

The Intersection of Caste, Class and Social Justice: A Sociological Inquiry into Sardar Patel's Thought

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intersection of caste and class in the political thought and practice of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, through a sociological lens. As a central figure in India's nationalist movement and post-independence state formation, Patel operated within a society marked by entrenched caste hierarchies and emerging class contradictions. While he upheld the principles of legal equality and national integration, Patel's political strategies often engaged with caste and class not merely as oppressive structures, but as pragmatic tools for achieving political cohesion. The paper is anchored in key sociological theories: Max Weber's framework of status and class stratification, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social and symbolic capital, and Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. These theoretical models help contextualize Patel's simultaneous endorsement of legal egalitarianism and his accommodation of social stratification. Weber's emphasis on legal-rational authority and status honour helps explain Patel's use of institutional discipline; Bourdieu illuminates how caste-based capital continued to function within agrarian mobilization; and Gramsci's framework reveals how Patel sought hegemony through moral leadership and national integration. By analyzing Patel's speeches, policies, and his leadership during events like the Bardoli Satyagraha and debates in the Constituent Assembly, the paper argues that Patel promoted a vision of citizenship centered on unity and discipline while minimally confronting structural caste inequalities. His thought thus reveals a productive but uneasy relationship between social justice and nation-building in India. This inquiry contributes to sociological understandings of how caste and class are co-constitutive forces in shaping modern citizenship. The paper is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based on secondary sources of data.

Keywords: Sardar Patel, caste, class, sociological theory, Weber, Bourdieu, Gramsci

1. Introduction

India's social fabric is historically defined by caste and class hierarchies, which continue to shape contemporary discourses on equality, justice, and citizenship. These intersecting systems create complex inequalities that challenge social justice efforts. The struggle for Indian independence was not only a political movement against colonial rule but also a negotiation with entrenched social structures. Among the key architects of modern India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel holds a crucial place due to his role in unifying princely states and laying the foundations of administrative order. However, his engagement with the issues of caste and class, particularly in the context of social justice, remains less interrogated.

This paper explores Patel's political praxis through a sociological framework, focusing on how he engaged with caste and class structures while advancing a vision of national unity. Patel's views on caste and class, particularly during the Constituent Assembly debates from 9 December 1946 to 24 January 1950, offer insights into his approach to social justice. This analysis integrates Patel's speeches, such as those on 26 May 1949 and 30 April 1947, with sociological theories to explore how he navigated caste-class dynamics. It employs the theories of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Antonio Gramsci to analyze Patel's political strategies and thoughts on governance, social hierarchy, and justice.

Theoretical Framework

Max Weber: Status and Class Stratification Max Weber's theory distinguishes between class, status, and party. For Weber, class refers to economic position, status to social honor, and party to the ability to exercise power (Weber, 1946). His notion of legal-rational authority is especially pertinent to understanding Patel's post-independence policies focused on discipline, institutional authority, and administrative centralization.

Pierre Bourdieu: Social and Symbolic Capital- Bourdieu emphasized the role of different forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—in reproducing social inequality (Bourdieu, 1986). Caste, as a bearer of cultural and symbolic capital, often translated into economic and social dominance. Patel's politics, especially during the agrarian struggles, negotiated with these forms of capital, particularly when mobilizing peasant communities.

Antonio Gramsci: Cultural Hegemony- Gramsci's concept of hegemony focuses on how dominant classes maintain power not only through coercion but also by securing consent through moral and intellectual leadership (Gramsci, 1971). Patel's vision of nationhood, rooted in unity and discipline, can be analyzed through this lens, revealing how he managed consent among diverse social groups without dismantling traditional hierarchies.

Caste and Class in Colonial India: Foundations of Social Hierarchies

The British colonial administration significantly restructured and institutionalized caste and class distinctions in Indian society, not merely by acknowledging existing hierarchies but by bureaucratizing them. The introduction of the census in the late 19th century, codification of caste categories, and incorporation of caste into the machinery of governance produced a new form of social visibility and rigidity (Cohn, 1996). The colonial discourse treated caste as a timeless and unchanging feature of Indian society, thus freezing fluid social boundaries and legitimizing hierarchies. From a Weberian perspective, this transformation can be seen as a fusion of legal-rational and traditional authority. While British rule was ostensibly based on legal-rational bureaucracy, it sustained itself through the reinforcement of traditional caste authority among local elites (Weber, 1946). Status groups, especially the dominant castes, maintained privilege not only through economic control but through their recognized position in the colonial legal order. This set the stage for the post-colonial state, where status-based honor (Weber's Stand) remained a major source of power. The rise of new social classes, particularly the urban bourgeoisie and agrarian capitalist class, added another layer of stratification. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital and habitus is useful here. Social groups navigated colonial modernity by investing in new forms of capital—English education, landownership, and bureaucratic

