the more alien the group that advocated that idea was for Patel. (Allegations of communalism were levied on Patel for this attitude—a subject to which we will turn in a moment). In 1942 various groups withheld support from Congress (Muslims, Communists, Harijans, students) as a result of which Congress prestige suffered considerably. Patel looked unkindly at all of them. The reason was simple. Their reservation brought a setback in Congress's plans. Withholding support for an accepted all-India goal was for him anti-national. Bargaining for bits and pieces of territory or rights in the face of larger, wider issues and goals of national vitality was the ultimate in anti-nationalism. His impatience with those who were identifying with 'smaller' aims (in this case it was the Muslims, but it could be any other group) was expressed in January 1946 when the Parliamentary Delegation visited India:

Pakistan is not in the hands of the British Government. If Pakistan is to be achieved the Hindus and Muslims will have to fight. There will be a civil war.<sup>21</sup>

This statement was exploited by League leaders much to Patel's permanent disadvantage. By March 1946 the Congress Working Committee had appointed Azad, Patel and Nehru to negotiate with the Cabinet delegation. Patel had become the gauge and measure of the attitude of Congress on political matters.<sup>22</sup> On the parity question (5:5:2) Wavell and his colleagues believed that it was really Patel who was vehemently opposed to it.<sup>23</sup> The realisation that Patel's word could be an impediment irked the Viceroy and his colleagues. The inclusion of a nationalist Muslim in Patel's scheme of 15 portfolios in the Interim Government was unacceptable to the League. Patel asserted that this meant that in the case of a Nationalist Muslim to be a Muslim was a handicap and that Muslims would leave Congress if their religion precluded them in this manner from positions.

Nehru once wrote to Patel that Congress had done very little by way of presenting visionary goals or national programmes to the country. 'They simply cannot function in a big way'. This was at the time that Congress was engaged in propaganda for elections in 1945. It was a telling comment for what it reveals of the qualities of both Nehru and Patel, qualities that made them essentially complementary to one another, which fact more often

than not went unappreciated by both. Limited objectives, intermediary goals—for Patel these were crucial in the process of achieving national unity. His election strategy was also pointed and specific, relying on particular individuals, groups or regions whose prestige, power and position was used to exert pressure on voters to influence their political behaviour. Simply creating 'a lot of enthusiasm' (like Nehru) was not enough.

For all their shared participation in a 'national movement' the essence of Indian nationhood meant different things to different people, including those leaders who pooled in their resources and acumen in a common cause. Unfortunately this difference was interpreted as a qualitative gradation of the intensity of national feeling among individuals or groups. Nothing could be further from the reality. Confining ourselves to the period of the nationalist struggle let us look generally at the legacies of nationhood left by the three leaders—Gandhi, Nehru and Patel.

For reasons that are quite evident the least tainted legacy is the Nehruvian: a religion-free, community-free, caste-free, region-free, language-free image geared to all-embracing principles of equity and justice; within the framework of classlessness Nehru had made ample space in his images for the free, secular individual, a creation of the Western liberal tradition, who would carry this image of nationhood forward. How conducive this image was to India's historically and culturally inherited pictures of a nation is a larger question that cannot be dealt with here. It could form a subject for further discussion. It might suffice to say at this point that a scientific spirit, the neutrality and universalism of goals and the rhetoric of socialism carried the day and almost certainly absolved Nehru of propositioning interest oriented goals for 'free' India.

The other image (Gandhian) was more at home with the imbibed inheritance of the many manifestations of the civilization that was India, and had a universality and all-embracing quality that only narrow orthodoxy would question. Gandhi's 'universalism' did not come out of the Enlightenment; he had worked through all-encompassing ideas of cohesion and togetherness that rested on moral and spiritual values. Theoretically these could cut across more barriers than any scheme had done within living memory in India. The appeals were directed to such areas of human perception and experience in which the scope for distortion and misunderstanding were minimal.

