

# **SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL: BUILDER OF INDIA'S STEEL FRAME**

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Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was a mass leader, politician, administrator and an astute diplomat. A patriot to the core, Sardar Patel was imbued with practical sagacity and ranks amongst the greatest architects of free India. The contribution of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, known as the 'Iron Man of India', to the Indian Freedom struggle has been remarkable and incomparable. A man of sharp intellect and character, he has always been an immense source of inspiration not only during the Indian freedom movement but also in the present times.

Because of all his contributions to India's freedom struggle, the building of the Indian State, its subsequent consolidation and laying the foundation of India's elaborate system of governance, Sardar Patel is deeply etched in the memory of every Indian. An average Indian adores the icon and legend called Sardar Patel for his selfless service to the nation. But one thing for which everyone interested in knowing India's success as an independent State and the efficiency of its governance system knows that the same would not have been possible but for its strong bureaucracy. And it is here as well that the fine imprint of Sardar Patel's legacy and contribution could be noticed and appreciated.

## **Sardar Patel's Role in Consolidating Indian State**

In what has become Sardar Patel's most lasting legacy, he, stitched together 565 disparate princely states along with the British Indian territories, thereby preventing the balkanization of India. The British, while granting India's independence, had also left it to the sweet will of hundreds of princely states to decide for themselves as to whether they wished to remain an independent state or would accede to India. It was Sardar Patel who, through his painstaking, nuanced diplomacy and strong action, ensured that a new India emerge effortlessly within the framework of constitutional democracy.

Through a bloodless revolution unprecedented in world history, he welded the disparate princely States together with the rest of the country. He not only built up the unity of this great land of ours but also laid down the foundations

of a true democracy. Sardar Patel, thus, united and consolidated separate states of the country, trapped in over 200 years of slavery and integrated them as inseparable parts of independent India. The manner in which he won over for India the loyalty of princely states and the Services was a marvellous piece of statesmanship. India's first President Dr. Rajendra Prasad rightly notes in his diary, "*That there is today an India to think and talk about is very largely due to Sardar Patel's statesmanship and firm administration.*"

### **Sardar's Socio-Economic Outlook**

While Patel was highly influenced by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and continued to remain associated with the latter during India's freedom movement, he did not identify himself completely with Gandhi's moral convictions and ideals. He had his own vision and convictions which stemmed from his education, knowledge of law and philosophy, experience in governance and politics. He, in fact, regarded Gandhi's emphasis on their universal application as irrelevant to India's immediate political, economic, and social problems. Sardar Patel was considered practical, decisive, and even ruthless. The British Government often found him dangerous to their imperial interests.

Patel also disagreed with Jawaharlal Nehru on the need to bring about economic and social changes by coercion. Unlike Nehru's emphasis on socialism and dirigisme, Sardar Patel believed in free enterprise. This helped him in gaining not only the trust of conservative elements from the Indian society but in also mobilising the funds required for sustaining the activities of the Indian National Congress. Paying tribute to him, Nehru called Sardar '*the builder and consolidator of new India.*' Even though Nehru and Patel differed on many issues confronting the nascent Indian nation, the two, however, never allowed the mutual differences to compromise India's governance.

### **Patel in post-independence India**

The formation of the post-independence nation out of the loose political structure of India after the departure of the British was a crucial phase in modern Indian History. It was India's good luck to have principled visionary leaders at the top during its formative years. And Sardar Patel was definitely one such leader who guided India through a very critical time. It is rare in history to have a combination of outstanding statesmanship with a genius for administration.

It was India's good fortune that at the most crucial stage of its modern history, it had in Sardar Patel a combination of the vision of a statesman with the sagacity and practical outlook of an administrator. Sardar Patel's empirical insights gained during his days in Ahmedabad municipal bodies and his regular interactions with civil servants came in handy while visualising and conceiving India's governance structure. Without his leadership and active involvement,

the Indian administrative system might not have been revitalised. In fact, its standards might well have fallen below the requisite standards something that the critical times and the formative years in a new nation earnestly required.

### **Sardar's Association and Engagement with the Indian Civil Service**

Fortunately, the nation had Sardar Patel in its most difficult times. It was he who would go on to establish the modern civil service, which remains the bedrock of the Indian administration till this day. Patel's association with the civil servants extends long before he took over as the Home Minister of the interim Indian government after its independence on the fateful day of 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947.

