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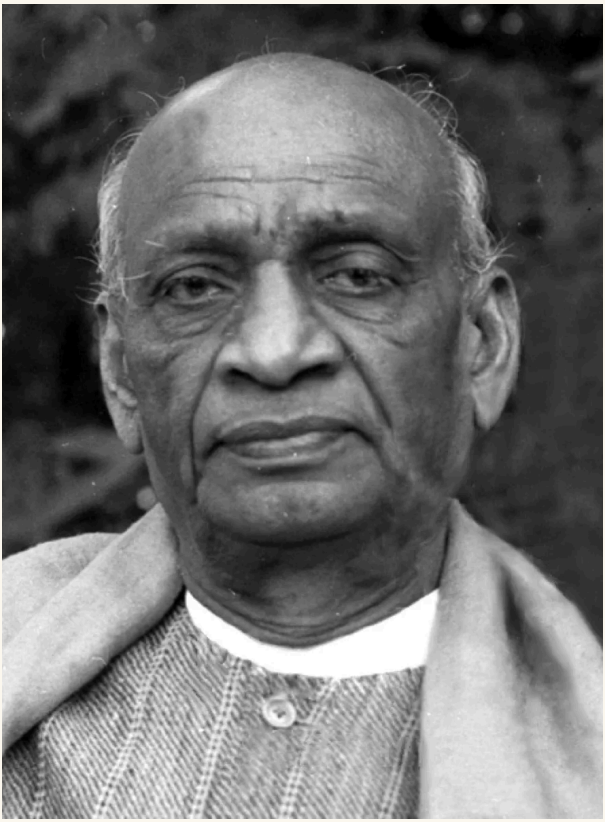
Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: The Iron Man of India

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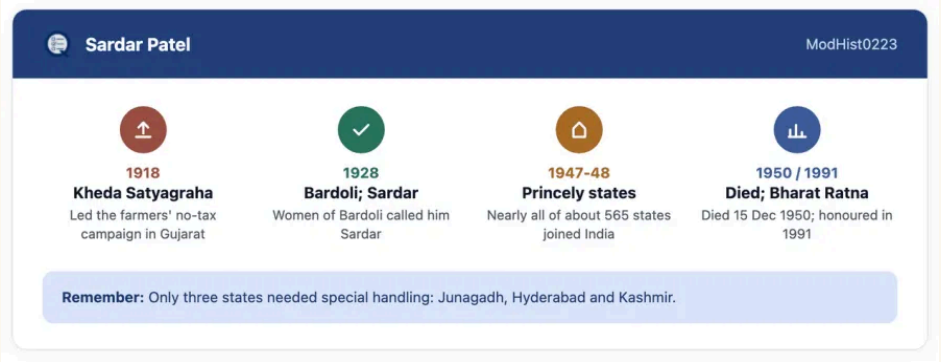
Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: The Iron Man of India

In 1947 India had about 565 princely states. Each ruler could pick India, Pakistan, or stand alone. One man had to turn that mess into a country: Vallabhbhai Patel.

People call him the Iron Man of India. His work was patient talk, firm pressure, and, in three hard cases, the army.



Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, photographed on 31 October 1949, his 74th birthday. Government of India Photo Division, public domain.



Four turning points in the life of Sardar Patel.

Born. 31 October 1875, Nadiad, Gujarat. The date was never officially recorded.
Titles. Sardar, meaning chief, and Iron Man of India.
Early fights. Kheda in 1918 and Bardoli in 1928.
Office. First Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister.
Big task. Bringing the princely states into India.
Died. 15 December 1950, in Bombay.

Sardar: a word meaning “chief”.

Instrument of Accession: the paper a ruler signed to join India.

Steel Frame: a phrase for the All India Services, which run the administration.

1 How did a village lawyer rise?

Vallabhbhai Patel was born in Nadiad, in Gujarat. His birth date was never officially recorded. He wrote 31 October on his matriculation papers, and that date stuck.

He belonged to the Patidar farming community. He passed his matriculation late, at around 22. Elders thought he would take a plain job. He had other plans. He read law from borrowed books and became a successful lawyer.

He wanted to study in England. A ticket arrived in the name “V. J. Patel”, at the house of his elder brother Vithalbhai. Vithalbhai had the same initials. Patel let his brother go in his place. Years later, at 36, he sailed to London himself. He finished a 36-month course in 30 months and topped his class.

