

From Independence to Viksit Bharat: Sociological legacies of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Patel

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Abstract

This paper explores the sociological contributions of Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in shaping modern India. Gandhi's philosophy of ahimsa, focus on village self-governance, and moral reform inspired the freedom movement and provided a moral direction for Indian society. Ambedkar, born into the Dalit community, fought for the systemic dismantling of caste through legal and constitutional reforms, advocating for reservation and law-based equality. Patel successfully integrated over 500 princely states after independence, creating administrative unity and stability essential for democratic development. Using sociological theories of Functionalism, Conflict Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, this paper analyzes how these leaders contributed to India's social order, engaged with inequality, and redefined national identity. Despite their methodological differences, they shared a vision of an inclusive, just, and united India. The National Education Policy 2020 reflects their combined legacies, seeking to balance value-based education (Gandhi), structural inclusion (Ambedkar), and nationwide institutional coherence (Patel). As India prepares for Viksit Bharat 2047, their sociological contributions remain indispensable in guiding the nation's progress towards becoming a truly developed and equitable society.

Keywords: Ahimsa, Swaraj, Caste, Constitution, Sarvodaya, Satyagraha, Symbolic Interactionism

Introduction

India's journey from colonial subjugation to an emerging global power has been shaped by remarkable sociopolitical leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Gandhi's philosophy of ahimsa (nonviolence) and his focus on village self-governance inspired the freedom movement and provided a moral direction for Indian society through movements like Champaran (1917) and Kheda (1918). Ambedkar, born into the Dalit community, fought for the systemic dismantling of caste, leading initiatives such as the Mahad Satyagraha (1927), drafting the Indian Constitution, and advocating for reservation and law-based equality. Patel, the "Iron Man of India," successfully integrated over 500 princely states after independence. His actions created administrative unity and stability, which were essential for the democratic development of India. Together, these three leaders laid the sociological foundations for the nation's diversity, justice, and unity.

Objective

This paper aims to explore how the ideas of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Patel influenced India's social structure and national development. Specifically, it seeks to achieve the following objectives

1. Examine their individual sociological contributions: Gandhi's moral reform, Ambedkar's institutional legalism, and Patel's statecraft.
2. The commonalities and conflicts are outlined.
3. Show how their shared legacy offers insight into today's educational and sociopolitical challenges, particularly within the context of NEP 2020 and the vision of Viksit Bharat.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter uses three foundational sociological theories—Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism—to interpret how Gandhi, Ambedkar, and

Patel shaped India's social structure and led its development. These perspectives also clarify their approaches to order, power, identity, and social transformation.

1. Functionalism

Functionalism views society as an integrated system whose parts (such as institutions, norms, practices) function collectively to maintain stability and harmony. Durkheim compared society to an organism, whose organs contribute to overall equilibrium.

Gandhi advocated Swaraj and Sarvodaya, emphasizing each village and individual functioning harmoniously toward the welfare of all—a classic functionalist vision of social cohesion balanced by moral values and roles.

Patel, through administrative unification and institution-building, performed a functionalist task: integrating princely states into a coherent nation-state, thereby reinforcing national solidarity and stability

Ambedkar, while also working within institutional frameworks, restructured core social institutions—legal, political, and educational—to stabilize society by embedding equality and justice into its structural framework.

2. Conflict Theory

Conflict theory emphasizes power struggles, social inequality, and the role of social conflict in driving changes. Class, caste, gender, and power dynamics are core to this paradigm.

Ambedkar epitomized conflict-driven social changes. He challenged entrenched caste hierarchies, led legal and constitutional reforms, and was the chief architect of India's egalitarian legal system, offering a structural response to long-standing oppression.

Gandhi recognized systemic inequalities—especially caste discrimination—and employed nonviolent resistance (e.g., Champaran, Kheda, Mahad satyagraha) to confront and

peacefully transform societal power imbalances. His insistence on including untouchables in temples and public life challenged the normative structures.

Patel managed the integration of diverse princely states, where power dynamics were central concerns. His political negotiations and authority played a conflict-theoretic role in consolidating central state power and eliminating fragmentation that could threaten the national stability.

3. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism analyzes how individuals create meaning through everyday social interactions using language, symbols, and gestures. Mead and Blumer highlight that meaning is socially constructed and evolves.