It is very well-known that before Patel actually stepped into India's freedom struggle and started actively participating in various related movements and activities, he was a very successful barrister in Ahmedabad. As such, Patel often dealt with the British civil servants on issues concerning law and order in the city. However, his real engagement with the British ICS (Indian Civil Service) came when he was elected to the Ahmedabad municipality. As a true administrator, Patel actively sought and received the cooperation of experienced British ICS officers. He successfully coordinated different activities with them for fulfilling his official obligations and this aptly brought out his administrative acumen.

### **Understanding the importance of an efficient civil service**

It was Sardar's vast experiences in the administration that helped him realise the true importance of Indian civil servants who had worked with great loyalty under the British rulers. He understood that after Partition when the British officers leave the country, there was going to be an administrative vacuum as India did not have enough experienced and efficient civil servants to administer a vast and diverse country like India. Patel realised that if those experienced civil servants were not taken into confidence and retained in service, there would be practically no good administrator left and the same would hugely compromise the different state-building and nation-building exercises required to consolidate a young nation's administrative foundations.

Despite staunch opposition from a number of influential Indian leaders and freedom fighters, Patel began building a team of efficient and competent officers who would shape and prop up the nation's administrative machinery. Working through these turbulent times with this team of civil servants further strengthened the conviction in his mind that they were indispensable. Understanding how critical they were to the entire nation-building processes, Patel took the Gandhian route of accommodation and adjustment by welcoming them with open arms.

### Overcoming the initial distrust of civil servants

As suggested above, the civil service of the pre-independence period was an anathema to the then nationalist leadership. As was true with other nationalist leaders, Sardar Patel too was highly sceptical and critical of the colonial civil service. As President of the Indian National Congress in 1931, he insisted on 'a heavy reduction in the civil service expenditure and a consequent reduction in the emoluments of the civil service'. Shortly before independence, he expressed his unhappiness with the civil service in the Constituent Assembly.

Nevertheless, Patel's decision to retain officers of the old ICS was vehemently opposed by many leaders of the freedom struggle. Those opposing retention of the ICS officers believed they weren't trustworthy because of their association with a reviled and ruthless British Raj. After all, it is the same civil servants who had actively participated in the arrest and harassment of Indian freedom fighters while the British called the shots. Even India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was not very keen on retaining them.

In the Constituent Assembly debates, arguments on the subject often reached boiling point, but Patel, however, remained unmoved. Patel held the fort and eventually had his way. He said, "I tell you, do not quarrel with the instruments with which you want to work." As an experienced and grounded leader, Patel knew how much this country needed the whole-hearted involvement of these civil servants in different developmental and governmental initiatives in the days ahead.

All this happened just few months before Independence. But after independence, Sardar Patel modified his views and began regarding the civil service as an invaluable institution whose members were worthy of trust as advisors and administrators. While acknowledging the yeoman service rendered by the Indian civil servants during the critical years following India's independence, Sardar Patel waxed eloquent in an address to the Constituent Assembly of India on October 10, 1949. He said, "*I wish to assure you that I have worked with them (civil servants) during this difficult period. I am speaking with a heavy sense of responsibility and I must confess that in point of patriotism, in point of loyalty, in point of sincerity, and in point of ability, they cannot have a substitute. They are as good as ourselves... I wish to place it on record in this House that if, during the last two or three years, most of the members of the services had not behaved particularly and with loyalty, the Union would have collapsed.*"

Sardar Patel was of the opinion that but for a good All-India Service, India would not survive as one nation. Patel was clearly convinced and conscious of the fact that independent India needed 'a steel frame to run its civil, military, and administrative bureaucracy'. His faith in the institutional mechanisms like

having an organised command-based army and a systematised bureaucracy has proved to be a blessing. It's India's efficient, effective and professionally-trained bureaucracy that has been one of the major reasons for the success of India's parliamentary democracy notwithstanding having a highly plural, inegalitarian and multi-layered diverse society.

### **Building the foundation of Indian administrative structure**

The manner in which Patel won over for India the loyalty of the services to consolidate the newborn freedom was a marvellous piece of statesmanship. It wasn't just a case of greeting the ICS with open arms, but also instituting a necessary structural framework for their functioning while also offering them constitutional safeguards for meeting the requirements of a new India.