Back in Ahmedabad he became a leading barrister. Then he met Gandhi in 1917. His life turned toward public service.

- Born in **Nadiad**; date taken as **31 October 1875**.
- Gave way to his brother **Vithalbhai** for the England trip.
- Finished the law course at the **Middle Temple** in **30 months**.
- Met **Gandhi** in **1917**.

> **Quick check 1.** Patel gave the title Sardar to Gandhi after the Kheda Satyagraha. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What did he win in Kheda and Bardoli?

In 1918 the Kheda farmers asked for tax relief after crop failure. Gandhi backed the cause but wanted a Gujarati to devote himself fully. Patel volunteered. He gave up his career and went village by village.

He also organised volunteers to help villagers hide their valuables from raids. Police seized property and thousands were arrested. The government finally agreed to talk. Kheda made Patel a hero in Gujarat.

Ten years later came Bardoli, in 1928. Famine and a steep tax rise had hit the farmers. Patel led a complete no-tax campaign. He set up camps and an information network. In August he won a deal that cancelled the tax rise and returned seized land.

It was during this struggle that the women of Bardoli began to call him Sardar. The word stuck for life.

- **Kheda**, **1918**: tax revolt after crop failure.
- **Bardoli**, **1928**: complete no-tax campaign.
- Settlement: tax rise **repealed**, land **returned**.
- Title **Sardar** from the **women of Bardoli**.
- Read about the Kheda Satyagraha and Mohanlal Pandya.

3 What was his role in Congress?

Patel was a master organiser. He was president of the Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee from 1920 to 1945. He was elected Congress president for its 1931 session at Karachi.

Under his chairmanship, the Congress passed the Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy resolution. It backed civil liberties and a secular nation.

From 1934 he raised funds and picked candidates for elections. In August 1942 he gave a rousing speech at Gowalia Tank in Bombay, supporting the Quit India movement. He was jailed with Gandhi at Yeravda in 1932. In 1942 he was arrested with the Congress Working Committee and held in Ahmednagar Fort until 1945.

- Gujarat Congress chief, **1920 to 1945**.
- **Karachi** session president, **1931**.
- Resolution on **Fundamental Rights** and economic policy.
- **Yeravda** jail with Gandhi, **1932**; **Ahmednagar** Fort, **1942 to 1945**.

4 How did he bring the states in?

After 1947 Patel became Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Britain had left about 565 princely states free to choose. He chose a capable aide, V. P. Menon, as the chief secretary of the States Ministry.

Almost all rulers joined willingly. Only three did not: Junagadh, Hyderabad, and Jammu and Kashmir. Popular accounts say 562 of 565 joined peacefully. The exact count varies by source.

Junagadh’s Nawab chose Pakistan, yet most people there were Hindu. Patel demanded the accession be cancelled. After protests and a civil government, Indian forces marched in. A later vote showed 99.5 percent

for India.

Hyderabad was the largest state. Its ruler, the Nizam, wanted independence or Pakistan. His Razakar militia pressed him to hold out. After talks failed, India sent troops in September 1948. The Nizam then signed the accession.

Kashmir followed a different path. Its accession came through a signed instrument. Patel, Nehru and Mountbatten each played a part.

- Aide: **V. P. Menon**.
- Only three resisted: **Junagadh**, **Hyderabad**, **Kashmir**.
- **Junagadh**: vote showed **99.5 percent** for India.
- **Hyderabad**: the **Razakars** and troops in **September 1948**.
- Read about the princely states, Junagadh and V. P. Menon.

> **Quick check 2.** Only three princely states needed special handling: Junagadh, Hyderabad and Kashmir. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

5 What did he build and leave behind?

Patel helped shape the Constitution as a senior leader in the Constituent Assembly. He is called the patron saint of India's civil servants. He helped create the All India Services, which he called the Steel Frame.

He also guided Gujarat farmers to form a milk cooperative. It became the Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union. That body later grew into the Amul brand.

After Gandhi's assassination on 30 January 1948, Patel banned the RSS on 4 February 1948. Its leaders were arrested.

He died on 15 December 1950 in Bombay. The Bharat Ratna came after his death, in 1991. The Statue of Unity, 182 metres tall, was dedicated on his birthday in 2018. India marks 31 October as Rashtriya Ekta Diwas.