But what if misunderstandings and distortions should arise? How would the machinations be worked out: Clearly Patel's basic functional premise was that India was a sum of different differentiated parts and pretending otherwise was both a fraud and deception. Such concrete measures and methods had to be spelt out that had an optimum capacity to harness the diverse features of Indian society that sometimes slipped through the utopian conceptualization that constituted the other two 'visionary' images (Nehruvian and Gandhian). This was the Patelian bestowal which supplemented Gandhian visions of inclusion. Translated into the realm of praxis it might take ugly shapes. Patel believed he could do all the necessary sifting to produce the desired practical results. If what emerged was stark, it could not simply be wished away. It could be shelved for a while, but eventually had to be modified (to shape) or sometimes be forced into shape. If it was individual reshaping it was easier to handle; regional was relatively easy; but if it was communal or religious the deployment of tough methods was the only way even if it was more than likely to attract brickbats, which it did.

Patel has had to live down allegations of communal and religious prejudice from several directions, just as Jinnah is subjected to an oft-repeated criticism that Partition was the result of his vanity, disappointed ambition and intransigence. At no point is an appraisal of Patel's role intended to be in the mould of a 'sole spokesman' thesis.<sup>24</sup> In the decades that followed independence, historiography produced an imagery about the national movement in which developments and personalities were often slotted according to the dichotomised categories of analysts. Events and people were handled and judged and then rehandled and rejudged according to one's view of history or the methodology one used to study those events and people.

So how does one actually assess Patel's contribution to the period and his perception of unity? The most common criticism levied against Patel as a national leader is that he had no long-term vision for India. It seems crucial to remember that Patel did not see himself as a visionary if 'visionary' meant having a dream of an (almost) all-inclusive India that did not take into account the realities of a highly differentiated and stratified society. Such a reality might bring all kinds of power equations with it but they were hardly likely to disappear simply by wishing them away with egalitarian wands. Patel wished to be an instrument in the attainment of a 'free' India: a job needed

to be done in the realm of the political in the first instance and to him visions and dreams, no matter how lofty, detracted from this the immediate goal.

Patel's emphasis on the 'political' highlighted his neglect of the socio-economic nuances of the differentiations that he was willing to address forthrightly, revealing a severe lacuna in his agenda. Unfortunately he never wished to be measured in socio-economic terms. Egalitarian goals, uniformities of procedure, universalisms—Patel was not enamoured by any of these. People were different, they were differentiated; rather than pretend that this was not so, it seemed Patel tailored his goals and methods around this reality. The primary concern was not social change; the immediate task lay in the political area (changing the locus of power from the area of the colonial to that of the national). In all of the three decades that he worked as the architect of a meticulously constructed ('nationalistic') power structure (without which he believed nothing could be effected) he harnessed support through prevalent interests and existing sub-groups. Difficulties might arise when the complexion of these interests (leaders, groups, affiliations) changed. Patel did not believe such projections needed to be worked out ahead of time.

These questions assume an understandable importance fifty years on. An important component of the current debates that surround pluralism, secularism, federalism and even fundamentalism in our society is what idea of unity, abstract and real, is sought to be inserted into the issues that surround these concepts. However a word of caution seems in order on this issue. An increasing 'communitarian' focus wishes to expose liberalism's failures as much as it seeks to assert an agenda positioned in socio-economic realities (which might be a facility for some and a burden for others). It would be presumptuous for such a focus to assume that we have suddenly 'found' the best ways of engaging with the people of India as they are (and were). Some political architects of yesterday (Patel was a prominent example) did address this many-layered India as it was—regions, communities, groups (interest and other)—albeit politically, and rejected the universalisms of the radicals and the reactionaries. It is not difficult to see the ease with which they might have all too easily become icons for those who would wish to demonstrate the irrelevance of a colonially imposed liberalism and individualism. The quest for larger unities giving way once again to a

recognition of and acceptance of smaller 'unities' is not without its fair share of dangers. The earlier protagonists that exemplified a degree of (political) success with such (workable) unities are held up as exemplary leadership-model material. Patel has served as one such model. The leaders of particular political parties today have held out Patel's ideas of 'unity' without uniformity as exemplary of the kind of national unification that is able to carry with it the essence of a larger multicultural tradition which they would wish to project as the tradition of the majority community and which Patel is believed to have sought. There is a yearning in some quarters for another Patel.