positions—that aligned with caste-based privilege. Caste thereby became embedded within class formations, not opposed to them (Bourdieu, 1986). Meanwhile, colonial capitalism disproportionately benefited upper castes, especially in agrarian regions. For instance, in Gujarat and Maharashtra, Patidar and Maratha castes expanded their landownership and dominance, becoming de facto rural bourgeoisie. These caste-classes would become the primary base for nationalist leaders like Sardar Patel. Gramsci's theory of hegemony also becomes relevant. The colonial state fostered a limited hegemony among dominant caste groups by integrating them into governance. Through education, language, and administrative power, these elites formed a new 'organic intellectual' class capable of articulating national aspirations—albeit without dismantling caste privilege (Gramsci, 1971).

Sardar Patel's Social Origins and Political Formation: The Politics of Pragmatic Conservatism

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was born into a Patidar family in Gujarat, a caste traditionally involved in agriculture and known for landownership and social mobility. This background placed him in a unique socio-political position: he was part of a dominant agrarian caste that benefited from colonial land settlements while also emerging as a leader in anti-colonial struggle. Patel's legal training in England and subsequent career as a barrister exposed him to Western ideals of liberalism, justice, and legal rationality. Weber's emphasis on legal-rational authority is mirrored in Patel's later political actions, especially in his insistence on institutional discipline, bureaucratic efficiency, and rule of law (Weber, 1946). Unlike Gandhi's spiritual-moral leadership or Nehru's socialist vision, Patel's approach to politics was grounded in procedural and administrative logic. Yet his conservatism was not reactionary—it was strategic. Patel believed that maintaining social order was a prerequisite for achieving national unity. This pragmatism is a hallmark of Gramsci's "war of position", where the transformation of society occurs through slow, consensual hegemony rather than revolutionary rupture (Gramsci, 1971). Patel's conservatism can thus be read as a strategy for consolidating hegemony among dominant social groups while gradually integrating marginal voices within the framework of legal equality.

Moreover, Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital helps explain Patel's leadership in Gujarat. The Patidar caste's symbolic association with hard work, self-reliance, and agrarian morality provided Patel with legitimacy among peasant communities (Bourdieu, 1986). His caste position enabled him to mediate between colonial administrators, Gandhian moralism, and peasant resistance.

Bardoli Satyagraha: A Case Study in Class-Caste Mobilization

The Bardoli Satyagraha (1928) marked one of the most significant peasant movements in colonial India and was Patel's first major political leadership success. The protest emerged in response to a 30% hike in land revenue by the British in Bardoli taluka, Gujarat, despite widespread crop failures. Patel's organization of the movement and its ultimate success in forcing the British to roll back the tax earned him the title "Sardar" from the peasantry. A closer sociological analysis of the Bardoli Satyagraha reveals the complex interplay of caste and class. The movement was largely led and supported by Patidar peasants—landowning and socially dominant groups in Gujarat. It was not a movement of the landless or lower castes, who remained on the periphery. This reflects the closure of status groups in

Weber's terminology, where dominant castes utilized their organizational capacity and social networks to claim redress, while excluding subaltern groups (Weber, 1946).

His leadership in movements like the Bardoli Satyagraha (1928) protested oppressive British land revenue policies, mobilizing farmers, including those from lower castes, to demand economic justice. Patel's support for cooperative movements and land reforms aimed to empower tenant farmers and landless laborers, many of whom were from marginalized castes. These initiatives addressed class disparities while indirectly challenging caste-based economic exclusion, as seen in his efforts during the Kheda Satyagraha (1918) to organize relief for flood-affected farmers, ensuring support reached lower-caste communities. Patel's approach to social justice was pragmatic, prioritizing governance and stability over radical reform. He supported constitutional measures against untouchability and reservations for SCs, aligning with the Indian National Congress's commitment to social reform.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, the success of the Bardoli movement was enabled by the Patidars' ability to convert their social capital (caste cohesion and community networks) into political capital (mass mobilization and negotiations with the state). The movement's symbolic framing—as an ethical, disciplined, and lawful protest—also reflects the use of symbolic capital to legitimize demands (Bourdieu, 1986). Yet the movement did not confront caste inequality or advocate redistribution of land or resources to lower castes. This selective mobilization aligns with Gramsci's notion of hegemonic compromise, where dominant groups lead mass movements while incorporating subordinate interests only to the extent that it doesn't threaten their own position (Gramsci, 1971). Patel's leadership ensured that the movement stayed within the bounds of Gandhian non-violence and class cohesion, avoiding any radical social demands.