Recruitment to the Indian Civil and the Indian Police Services was first slowed down and then stopped because of the war. The likelihood of a constitutional change resulting in wide gaps in those services was yet another reason. In the meantime, there had been considerable dilution of standards in terms of qualifications, mode of recruitment, quality and capacity-building as a result of large numbers of ad-hoc appointments to other services. The preoccupation with works connected with war and civil supplies had caused neglect and dislocation in the normal activities of the government. The administrative structure was there, but the same existed in a very weakened and attenuated state. The administration, as a whole, was generally in a disarray and in a rundown condition.

Uncertainty and ambiguity about the picture that might emerge from the impending constitutional changes, and its effect on their own future had tended to affect the enthusiasm and self-confidence of the senior civil services. There was, further, the rising tide of communalism with ominous potential of violence. This had brought in extraneous considerations in the working of the then bureaucracy which was in a very disoriented shape. This was the background of the administrative situation which Sardar Patel as the Home Minister in the interim government faced in 1946.

As the year 1945 advanced and the constitutional negotiations took their tortuous course, Sardar Patel started thinking of the future. The Muslim League's firm thinking was that if India was to remain united, it could only be on the basis of a weak Centre with its jurisdiction limited to External Affairs, Defence, and Communications. There was no scope in such a constitutional arrangement for any All-India Administrative or Police Service.

By October 1945, Sardar Patel had come to the conclusion that with the intransigent attitude of the Muslim League, partition was probably unavoidable. Against this background, Sardar Patel realised that India must have its own new

services as successors to the ICS and IP for building an India in accordance with the ideals and visions that informed the Indian freedom movement and as would subsequently be enshrined in independent India's democratic Constitution. This, apart from filling the existing wide gaps in these services, would contribute to the unity of the country while also adding to the strength of its administrative structure.

The first momentous step he took in this regard was to have a resolution adopted at a Conference of the Congress Chief Ministers (despite vehement opposition from some of them) in October, 1945 authorising the setting up of two All-India Services namely the IAS (Indian Administrative Service) and the IPS (Indian Police Service) to succeed the ICS and IP of pre-independence vintage. The nomenclature 'All-India Service' was coined by the M.E. Gauntlet Committee on Division of Functions in 1918 when the Government of India Act, 1919 was framed and promulgated.

### **Rationale for the civil services**

The contemporaneous documents also indicate that Sardar Patel was acutely conscious of the historical and cultural factors, and of the debilitating effect of a long period of subjection on the moral fibre of the Indian people. Such factors were very likely to make India a "soft" state, making it vulnerable to policy and administrative vacillation in critical situations or when faced with difficult options. Sardar Patel had a deep understanding of the lessons learnt from Indian history. Regional and other narrow loyalties in India had often led to chronic divisiveness have had free play in the periods of absence of a central authority or its weakness. His experience of dealing with the Congress organisation and of the Provincial Ministries had strengthened his apprehensions.

Sardar Patel was convinced that All-India Services for general and law and order administration would be valuable adjuncts to a strong constitutional authority at the Centre. This, however, was to be consistent with the federalism of our Constitution, of which he was to be one of the main architects. Sardar Patel did, therefore, believe that it was essential for independent India's administrative machinery to have a strong frame with strong capabilities for withstanding stresses.

He wanted the Indian civil services to have the capacity and capability of maintaining discipline in administration as well as peace and order in the society. For decades, the ICS and IP had been referred as the 'steel frame' of imperial rule. But Sardar Patel conceived of the successor services in a role fundamentally different in objectives and style of functioning while simultaneously retaining the element of firmness. He wanted the services to remain in sync with the new ideals and visions of new India.

### **Role and Mission of civil services in independent India**

They were to be the servants of the Indian people, unfaltering in their loyalty to the country while also being dedicated to the ideals of the Indian Constitution. They were expected to execute different developmental programmes and schemes with devotion in accordance with the laws and policies of the Central and provincial governments in new India. Sardar Patel laid down the broad principles on which entrants to the Indian Administrative Service were to be trained.