- Created the **All India Services**, the **Steel Frame**.
- **Amul** grew from the **Kaira** milk union.
- RSS banned **4 February 1948**.
- **Bharat Ratna** in **1991**; **Statue of Unity** in **2018**, **182 metres**.

6 What are the exam traps?

Patel's story is full of near-twins. Watch the details.

- He did **not** bring in every state peacefully; **three** needed special handling.
- The title **Sardar** came from **Bardoli**, not Kheda.
- Gandhi led **Champaran**; Patel's fields were **Kheda** and **Bardoli**.
- Patel was **Home Minister**, with the States Ministry under him.
- Do not confuse him with his brother **Vithalbhai Patel**, a legislative leader.

Remember: Patel led Kheda in 1918 and Bardoli in 1928. He earned the title Sardar at Bardoli. After 1947 he brought nearly all the princely states into India.

Think it through: Why did Patel use both talks and the threat of force?

Most rulers agreed once they saw India was serious. A few refused, and delay would have split the country. Force was used only where talks failed and time ran short.

Quick check 3. Patel banned the RSS before Gandhi was assassinated. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's greatest post-independence achievement was integrating how many of India's 565 princely states into the Indian Union?

A. 565

B. 450

C. 500

D. 562

See answer ↓

2. The Statue of Unity, depicting Sardar Patel and inaugurated on 31 October 2018, stands how tall, making it the world's tallest statue?

A. 210 metres

B. 182 metres

C. 126 metres

D. 93 metres

See answer ↓

3. Following independence, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel served as India's first Deputy Prime Minister and simultaneously held which other crucial ministerial portfolio?

A. Foreign Minister

B. Defence Minister

C. Finance Minister

D. Home Minister

See answer ↓

4. At the 1931 Congress session that elected Sardar Patel President, which landmark resolution did Congress pass?

A. The Non-Cooperation Resolution

B. The Poorna Swaraj Resolution

C. The Quit India Resolution

D. The Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy resolution

See answer ↓

5. Which cooperative, guided into being by Sardar Patel, later became the Amul brand?

A. The Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation

B. The National Dairy Development Board

C. The Anand Milk Union Limited

D. The Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union

See answer ↓

6. Who first began calling Vallabhbhai Patel Sardar, meaning chief, after the 1928 Bardoli struggle?

A. The women of Bardoli

B. The Viceroy

C. Mahatma Gandhi alone

D. The Gujarat Sabha

See answer ↓

7. Which three princely states did not accede to India willingly in 1947?

A. Baroda, Gwalior and Indore

B. Travancore, Bhopal and Mysore

C. Patiala, Kapurthala and Nabha

D. Jammu and Kashmir, Junagadh and Hyderabad

See answer ↓

8. On what date did Home Minister Patel ban the RSS after Gandhi's assassination?

A. 15 August 1947

B. 4 February 1948

C. 26 January 1950

D. 30 January 1948

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** Patel integrated 562 of 565 princely states into the Indian Union, largely through diplomacy backed by the threat of force. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The Statue of Unity stands 182 metres tall, at Kevadia, Gujarat, making it the tallest statue in the world. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** Patel's dual role as Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister positioned him as the central figure overseeing both the princely-state integration process and the broader internal administrative consolidation of the newly independent nation, complementing Nehru's own primary focus on foreign policy and broader national leadership as Prime Minister. This effective division of core responsibilities between Nehru and Patel -- external/visionary leadership versus internal/administrative consolidation -- proved a significant and largely successful working partnership during India's crucial, turbulent first years of independence, despite the two leaders' occasionally differing political and ideological outlooks. Patel's Home Ministry portfolio also gave him direct authority over the new nation's internal security apparatus during the extremely challenging Partition-violence and refugee-crisis period, adding further weight to his already substantial responsibilities during this critical transitional period. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** Patel was elected Congress President for the 1931 Karachi session, where the landmark "Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy" resolution was passed. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** Sardar Patel guided the creation of the Kaira District Co-operative Milk Producers' Union, the cooperative that later became the Amul brand. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** Accounts say the women of Bardoli first began calling Patel Sardar. They did so during and after the 1928 Bardoli tax struggle. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** Nearly all princely states joined willingly. Only Jammu and Kashmir, Junagadh and Hyderabad needed special handling. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** After the assassination on 30 January 1948, leaders of the RSS were arrested. Patel banned the organisation on 4 February 1948. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1

2. **True.** ↑ 2

3. **False.** ↑ 3

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