



Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and the Making of an Indian Educational Ethos: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's contribution to India's nation-building is widely acknowledged, yet his educational philosophy remains comparatively underexplored. This paper examines Patel's vision of education as a transformative force for moral, social, and national regeneration. Drawing upon his speeches, writings, and administrative initiatives, it analyzes Patel's critique of the colonial education system and his advocacy for a holistic, value-based model that integrates intellectual, physical, and spiritual development. Patel emphasized education in the mother tongue, character formation, vocational skill, and rural engagement as essential to India's self-reliance and cultural continuity. His approach closely aligned with Mahatma Gandhi's Nai Talim, yet retained a pragmatic focus on modernization, science, and technology to meet the needs of a developing nation. The study further explores his progressive stance on women's education, student conduct, and national integration through education. It concludes by situating Patel's ideas within contemporary debates on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his educational ethos in shaping a self-reliant, value-oriented, and technologically advanced India by 2047.

Keywords-Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel; Educational philosophy; Character-building; Vocational education; Moral and spiritual development; Rural education; Women's empowerment; National integration; Wardha Scheme; Gandhian education; NEP 2020; Indian educational ethos; Holistic education; Self-reliance; Indigenous language policy.

Introduction

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), widely known as the "Iron Man of India," was much more than a political leader and freedom fighter—he was also a deep thinker on education and nation-building. While his efforts in unifying the princely states and leading movements such as the Bardoli Satyagraha are well recognized, his reflections on education and the development of the educational system are less frequently discussed in historical studies. Renowned as both a statesman and an able administrator, Patel was equally devoted to the cause of education. Similar to Mahatma Gandhi, he had a well-defined and holistic vision for the kind of educational framework that would best serve an independent India. He articulated his views on this subject forthrightly and consistently on numerous occasions. However, before examining his educational philosophy, it is essential to first analyze the prevailing educational system of that era. This research attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of Sardar Patel's educational philosophy based on his authentic primary sources, collected works, speeches, and scholarly interpretations.

1. Critique of Colonial Education System

The education imparted to Indians was fundamentally limited and filtered, with its foundations laid by Lord Macaulay, who held little regard for Indian culture and literature, whether contemporary or historical. Moreover, this educational system was introduced to serve two specific objectives. The first was to create a class of Indian bureaucrats who, while appearing to be natives, possessed the mindset and values of British rulers and could effectively administer the country on behalf of the British Empire. The second was to prepare a class of subordinate office workers, commonly referred to as "babus," to serve in administrative positions. English served as the medium of instruction, and the curricula were heavily laden with English language, literature, history, and culture, incorporating knowledge that was fundamentally incompatible with Indian philosophical thought and cultural traditions. Furthermore, this colonial education remained

inaccessible to the masses, leaving the majority of the population illiterate.ⁱ

In his landmark convocation address to Nagpur University in 1946, Sardar Patel delivered a stinging critique of the colonial education system's reliance on English. He argued that imposing a foreign language on children resulted in a dissociation of the mind from the immediate reality, leading to a superficial form of learning he termed "cramming."

*"Children taught in a foreign language are forced to memorize the words without understanding and when cramming power increases, understanding power decreases."*ⁱⁱ

This observation was deeply rooted in what colonial educational psychology confirms: the cognitive load of processing a foreign syntax subtracts from the mental energy available for understanding the substantive concept. Patel posited that the colonial system created a class of "crammers"—individuals who could recite texts with perfect diction but lacked the critical thinking faculties to apply that knowledge to Indian realities.

One of Patel's most significant critiques of the contemporary British-influenced education system was encapsulated in his famous statement about "parrot education." In his critique of colonial education, Patel stated:

*"Modern (colonial) education is like educating a parrot. Body and mind do not connect with each other nor there is any physical and mental progress. Education should be such that it develops the mind, body, and his soul to make progress. The aim of education should be to make school and the village complementary to each other and join both together."*ⁱⁱⁱ

This critique reveals several fundamental aspects of Patel's educational philosophy:

Key Implications:^{iv}

- Patel rejected the fragmentation of education that prioritized rote learning over holistic development
- He emphasized the integration of intellectual, physical, and moral dimensions of learning
- He advocated for bridging the urban-rural divide through complementary educational practices
- He saw education not as mere knowledge transmission but as character and personality development

The Problem with Foreign Language Medium

Patel was vocally critical of the British practice of conducting education in English rather than in Indian languages.

