

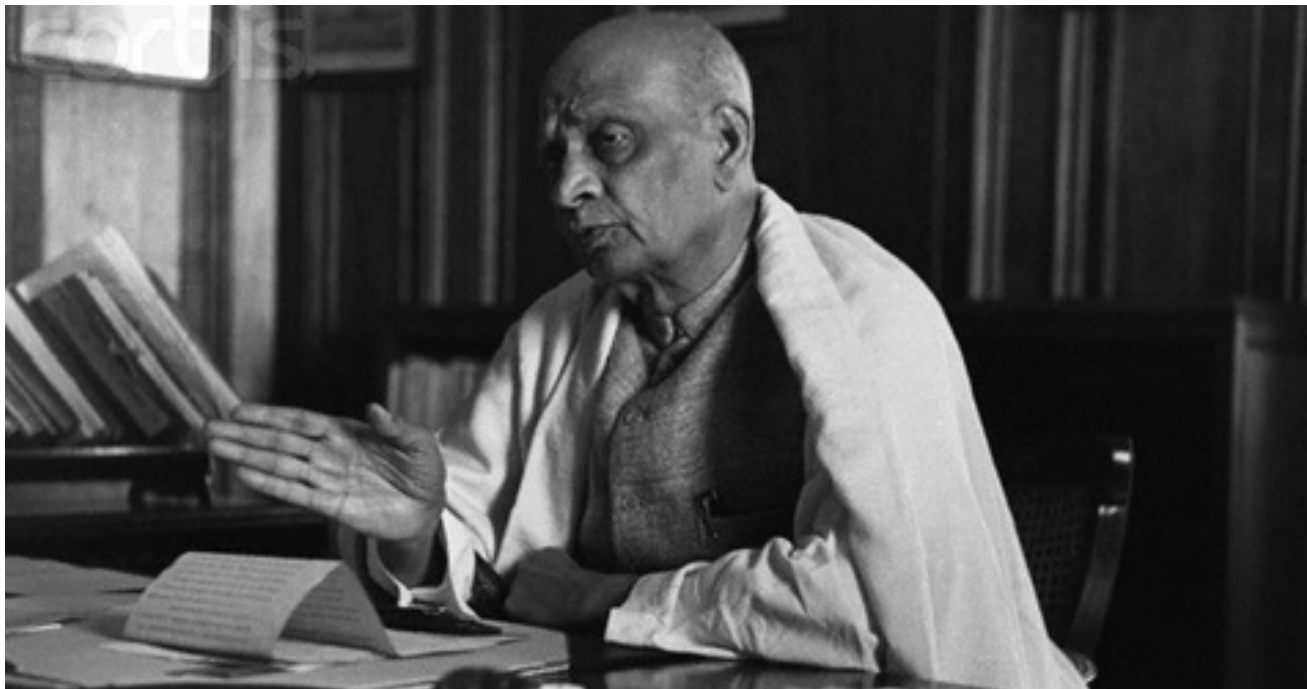
[BOOK EXCERPT](#)

This book examines India's nationalist fight against the British through Vallabhbhai Patel's life

An excerpt from 'Vallabhbhai Patel: The Limitations of Anti-Colonial Nationalism and Electoral Politics', by Rani Dhavan Shankardass.

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Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. | Wikipedia/ Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

For too long nation, national, nationalism and nationalist have served as inclusive all-embracing notions that adorned the narrative of India's historical journey towards self-rule to suggest an idyllic unity of purpose that managed to conceal the not-so-idyllic features that lay beneath. Romanticisation and euphoria, scorn and cynicism have all formed part of the old storyline of India's freedom struggle whose clichéd imagery has now well crossed its sell-by date. Simplistic images of nationalism still persist today for two related reasons: in ideologically trimmed and fine-tuned shapes and forms, the images are used as reference points for independent India's political and social goals by newer vested interests.

This ideological referencing then stretches further by idealising, even idolising constructed ideas of nation and nationality, and valourising performances of particular leaders by hailing them as saviours of the nation. Apparently innocuous, when extended to the point of emulation and replication, it becomes both acontextual and ahistorical. A multi-level re-examination of leaders' roles and contexts enables a better understanding of why even as frontrunners, only the genius of some could go beyond their contexts (Gandhi being a prime example), while the proficiency of others like Patel,

Jinnah, Bose, and to some extent even Nehru – though effective and indispensable in the milieu in which they operated – was problematic.

One concern as the story of our main protagonist, Vallabhbhai Patel, unfolds is the lack of clarity around words like “freedom”, “independence” and even “nationalism” in the context of India’s journey to self-government. It would be a long route if we were to burrow deep into nationalism as a concept, or trace its manifestation and development in other nations, primarily European, that may or may not have inspired its unfolding in our history. Suffice it to say that from its context after the French Revolution when French nationalism leaned on cultural and linguistic roots, to the later German version based on exclusion, anti-French sentiments and a phobia of Russia, to translate into a militarised territorial expansion, we can extract but three concepts – language, territory and cultural characteristics – as the commonest prerequisites of nationalism.

For a discussion on nationalism, three sources have some relevance for us: Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, and this will become clear in our context as we analyse the particular brand of nationalism of this period (and it is particular), and interrogate the sanctity granted it by “national(ist)” leaders (and indeed historians) despite the limitations associated specifically with the context in which it flourished (colonial). From its beginnings as a lofty sentiment fostering a sense of togetherness and misbranded “unity”, eulogised and nurtured to face an adversary, how did Indian nationalism become a tool that could be shaped and re-shaped for multiple purposes: one that would wrest power from the imperial enemy and rival political groups, as well as enable the forging of a somewhat shaky unity amidst a diverse people, so diverse that any attempt towards arbitrarily pigeon-holing them into mouldable categories was almost harmful?

