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SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL: A TRUE CONGRESSMAN OF PRAGMATISM

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Introduction

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950) stands as a colossus in India's independence struggle and post-colonial consolidation. As the first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Patel's pragmatic leadership ensured the integration of princely states, averting potential balkanization of the fledgling Indian nation (Journals of India, 2020). His views on democracy blending liberal principles with conservative realism, critiquing unchecked socialism while upholding constitutionalism and national unity (Panda, 2014). Yet, Patel's relationship with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru has been politicized, especially by right-wing narratives that amplify their differences to diminish Nehru's legacy and co-opt Patel's legacy (Hindutva Watch, 2021). This paper explores Patel's perspectives on liberal and social democracy, his policy divergences with Nehru, their personal bond amidst discord, and the contemporary misuse of his image by the BJP, substantiated by historical records and scholarly writings.

Patel's Views on Liberal and Social Democracy

Patel's political philosophy was a blend of a liberal-democratic ethos, pragmatism, tempered by conservatism. He contributed to the Constitution's drafting, emphasizing rights, liberty, equality, and justice (Vision IAS, 2025). Unlike Nehru's socialist inclinations, Patel rejected nationalization, viewing it as inefficient for a nascent state (PIB, n.d.). He advocated private-led industrialization and agricultural reforms, criticizing socialist slogans as premature without wealth creation. This stance positioned him against "social democracy" as overly statist, favoring a welfare-oriented conservatism that integrated humanism and nationalism (Panda, 2014).

Patel's critique of liberal excesses stemmed from his experiences in the freedom struggle. He saw liberalism's individualism as potentially disruptive in a diverse society, prioritizing national cohesion over abstract freedoms. As Home Minister, he reorganized the colonial British-inherited Indian Civil Service bureaucracy into the All India Services, calling it the "steel frame" of democracy, blending efficiency with

federalism (Vision IAS, 2025). Yet, Patel was no reactionary; he supported women's rights and secularism, envisioning a pragmatic democracy that addressed disparities without radical structural and ideological upheaval (INC, n.d.). This framework underscores Patel's balanced critique, not outright opposition, to liberal and social democratic ideals.

Differences with Nehru on Domestic and International Issues: Patel and Nehru's divergences were profound yet functional, shaped by temperament Patel's realism versus Nehru's idealism

Domestic Issues: Economically, Patel opposed Nehru's socialist bent, rejecting controls and favoring market-driven growth (PIB, n.d.). On princely states, Patel's diplomacy integrated 562 states, while Nehru's anti-monarchical fervor led to clashes, as in Junagadh and Hyderabad, where Patel threatened resignation over Nehru's hesitancy (The Hindu, 2023a). Communally, Patel exhibited more hardline tendencies post-Partition, suggesting reciprocal expulsions of minorities, which Nehru rejected as unsecular. Yet, Patel upheld secularism, banning the RSS after Gandhi's assassination and He refuted RSS claims of non-involvement in violence. (INC, n.d.).

International Issues: On Kashmir, Patel favored military completion to reclaim Pakistan-occupied areas and opposed UN internationalization, viewing Nehru's approach as naive (India Today, 2025). Regarding China, Patel's 1950 letter warned of aggression post-Tibet invasion, contrasting Nehru's "Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai" optimism (Swarajya, 2014). Patel prioritized alliances like the Commonwealth, while Nehru leaned non-aligned (ORF, 2023). These differences, while sharp, were resolved through dialogue, often mediated by Gandhi, ensuring unified policy (The Indian Express, 2025).

Overall Discord with Nehru and Strong Personal Affinity

The Nehru-Patel dynamic was marked by ideological friction but unbreakable camaraderie. Discord peaked in 1946 when Patel withdrew his Congress presidency bid at Gandhi's behest, despite 12 of 15 provincial committees favoring him (The Print, 2025a). Temperamental clashes—Nehru's "emotional insanity" of more idealistic, emotionally driven approach versus Patel's stoicism of unflinching resolve, administrative efficiency, and focus on national unity, —led to resignation threats, yet they presented a united front (Moneycontrol, 2025). Their affinity was profound: Patel called Nehru "the strongest pillar of the Cabinet," pledging lifelong loyalty. Nehru defended Patel against critics, and post-Gandhi, they suppressed differences for unity. Patel's 1949 endorsement of Nehru as "idol of the nation" refutes rivalry myths. As Guha notes, they "put aside differences to unite India" (The Indian Express, 2025).

Exploitation by Right-Wing Parties and the BJP's Construction of Patel's Statue

Right-wing parties, led by the BJP, have weaponized Patel-Nehru differences to claim ideological kinship, portraying Patel as a "Hindu nationalist" overlooked by "secular" Congress (Hindutva Watch, 2021). This narrative gained traction post-2014, with BJP invoking Patel to critique Nehru on Kashmir, China, and economy (India Today, 2023).

The Statue of Unity, inaugurated by PM Modi in 2018 as the world's tallest (182m), exemplifies this. Funded by Gujarat government (initially announced by Modi as CM in 2013), it symbolizes BJP's "reclamation" of Patel, tied to Gujarat's pride and Modi's persona (Gujarat Tourism, n.d.). October 31 is National Unity Day, amplifying Patel's integration legacy. BJP alleges Congress "disowned" Patel post-Nehru, justifying appropriation (The Wire, 2019).

Representation and Misuse by the Present Ruling Regime

The BJP regime represents Patel as anti-Nehru, anti-socialist, and implicitly pro-Hindutva, aligning with RSS ideology. Modi positions himself as Patel's heir, using the Statue for tourism and nationalism (India Today, 2023). This serves electoral gains, especially in Gujarat's Patidar community. Misuse is evident in historical distortions: BJP claims that Nehru sidelined Patel, ignoring Patel's voluntary support. Patel's RSS ban and criticism of it as "communal poison" would contradict BJP's portrayal (Scroll.in, 2024). The Statue, while honoring Patel, is critiqued as political symbolism, displacing Adivasi communities without compunction (Hindutva Watch, 2021).

Evidences Against the Right-Wing Misuse of Patel's Congress Legacy

Patel's lifelong Congress loyalty refutes what BJP has been trying to claim and appropriate. He was a Gandhian, banning RSS post-Gandhi's assassination and stating it that it lacked "patriotism" or "humanity." Letters to Nehru affirmed their "unbreakable combination." Post-death, Congress honored him by establishing memorials, institutions and naming them after his name, but BJP's "mis-owning" stems basically from neglect narratives (National Herald India, 2021). Evidence includes Patel's secular actions: opposing communal electorates, supporting minority rights. Historians like Guha notes BJP's portrayal ignores Patel's RSS opposition (Scroll.in, 2024). Congress resolutions (e.g., 2025 Ahmedabad) highlight Patel's anti-RSS stance, countering BJP's "fake news" (Gujarat Samachar, 2025). Patel's 1948 RSS ban and rehabilitation of Muslims post-Partition underscore his inclusivity, clashing with Hindutva. This misuse erodes Patel's true legacy of pragmatic unity.

Conclusion

Patel's critique of liberal and social democracy was nuanced, favoring balanced nationalism over extremes. His differences with Nehru enriched India's founding, balanced by deep affinity. The BJP's appropriation—via the Statue of Unity and anti-Nehru rhetoric—distorts this, ignoring Patel's Congress roots and RSS opposition (The Wire, 2019). Historical evidence demands reclaiming his inclusive vision and pragmatic strategy for nation building, not partisan myths and BJP's mis-owning to serve its own political agenda is to be rebutted.

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