Patel regarded the use of foreign languages in education as a significant impediment to spreading knowledge and nurturing national awareness among the people. He believed that teaching in an unfamiliar language disconnected learners from the practical application of what they studied.^v

In his collected writings, Patel underscored the importance of incorporating Hindi and regional languages into the educational system, observing that an excessive focus on foreign languages often obstructed real learning instead of enhancing it.^{vi} He maintained that a solid foundation should first be laid through instruction in the mother tongue before introducing any foreign language.

Disconnection between Knowledge and Character

Patel consistently maintained that mere acquisition of knowledge without corresponding development of character was not only futile but also potentially dangerous. He declared emphatically:

"Learning without character is just a hollow mockery."^{vii}

This principle underpinned his entire educational philosophy and distinguished his approach from the purely academic models prevalent during his time.

2. Character Building and Moral Education

Patel consistently affirmed that knowledge without moral grounding was meaningless and even harmful. He firmly stated, *"Young men and women are to build-up a strong character. A nation's greatness was reflected in the character of her people. If it was sullied by selfishness, such a people could not prosper or achieve great things."*^{viii} This belief shaped his entire philosophy of education, setting it apart from the purely academic systems common during his era.

Dual Dimensions of Character Building

According to Patel's philosophy, character development had two essential dimensions:^{ix}

- 1. Cultivating Strength to Challenge Oppression:** Education should develop the capacity in individuals to resist injustice and stand against wrongdoing
- 2. Cultivating Tolerance of Hardship:** Students should develop the resilience and fortitude to endure the consequences of their principled stands

Patel stated: "Two ways of building character - cultivating strength to challenge oppression, and tolerate the resultant hardships that give rise to courage and awareness."^x

Spiritual and Moral Dimensions

Patel's educational vision incorporated spiritual and moral development alongside intellectual training. He was not advocating for religious indoctrination but rather for the cultivation of universal moral values such as:

- Truthfulness and honesty
- Non-violence and compassion
- Self-discipline and sacrifice
- Sense of duty and national consciousness
- Respect for all sections of society

These values were to be fostered through practical engagement with moral dilemmas and through living by principles rather than merely studying them.^{xi}

Holistic Approach to Education: Mind, Body, and Soul Integration

Patel's conception of holistic education transcended conventional academic curricula, envisioning a comprehensive system that developed all dimensions of human personality.

Patel understood that genuine education must cater to the comprehensive growth of both individuals and society through a balanced, integrated approach.

Intellectual Development ^{xii} formed the foundation of his educational outlook. He championed the cultivation of critical thinking, logical reasoning, and a scientific outlook that inspired creativity and innovation. Patel placed strong emphasis on practical, real-world knowledge rather than purely theoretical learning, and highlighted the study of national history and culture as essential for nurturing a sense of rooted identity and national pride.

Physical Development ^{xiii} was equally important in his view. He sought to combine physical labour, manual skills with formal education, convinced that first-hand experience with nature, and agricultural work fostered self-reliance and practical competence. Patel believed that individuals should depend on their own abilities and work ethic to achieve economic and personal independence.

Moral and Spiritual Development ^{xiv} completed his triadic vision of education. He held that intellectual capacity without moral discipline led to hollow progress. Thus, he prioritized character formation and moral instruction as essential components of education, coupled with a spirit of social responsibility and service toward the community. Central to his vision was cultivating national consciousness and patriotic spirit, ensuring educated individuals remained committed to national advancement and integrity.

Patel emphasized this during his address to students at Vidya Vihar, Ahmedabad, stating:

"If you want to swim in this world rely on your hands and feet... and love physical labour. Everybody has been provided energy by the Nature, and its development either saves him or drowns him."^{xv}

3. Practical Knowledge and Vocational Training Education

Unlike the purely theoretical education model of his time, Patel stressed the importance of practical knowledge and vocational skills. He believed that education should equip students with capabilities to engage in productive work and contribute economically to society.^{xvi}

This practical orientation was not merely about economic utility but was intimately connected to his philosophy of self-reliance and dignity through labour. The NEP's push to integrate vocational training from Class 6 mirrors Patel's support for the *Wardha Scheme* and his belief in the dignity of labor. Patel's critique that "we looked upon masons... as inferior"^{xvii} is directly addressed by modern attempts to formalize and respect vocational skills within the mainstream curriculum, ensuring that the "drudgery" of labour is transformed into the "dignity" of skill.