The story of India’s national movement still serves as a backdrop for most of India’s ideological underpinnings, and as a bedrock of the most significant of relationships – that between the individual and the state – continues to throw up intriguing questions about the goals and methods adopted during a supposedly linear journey from “illegal” satyagraha to “legal” statehood. The questions are as important as the journey. Aside from a fundamental difference of views of different leaders and their followers on nationalism itself, there is a bigger problem. If its main thrust was (i) anti-colonial, and (ii) primarily political (as opposed to cultural, as in France), how would a nationalism used as a weapon to fight the coloniser be transformed into a constructed tool that would foster unity amidst India’s sharp divides and diversities of region, religion, language, caste, class and more? Would this (mis)translation of nationalism be able to inculcate a sentiment of togetherness that could be uniformly spread over a diverse people to paper what leaders saw as cracks, but people believed were differences that defined their lives and of which they were rightfully proud?

Nationalism’s initial emphasis was on a common political adversary, and there was an impression that it was large enough to “contain multitudes” (to use Walt Whitman’s phrase). This may well have enabled “nationalist” leaders to successfully rid the new nation of its enemy. But designed as it was for political purposes, it could hardly infuse the spirit of affinity in widely different peoples without their *willing* cooperation. To stand together, people had to be inclusively taken on board by leaders who represented them, rather than be indoctrinated by power-wielders who had clout. No matter how well-meaning they were as leaders, the question remained: how representative were they of differing categories and groups of peoples?

Despite the limitation that it was designed to combat colonialism, the active promotion of nationalism and national unity as primary goals was handled differently by leaders like Patel, Nehru or Bose. To gather support for “national” goals it was necessary to obtain and maintain the support

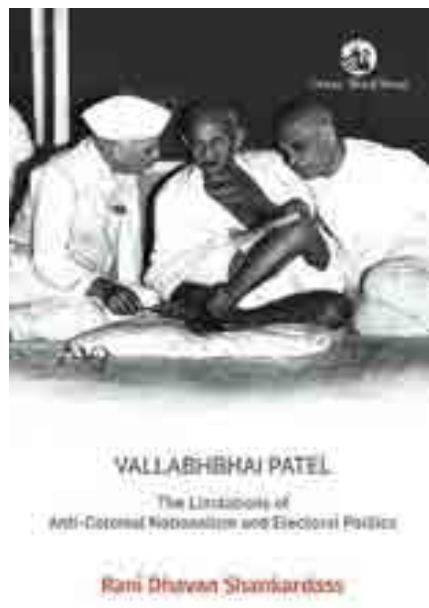
of people from regions with multiple affinities. How would these affinities and socio-economic grievances be grafted onto the larger, somewhat abstract, and yet concrete goal of anti-colonial nationalism? Or were such awkward socio-economic questions addressed by Congress, the largest party, on sufferance and under pressure from other organisations? How were other protest movements (of the left and right) viewed, whose legitimacy came not just from an anti-colonial stance but from their socio-economic concerns: socialists for instance? Or was the objective of the ardent “nationalists” to divert all protest movements unidirectionally into a larger movement that would flow like many rivers into the big sea labelled “national movement”? How was unity perceived and then sought, amidst the diversities that defined social groups and regions? Was it achieved; if so, how long could and would such a unity last?

There is a host of reasons why the present revisitation of the decades-old, for too long romanticised story of India’s journey towards independence, freedom and unification is being narrated for the most part through the voyage of a single-mindedly dedicated but also relatively prosaic and unromantic political leader – Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel. One reason is that he typifies the image of the quintessential Indian politician, grounded in the basic Indian realities of life and livelihood, traditional and conservative, with little by way of superfluous social and economic frills and fancies, honest to a fault and simple, but ambitious enough to engage in public life with the intention of producing results that his own judgement deemed fit.

With little by way of explanation, like *My Experiments with Truth or An Autobiography*, the workings of his mind are gleaned from his decisions and actions, a good enough measure for understanding the mind of a representative of political India at that time. In re-presenting him, in what may appear to be the same stale nation-building and unification narrative, there is a stripping away of the romance of the “freedom” narrative to analyse how a person of relatively humble origins with essentially local but firm roots in his region – Gujarat – with its distinctive and heterogenous features, became one of the most effective major players in the much-acclaimed political drama of India’s journey to nation and statehood.

What did Patel do that had not been done before that gave a new or different direction to Indian politics? The book is structured to provide some answers to these questions, sometimes directly and candidly, at other times indirectly by inference, or by extrapolating from a sea of information derived from his interactions with others such nuanced details as would throw light on the working of Patel’s mind.

Revisiting Patel’s role in the momentous journey towards India’s independence makes one thing clear: all that was achieved in those crucial years would not have been possible if actors like Gandhi, Patel, Nehru and others with different outlooks had not been working in tandem. Gandhi could not do what Nehru and Patel did, Nehru could not do what Patel and Gandhi did, and Patel could not have achieved what he did if there were no Gandhi and no Nehru. With others added to the list it becomes evident that the story of India’s independence is much more than the story of any one individual or just a few men and women. Much is revealed of our protagonist by observing others around him, so that the story becomes clearly the story of many, many more, which it was.



Excerpted with permission from Vallabhbhai Patel: The Limitations of Anti-Colonial Nationalism and Electoral Politics, Rani Dhavan Shankardass, Orient Black Swan.