The civil servants in newly-independent India were to be moulded into patriotic Indians and not as English country gentlemen. They were no longer expected to be oriented to working as agents of an imperial rule as had been the aim even for the Indians in the ICS. They were to have an All-India and not a parochial outlook. They were to have an understanding of our past, deeper appreciation of the Indian culture and social conditions and multifarious requirements for building a new progressive State with equal opportunities for all its citizens. They were to facilitate India's rise as a developed and progressive democracy in the Comity of Nations.

*“Sardar's heart was big enough to appreciate merit and he wanted the services to be steadfast to their traditions of efficiency, impartiality and equality”* writes KL Punjabi, author of ‘Life and Work of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’. Sardar Patel had his finger on the pulse of the people as he had his grip on administrators. It was his vision that the Indian civil service should become a strong tool in strengthening the cohesion and national unity in India.

Sardar Patel wanted a strong and vibrant federal administrative system in which the All-India Services would play an important role. True to his conviction, the Civil Services have provided the requisite framework for an effective administration of the country. The values of integrity, impartiality and merit remain the guiding principles of civil services and that is how it ought to be.

### **Consolidating Indian Unity and Nation-building**

At the dawn of independence in 1947, when the nation was faced with many problems, ensuring its unity amid a mind-boggling diversity was indeed a great challenge. It is here that India's Civil Services played their historic role in nurturing the processes of national cohesion and strengthening the bonds of unity and integrity. Indian civil servants have played multiple roles in the initial years of our nation-building process. A wide range of tasks spanning a variety of knowledge domains were undertaken for completion by civil servants as the country had a severe shortage of trained personnel in many areas.

In addition to performing their main role as administrators, the civil servants took upon many specialist roles in different fields. It was the requirement of the

time and they rose to the occasion. However, there was a larger role expected of the Indian bureaucracy. Our national leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel viewed the All-India Services as a group of professionals who would take a long-term view of the national needs and priorities.

While the local administration would focus on day-to-day issues of governance, the All-India Services (AIS) were charged with the responsibility of building a nascent nation while factoring the various constraints and challenges stacked against it. The AIS have ensured that India not only marched from strength to strength through its multiple crises on the road to its glorious present, it has also ensured the inculcation of robust national feeling among its citizens. This role got only reinforced with the emergence of strong democratic forces in the immediate aftermath of India's independence. India's evolution as a strong economy and vibrant democracy is a testimony to the great contributions of India's civil services under the stewardship of its elected governments.

### **Delineating the contours of All-India Services**

As per the framework put forward by the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946, the erstwhile British civil services were to be abolished once the transfer of power got in motion, leaving Indian officers of the ICS in a spot. The British Foreign Secretary had argued that members of ICS could choose to stay in service or leave once the transfer of power materialised. On October 10, 1946, a meeting was called between the prime ministers of the various British India provinces to discuss the functioning of the administrative machinery following the transfer of power under the chairmanship of Sardar Patel, head of the Home Department in the interim Government.

Sardar Patel felt that if the old ICS cadre was replaced by a new cadre like the IAS and IPS, there would be a psychological effect on the Indian people. They would welcome the new thinking and outlook. To avoid constitutional and political complications, he introduced the new services as per the requirements of the new Indian State. Although Nehru and the likes finally came onboard for the replacement of the ICS with an All-India Service, a point of difference emerged on the recruitment and executive control of these officers. The bone of contention also included as to whether the Central or provincial governments would exercise control over them. Provincial autonomy was a major issue considering the diverse communities that inhabited the Indian Union.

GB Pant, a prominent leader of the Indian freedom struggle from Uttar Pradesh, wasn't very keen on the idea of an All-India Service, while T Prakasam of Madras Province sought the complete control of these civil servants under provincial governments, including powers of recruitment and dismissal from service. However, Patel remained firm in his position. While he recognised



the imperative of adequate allowance for provincial susceptibilities, but still considered the centrally-controlled All-India Services very important.

The new set-up provided for organising an All-India Administrative Services in line with the previous ICS and a provincial service under the control of the provincial government. It was suggested that the officers of the provincial services would be promoted to central services on quota and seniority basis. The IAS was suggested to be recruited and controlled by the Federal (Union) Public Service Commission of the Union Government, though the officers might be deputed and posted in different provinces. He believed Central control over the provinces was necessary for maintaining India's integrity.