4. Rural Education and Village Development

Patel had an intimate connection with rural Gujarat and understood deeply the needs and aspirations of the peasantry. His approach to education was fundamentally rooted in the belief that rural education was the foundation of national development. He stated: "The heart of Indians lies in the villages; and unless the standard of living in the villages was improved, there could never be any hope for the salvation of India, politically, economically or socially."^{xviii} Patel was deeply influenced by Gandhi's concept of Grama Swarajya (village self-rule) and saw education as a crucial instrument for realizing this vision. He supported the establishment of educational institutions like Charutar Vidya Mandal specifically for rural development through education.^{xix}

According to the Vice President's address on Charutar Vidya Mandal's foundation by Patel: *"Sardar Patel firmly believed in empowering the people living in rural areas by providing value-based education and that was this institute's main objective. He believed that the development of villages or rural India was critical to close the gap between the 'haves and have-nots'."*^{xx}

Patel's vision encompassed schools that would be integrated with village life rather than alienated from it.

The educational institution should not become a place of escape from rural reality but should strengthen community bonds and address local needs.^{xxi}

He emphasized that education should not be restricted to classroom experience but should encompass practical learning from agricultural and artisanal work, making the school and village complementary to each other. As part of his rural educational philosophy, Patel advocated for the revival and development of indigenous industries spinning, weaving, and khadi production through education. This was not merely economic policy but an integral part of his educational framework aimed at fostering: Self-reliance and economic independence, Connection to national heritage and tradition, Dignity through labour and craftsmanship, Sustainable livelihood systems etc.

5. Patel and Gandhi on Education

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel strongly endorsed the value-based education framework championed by Mahatma Gandhi. This educational philosophy rested on twin pillars: moral and ethical development, alongside foundational or basic knowledge (*Buniyadi Shiksha*).

Gandhi articulated its essence as follows: "By education, I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man body, mind, and spirit"^{xxii}

Mahatma Gandhi envisioned this holistic education to foster comprehensive human development, enabling individuals to lead righteous lives and achieve self-reliance.

In 1938, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel while speaking at a function also said: "People have desire for degrees in this nation. But the many millionaires are not degree holders. They have become rich on the basis of the development of their own natural abilities."^{xxiii}

The Wardha Scheme (Nai Talim) as a National Necessity

The archives indicate a strong resonance between Patel's views and the *Wardha Scheme of Basic Education* introduced by Mahatma Gandhi in 1937.

While Nehru concentrated on the development of heavy industries, Patel viewed the Wardha Scheme as the educational counterpart to India's political movement. The Scheme emphasized vocational training, advocating craft-based learning that would make students economically productive; self-reliance, encouraging schools to sustain themselves through the work of their pupils; and experimental learning, rooted in the principle of "learning by doing." Scholars examining Patel's ideas note that he regarded these components as essential pillars of a pragmatic educational system. He maintained that technical proficiency must always be accompanied by a sense of civic duty and social responsibility.^{xxiv} For Patel, the Wardha Scheme represented far more than an educational experiment—it was integral to the nation's very survival. He envisioned it as a means to nurture "thinking workers rather than passive intellects,"^{xxv} a perspective that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of his philosophy.

6. Patel on views on Women's Education

Patel stood out as a forward-thinking proponent of women's education at a time when such advocacy challenged deep-rooted social norms. He firmly believed that empowering women through education was essential for the moral and social advancement of the nation. His position was not merely philanthropic but grounded in his understanding of nation-building and social progress.^{xxvi}

In the Constituent Assembly in 1949, Patel emphasized: "No programme of national education can be appropriate if it does not give full consideration to the education and advancement of one-half of the society that is women."^{xxvii}

Patel recognized women's education as strategically important for two interconnected reasons: First Dimension Citizenship: Women needed education to fulfill their roles as equal citizens of free India, possessing the same fundamental rights and responsibilities as men.^{xxviii} Second

Dimension Social Multiplications: Educated mothers would naturally educate their children, creating a multiplier effect in the dissemination of literacy and knowledge across generations. He articulated this profoundly: "More than half of the world's problems would be solved if women would be given education because educated mothers meant literate children"^{xxix}

Patel's commitment to women's education was not merely rhetorical. His personal practice included:

- Enrolling his own daughter, Maniben, in the Gujarat Vidyapith (a national educational institution) rather than a convent school, making a deliberate statement about his educational priorities^{xxx}
- Supporting educational institutions like Vitthal Kanya Vidyalaya and Kanya Vidya Bhavan and advocating for practical skill development in women's education, not mere literacy.^{xxxi}

Patel's advocacy for women's education was integrally connected to his broader social reform agenda. He viewed education as a means to challenge traditional patriarchal practices, including child marriage and restricted mobility for women.^{xxxii}

At the Mahila Seva Samaj gathering in Bangalore, Patel spoke about the problem of untouchability affecting women of the depressed classes and called for education as a means to improve their status and dignity.^{xxxiii}

Sardar Patel's views on women's education were progressive and uncompromising, challenging the

conservative orthodoxy of his time. In the patriarchal milieu of the early 20th century, particularly in the Charotar region, Patel advocated not just for female literacy but also for the total empowerment of women through character-building education.^{xxxiv}

7. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel View on Student Life And Educational Conduct

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel held strong views on student life and educational conduct, emphasizing discipline, moral courage, and the importance of non-violent activism. His own experiences as a student shaped his belief in collective action, self-reliance, and the need for students to stand up against injustice while maintaining academic seriousness and physical well-being.^{xxxv}

Student Activism and Discipline

Patel was known during his school days for correcting incompetent and lazy teachers through organized student action, advocating against unjust practices, and maintaining strict discipline and non-violence in his protests. He believed that students should be proactive in improving their educational environment but do so with responsibility and respect for order. Patel's approach to activism was rooted in Gandhi's principles of Satyagraha, promoting peaceful resistance and collective decision-making among students.^{xxxvi}

Fearlessness (Abhaya) as the Core of Curriculum (In the The Pre-Independence Stance: Students as Freedom Fighters)

For Patel, the primary output of education was not merely literacy, but character—specifically, the quality of fearlessness. He argued that an education that left a student afraid of oppression was a failed education. In his address to students at Surat in 1928, following the Bardoli Satyagraha, he famously stated: "Non-violence is the ABC of Bardoli movement and the youths must learn that." He urged students to understand that true discipline lies in the courage to face "cane, coercion, and oppression" without retaliating, thereby cultivating a "soldier's anxiety" for the cause rather than for personal safety.^{xxxvii}

Post-Independence Shift: From Agitation to Construction

It is crucial to note the evolution in Patel's views post-1947. While he encouraged student participation in politics to oust the British, his stance shifted once India gained independence. He firmly believed that in a free India, a student's primary duty was to study and build technical capacity for the nation. Addressing the students of Banaras Hindu University in 1948, he warned that "students must not take part in party politics," arguing that the time for "destructive" agitation was over and the era of "constructive" nation building had begun.^{xxxviii} He viewed continued student strikes in independent India as a "misguided" expenditure of energy that should instead be focused on technical and industrial mastery to strengthen the state.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel regarded student education as a harmonious blend of disciplined action and moral integrity. He urged students to confront injustice with courage and responsibility, guided by the principles of non-violence. Over time, his focus shifted from encouraging youth participation in the freedom movement to inspiring them, in the post-independence era, to contribute to nation building through the acquisition of technical knowledge and vocational expertise. For Patel, education was not confined to intellectual training—it was a means to shape young people into courageous, socially conscious, and constructive citizens devoted to the progress of the nation.

Patel's Perspectives on Science, Technology, and Modern Education

Though Patel drew significant inspiration from Gandhi's advocacy of rural-based learning, he also possessed a forward-looking understanding of the importance of modernization and technological advancement.^{xxxix} He recognized that India's progress relied on balancing moral values with industrial and scientific growth, effectively bridging the philosophical divide between Gandhi's emphasis on the spinning wheel and Nehru's vision of heavy industry and steel production. While critical of modern education's excesses, Patel was not against modern science or technology. He advocated for the inculcation of scientific temperament and modern knowledge in the educational system, but always within the framework of moral and character development.^{xl} He foresaw the importance of technical education and modern sciences for India's future development, Agricultural improvements and modern farming techniques, Sanitation and public health and hoped for a day when India would have technical educational facilities of such quality that people from abroad would seek education in India. Patel argued that for India to survive, it had to be "technologically advanced". He stated, "The world was becoming more and more a technical civilization, and living standards could not be raised without using the latest techniques".^{xli}