Constituent Assembly Debates: Citizenship, Reservation, and Legal Rationality

Patel's interventions in the Constituent Assembly were concentrated in the early stages of constitution-making, particularly when the Assembly was considering interim reports on Fundamental Rights and Minority Rights. As chairman of the Advisory Committee, he played a pivotal role in shaping these provisions. His speech on 26 May 1949, during the discussion of the final Report of the Minorities Committee, is particularly significant. Patel emphasized trust in the majority, stating, "The future of a minority, any minority, is to trust the majority" (Patel, 1949). He rejected separate electorates, arguing that they would exclude minorities from government participation in a system of joint responsibility. Patel also supported a ten-year limit on reservations for SCs, indicating his belief in affirmative action as a temporary measure to uplift marginalized communities, as accepted in Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava's amendment (Patel, 1949). On 30 August 1947, Patel spoke on the Supplementary Report on Fundamental Rights, presenting the Advisory Committee's report and highlighting the division between justifiable and non-justifiable rights, which influenced the Constitution's structure (Patel, 1947). Sardar Patel played a pivotal role in shaping the Indian Constitution and defining citizenship. As Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities and Tribal and Excluded Areas, Patel contributed significantly to the discourse on citizenship, legal equality, and integration of princely states. Patel consistently emphasized the principle of legal equality, arguing that all Indians should be treated equally before the law regardless of religion, caste, or gender. His approach was procedural and administrative, resonating strongly with Weber's legal-rational authority model (Weber, 1946). For him,

justice was to be achieved through efficient administration, not social engineering. However, this universalist approach came into tension with caste-based demands for affirmative action. Leaders like B.R. Ambedkar argued that legal equality without social and economic equity would perpetuate structural disadvantage. Patel, while not opposing reservations outright, was hesitant about extending group-based rights, fearing they would undermine national unity. From a Gramscian lens, Patel's insistence on a uniform legal framework represents an attempt to build hegemonic consensus around the idea of the Indian citizen. Yet this consensus was built by downplaying the need for redistributive justice, and instead privileging dominant caste narratives of merit and unity (Gramsci, 1971). In doing so, Patel helped construct a national identity that universalized the experiences of dominant castes while rendering caste oppression invisible.

Moreover, his focus on integrating princely states and suppressing secessionist demands often overshadowed debates around social inclusion. The emphasis was on territorial and administrative unity rather than social justice. Thus, while Patel helped lay the foundations of Indian democracy, his model was more administrative-integrationist than socially-transformative.

National Integration and the Politics of Accommodation

Patel's most enduring legacy lies in the political integration of over 500 princely states into the Indian Union. This monumental task required a delicate balance of diplomacy, coercion, and strategic compromise. His success lay in his ability to negotiate with a range of actors—from feudal monarchs to modern bureaucrats—without triggering large-scale conflict. This project of integration can be viewed through Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Patel built alliances with princely elites, landlords, and dominant caste groups, offering them a place in the new republic in exchange for their loyalty. This reflects a hegemonic bloc, where diverse social forces are unified under a shared political project, often at the cost of marginal interests (Gramsci, 1971). While Patel's actions ensured political unity, they also entrenched the power of existing elites. By avoiding a frontal attack on feudal privileges or caste oppression, the postcolonial state inherited many of the hierarchical structures of the colonial regime. As Bourdieu would argue, the conversion of symbolic capital into institutional power was seamless—old elites retained dominance by adapting to new norms (Bourdieu, 1986).

Patel's integration strategy also reflected a Weberian concern for rational-legal legitimacy. He believed that a strong central authority, backed by a disciplined bureaucracy, would secure India's future. His resistance to linguistic reorganization of states or premature redistribution policies stemmed from this prioritization of administrative order over social reform. In sum, national integration was not merely a territorial achievement—it was a project of ideological consolidation that privileged stability over structural justice.

Conclusion

Sardar Patel's thought on caste, class, and social justice was shaped by his pragmatic nationalism and his role in the Constituent Assembly. His contributions to land reforms, cooperative movements, and constitutional provisions reflect a nuanced approach to addressing systemic inequalities. While his emphasis on national unity sometimes overlooked structural caste hierarchies, his leadership in the Constituent Assembly ensured protections for marginalized communities through Fundamental Rights

and reservations. Patel's legacy offers valuable lessons for contemporary India, where balancing social cohesion with systemic reform remains a critical challenge, as seen in ongoing debates over reservations and caste-based mobilization.

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