Once the contours of this new administrative system were established, serious planning went into determining the process of recruitment, training, posting and payment of salaries. Similar arrangements were also put in place for civil servants working in other departments of the government. The interim shortfall in the number of officers was overcome by promoting officers from the provincial services and recruiting personnel from the war services. Such foresight allowed Patel and his team of civil servants to overcome the turbulence that came with the transfer of power.

### **Crafting Constitutional Safeguards for the civil services**

Another sterling contribution of Patel to the Indian bureaucracy was his steadfast determination to ensure adequate constitutional safeguards and guarantees for the civil servants, following their yeoman service to the nation in turbulent times. He succeeded in incorporating Article 312 in the Constitution, thus, endowing the All-India Service with a constitutional sanctity. This was to ensure the latter full protection necessary for its fearless functioning without much intervention. Accordingly, special safeguards for the civil services were inserted into the Constitution under Article 312 (2) in Part XIV, giving birth to the modern IAS and IPS.

In October 1951, the Indian Parliament passed the All-India Services Act, which laid down the rules of recruitment and service conditions. Patel, unfortunately, had met his demise on December 15, 1950, nearly a full year before the All-India Services Act was passed in the Parliament. However, by then, Patel had already established an institution that has stood the test of time producing officers with a range of capabilities to oversee different aspects of Indian administration.

### **Roles and responsibilities of civil services**

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, while speaking to the first batch of Indian Administrative Service officers at Metcalf House in Delhi on April 21, 1947, had outlined the civil servants' tasks in an independent India and laid down

certain principles of 'Surajya' or good governance. *"Your predecessors were brought up in the traditions in which they kept themselves aloof from the common run of the people. It will be your bounden duty to treat the common men in India as your own"*.

Sardar Patel regarded the civil service as an invaluable partner in the task of governance in independent India. He openly exhorted the civil servants to function fearlessly and professionally in their relationship with the ministers. He declared, *"Today, my Secretary can write a note opposed to my views. I have given that freedom, to all my secretaries. I have told them, 'If you do not give your honest opinion for fear that it will displease your Minister, please then you better go. I will bring another Secretary... I will never be displeased over a frank expression of opinion."* April 21 has since then been celebrated as the 'Civil Services Day'.

Patel went on to advise the young bureaucrats to consider it as their *"bounden duty to treat the common men in India as your own, or to put it correctly, to feel yourself to be one of them and amongst them, and you will have to learn not to despise or to disregard them. In other words, you will have to adopt yourselves to democratic ways of administration and to uphold throughout your service, its dignity, integrity and incorruptibility."*

He further advised them to maintain the utmost impartiality and incorruptibility of administration. *"A civil servant cannot afford to, and must not, take part in politics. Nor must he involve himself in communal wrangles,"* he said. He believed that *"to depart from the path of rectitude in either of these respects is to debase public service and to lower its dignity."* That is why, he told them to *"Render your service without fear or favour and without any expectation of extraneous rewards"*.

### **Sardar Patel and modern Indian civil services**

Today, the All-India Service is the name of the civil service which is recruited and initially trained by the Union Public Service Commission as an independent body under the Government of India. But this is common to both the levels of government, and serve both of them i.e. the Central and the State governments. Its members are allocated to a provincial (or, state) government, but can rotate between the Government of India and the government of his allotted cadre. The experiences and insights gained during their field postings come handy during their role as policy-makers.

That Sardar Patel is relevant even today is proved by the fact of his being remembered every time the nation is faced with a constitutional or political crisis. His name immediately comes to mind as one who could have rid us of the sundry problems before us. Patel's legend and legacy continue to grow and with every passing year it glows brighter.

Patel was a selfless leader, who placed the country's interests above everything else and shaped India's destiny with single-minded devotion. The invaluable contribution of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in building a modern and unified India needs to be remembered by every Indian as the country marches ahead as one of the largest democracies in the world. The Indian State remains beholden to the legacies of Sardar Patel and it is only hoped that the Indian civil services, as visualised by him, shall continue to contribute tirelessly to the socio-economic development of its countrymen. It is also the bounden duty of every Indian citizen to remain true to the ideals and visions that Sardar Patel espoused and fought for.