There is an ambivalence about the messages that might be invoked from Patel's unification policies and strategies. The same utterances and representations have in fact produced contradictory impulses—of all-encompassing national unity as well as of smaller community and group loyalties (variously interpreted). And these contradictory impulses have in turn been further (mis)represented and misused to corroborate methods and styles that might be highhanded and indeed undemocratic even as they profess to be 'majoritarian'. From these impulses have emerged a range of positions that depend on just how much free play might be permitted to groups and associations that take into account the nuanced cultural reality that is India, far more effectively than that over-arching institution bashing which is the pre-occupation of many of us. The answers unfortunately are as complex as the questions for the choice between State oppression and community (group) oppression is no choice at all, and certainly not one that might be left solely in the hands of the privileged and well endowed.

This paper has sought to place Patel's ideas about Indian unity in its contextual and ideological framework. It would also wish to suggest how there might be room for both manoeuvre, misrepresentation and distortion in receiving and then retransmitting the signals that the Patelian tradition of 'unity' sent out; that such misrepresentations were more than likely today, given the climate in which smaller loyalties, unities, interests, affiliations and allegiances are encouraged as part of the non-liberal armoury that would wish to discard two legacies—the liberal and the radical—without working out how the multifarious oppressions of the 'smaller unities' would be avoided.

Perhaps Patel misjudged and underestimated an inherent and subsequent likelihood of misuse of his focus, his political style

and his somewhat exclusive emphasis on the political edifice. The consistent impatience with those who got out of step, the resolute obstinacy accompanying his dogged pursuit of agreed political objectives may have served national anti-imperialist goals quite effectively at the time; but the probability that such methods were prone to abuse, and in any other context, more than likely to produce unintended effects, seems to have been over-looked. Even when details of independence and partition were being worked out, Patel's anxiety about questions of power and dominance persisted. Particular ire with the socialists' attempts to ruin Congress's efforts to realise 'the goal' pushed Patel to instruct provincial governments to meet the threat from the left as severely as necessary. The Bihar Ministry for instance was specifically advised to build and use a strong police force to control the activities of the Socialist Party.<sup>25</sup>

He may have believed his authoritarianism was not being flaunted about arbitrarily. He may have believed he was an Indian before he was a Hindu, a Gujarati, or a Patidar. The question is how others perceived smaller loyalties and affiliations—all those intermediary groups with their obsolete linkages that had been accommodated exactly as they were, under the larger (political) umbrella. The likelihood that their understanding might differ from his own had not been provided for. His vision, if one can call it that, was one of strength, power and domination rather than progress, development and reform. He wrote in June 1947:

We are now free to develop about 80 per cent of our country in our own way. If we can consolidate our forces, have a strong Central Government and a strong army, we can during the course of five years make considerable progress.<sup>26</sup>

One might conclude with a rhetorical question: Would it have been more worthwhile if Patel had worked out an idea of accommodating the many, many Indias under some feasible social umbrella that accompanied the political? Perhaps; but then that would not have been Patel.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Some seminal writings that address the multi-layered, multi-dimensional realities and provide wholesome analyses reviewing earlier simplistic and dichotomised perceptions and conclusions of the colonial/national encoun-

ter might be mentioned:

Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1986); and *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India. 1885-1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983); also *Popular movements and middle class leadership in late colonial India: Perspectives and problems of a history from below* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1983); and *Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1985); Romila Thapar, *Past and Prejudice* (New Delhi: Patel Memorial Lecture, Publications Division, 1973); also Communalism and the *Writing of Indian History* (New Delhi; People's Publishing House, 1977).