8. Integration of Values and Practical Learning

Patel, while maintaining his independence and critical perspective, appreciated moreover, supported educational models that integrated values with practical learning. The ashram-based education system, particularly as promoted by Gandhi, aligned with several aspects of Patel's philosophy.^{xlii}

However, he did not accept all conditions of ashram life, maintaining his independent judgment while engaging with the broader educational vision.^{xliii}

Patel believed that education was not confined to the classroom but was an ongoing process of learning

through lived experience. This included Learning from nature and agricultural work, learning from social problems and community needs, learning through participation in social movements, learning from moral dilemmas and ethical challenges.^{xliv}

9. National Integration through Education

For Patel, education was the ultimate tool for national integration. He did not see the integration of princely states as merely a political or territorial exercise; it required an integration of hearts and minds, which only education could achieve.

Patel distinguished between "parched-up paper-unity" (constitutional/legal agreements) and "heart unity" (emotional integration). He believed that true unity could only be "hammered into shape by ourselves" through a shared educational and cultural consciousness.^{xlv}

He envisioned universities not just as degree factories but also as centres where students from different castes, creeds, and regions would come together, dissolving their petty differences to form a cohesive national identity. He famously stated, "We have to shed mutual bickering, shed the difference of being high or low... We have to live like the children of the same father". Education was the mechanism to strip away the prejudices of caste and regionalism.^{xlvi}

Patel believed that a "strong united India" must be "nurtured by its own traditions and thought".^{xlvii} He felt that an education system rooted in Indian culture was essential for unity. If the educational system remained colonial, the mind of the Indian would remain colonized, and true unity would be impossible because the reference point for success would always be external (London) rather than internal (Bharat).

10. Contemporary Resonance: Patel's Vision and the NEP 2020

Current research papers explicitly link Sardar Patel's educational vision to Bharat's *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*, suggesting that his ideas are experiencing a renaissance in modern policy frameworks.

Multidisciplinary and Value-Based Education

Scholars argue that the NEP 2020's focus on "multidisciplinary education, rootedness in Bhartiya traditions, ethical values" reflects the ideals envisioned by Patel. Patel's insistence that education is not about degrees but about nurturing "balanced and emotionally intelligent individuals" is seen as a precursor to the holistic development goals of modern policy.^{xlviii}

Vocational Integration

The NEP's push to integrate vocational training from Class 6 mirrors Patel's support for the *Wardha Scheme (Gandhian Basic Education)* and his belief in the dignity of labour. Patel's critique that "we looked upon masons... as inferior" is directly addressed by modern attempts to formalize and respect vocational skills within the mainstream curriculum, ensuring that the "drudgery" of labour is transformed into the "dignity" of skill.^{xlix}

Linguistic Policy

Patel's 1946 Nagpur speech warning against the "cramming power" of foreign languages finds direct resonance in the NEP's advocacy for mother tongue instruction in primary, secondary, higher education level. His argument that "understanding power" decreases when a foreign language is imposed remains a central tenet of educational psychology cited by modern policymakers in India.^l The policy's shift towards local languages is a validation of Patel's foresight that true intellectual independence requires indigenous linguistic roots.

Conclusion

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's educational views were not written in a single manifesto but were lived through his actions and scattered across his speeches to students, teachers, and administrators. His philosophy was a "philosophy of action."

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's views on education represent a comprehensive philosophy grounded in his deep understanding of Indian society, his commitment to social justice, and his vision of a united, strong, and self-reliant India. His critique of the prevailing British education system was not merely destructive but offered constructive alternatives based on:

Holistic Development - integrating intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual dimensions, Character as Foundation - emphasizing moral values as prerequisite to knowledge, Rural Orientation - viewing village education as key to national development, Practical Relevance - connecting education to real life and productive work, Social Justice - ensuring education for all, particularly women and marginalized sections. This framework transformed education from colonial credentialism to nation-building instrumentality.

In short, Patel's educational vision was an extension of his life's work: the unification of India. He realized that while political treaties could integrate territories, only a reoriented, character building and Bhartiya

education system could integrate the people. His warning that "cramming power" destroys "understanding power" serves as a timeless reminder that the ultimate goal of education is not the accumulation of words, but the liberation of the intellect for the service of the nation. As India marches towards 2047, the centenary of its independence, the educational blueprint of the Iron Man remains a vital guide for building a "Viksit Bharat".

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