2. Pathak, Devavrat N and Seth, Pravin, *Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: From Civic to National Leadership* (Ahmedabad, 1980).

3. The satyagraha campaigns have been variously covered in several works: Shankarlal Parikh, *Khedani Ladat* (Guj) (Ahmedabad, 1922); David Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District, 1917-1934* (Delhi, 1981); Shivram Kshirsagar, *The Indomitable Sardar and the Triumph of Borsad* (Vallabh Vidyanagar, 1973); Manibehn Patel, *Borsad Satyagraha* (Ahmedabad, 1972); Mahadev Desai, *The Story of Bardoli* (Ahmedabad, 1957); Rani D. Shankardass, 'Spokesman for the Peasantry: The Case of Vallabhbhai Patel and Bardoli' in *Studies in History*, Vol. 2 No. 1. 1986; Shirin Mehta, *The Peasantry and Nationalism: The Story of the Bardoli Satyagraha* (Delhi, 1984).

4. Shankardass, Rani D., *Vallabhbhai Patel: Power and Organisation in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988), p. 52.

5. Patel to Nehru 1 August 1923, Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, NMML.

6. Patel to Mahadev Desai, Nagpur File, Patel Papers, Navajivan Ahmedabad.

7. 'Uday' Amraoti, from Extracts from Central Province's Newspapers, in G O I (Home) letter No. 5 of 1923 to Secretary of State, 6 December 1923 L/P & J/6/1974, IOL, London.

8. See Shankardass, 'Spokesman for the Peasantry: The Case of Vallabhbhai Patel and Bardoli, *op. cit.*

9. Brown, J., *Modern India* (London, 1984).

10. *Bombay Chronicle*, 2 April 1931, p. 1

11. Patel to Purshotamdas Thakurdas, Letter published in *Bombay Chronicle*, 23 July 1930.

12. *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 November 1930.

13. *Bombay Chronicle*, 17 September 1934, p. 1.

14. See Shankardass, (1988) for details of this argument.

15. Patel at a meeting in Matunga, *Bombay Chronicle*, 2 October 1934, p. 12.

16. While there was resentment among many for the manner in which Working Committee members had been chosen clearly at Patel's behest Gandhi tried to explain this by saying: 'The idea is to save time and some degree of vexation. ...No President can work if his colleagues are imposed on him'. The President in question was Rajendra Prasad but clearly Patel had worked through hi to exclude socialists, Bengal Congressman and others from the new Working Committee.

17. Home Dept. (Spl) 1/7 January 1935, Brabourne Mss. IOL, London.

18. See Shankardass (1982) and (1988) for an analysis of these 'Congress episodes'

19. Title of book by Rani D. Shankardass, *The First Congress Raj* (New Delhi:

Macmillan, 1982).

20. Files 47/1 and 47/2, Patel papers, Navajivan, Ahmedabad.

21. Patel in a speech at Ahmedabad on 14 January 1946, Times of India, 15 January 1946.

22. Mansergh, N and Moon P. (Eds.), *Transfer of Power*, Vol. VII (London: H.M.S.O., 1970-1984).

23. Note of an interview with Birla, 6 June 1946; Transfer of Power, VII, No. 461; Note by Wavell, 12 June 1946, No. 503.

24. See Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, The Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) for a view about Congress's insistence on partition and Jinnah's opposition to it, suggesting that Pakistan was for Jinnah a mere bargaining lever, his primary aim being parity in the Central Government as the only effective means of protecting the interests of Muslims in a united India. See also H.M. Seervai, *Legend and Reality* (Bombay: Tripathy, 1994) for other aspects of credit and blame worthiness, particularly in the light of the 'withheld pages' controversy about Azad's 'India Wins Freedom'.

25. Patel to Sri Krishna Sinha, 8 May 1947, *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, 5, No. 109.

26. Patel to K.C. Neogy, Member of the Central Assembly from Eastern Bengal, 7 June 1947, *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, 5, No. 71.