Gandhi used symbolic acts—salt marches, fasting, khadi—to redefine Indian identity and reshape self-perception. These rituals re-signified symbols such as salt or the spinning wheel as vehicles of moral and political meaning. Ambedkar reframed the identities of marginalized communities through public discourse, legal drafting, and speeches, offering symbols and narratives (e.g., constitutional citizenship and Dalit pride) that empowered and resonated at the grassroots level.

Patel though structural in approach, also utilized symbolic unity—such as national integration ceremonies, parades, and rhetoric—reinforcing shared identity markings, loyalty to the republic, and the legitimacy of centralized governance.

Synthesis and Relevance

The macro-level lenses—Functionalism and Conflict Theory—illuminate how Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Patel built institutional structures and challenged systemic inequities.

The micro-level lens of symbolic interactionism reveals how they transformed individual and collective identities through cultural symbols, rituals, and public acts.

Together, these theories enable a comprehensive understanding of how these leaders shaped India sociologically by balancing stability and unity, confronting deep-rooted inequality, and reimagining national identity through powerful everyday symbols.

Gandhi's Sociological Vision

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of society was deeply rooted in ethical humanism, emphasizing moral reform, self-reliance, and non-violent transformation. His sociological outlook was not systematized in academic terms but articulated through his praxis, combining indigenous traditions, spiritual philosophy, and active resistance to injustice. Gandhi's model of society envisioned an organic, morally responsible community where justice, equality, and harmony were integral to national progress.

Sarvodaya and Social Harmony

At the heart of Gandhi's social vision was Sarvodaya—the "welfare of all." Inspired by John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, Gandhi adopted and adapted this principle into a philosophy of inclusive upliftment, where the prosperity of the weakest formed the moral yardstick for development. Sarvodaya sought to replace competitive individualism with cooperative living, aiming for social harmony through mutual services and responsibilities.

Gandhi believed that true progress required restoring dignity to the marginalized, particularly Dalits (whom he

respectfully called *Harijans* or "children of God"). His efforts to integrate Dalits into the public sphere—temples, schools, and public facilities—marked an ethical challenge to caste hierarchies and laid the groundwork for a more equitable society.

Role of Education, Village Economy, and Non-Violence

Gandhi's approach to education was revolutionary in its focus on character formation, manual labor, and moral development. His *Nai Talim* (Basic Education) model proposes that education should be rooted in the local context, integrating craft, self-sufficiency, and ethical training. According to Gandhi, education is not merely a means to employment but a tool to cultivate responsible citizens with a sense of duty toward others.

Gandhi's village-centric economy also formed a key pillar of his vision. He saw Indian villages as the true soul of the nation and believed in promoting local industries, such as khadi, sustainable agriculture, and decentralized governance. This model is sociologically significant in resisting colonial economic centralization and capitalist alienation.

Non-violence (*ahimsa*), more than a political strategy, was a foundational sociological principle for him. It was an ethical expression of human interconnectedness, a method to reform rather than destroy the oppressor. By promoting *satyagraha* (truth-force), Gandhi established a mode of resistance that empowered the masses and preserved communal harmony.

Social Reforms and Caste Eradication

Gandhi's commitment to caste reform was an essential aspect of his sociological engagement. He vigorously campaigned against untouchability, launched temple-entry movements, and supported inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. However, unlike Ambedkar, Gandhi did not call for the complete abolition of the varna system; instead, he envisioned its moral purification, arguing that all work has dignity and should be honored equally.

He viewed spiritual regeneration and moral upliftment as essential steps toward caste harmony, believing that societal change must begin from within. Critics, including Ambedkar, argued that Gandhi's approach was insufficiently radical, but his influence in awakening the conscience of upper-caste Hindus and mobilizing public support against untouchability remains sociologically significant.

Gandhi's sociological legacy lies in his insistence that true freedom must be both political and social. His emphasis on ethical living, community interdependence, and resistance without hatred offers an alternative to both Western industrial modernity and hierarchical traditionalism. Although debated, his vision continues to inspire efforts toward social harmony, educational reform, and sustainable development in India.

Ambedkar's Structural Approach

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's sociological vision was profoundly grounded in rationalism, legal equality and institutional reform. Unlike Gandhi's moral-spiritual methods, Ambedkar adopted a structuralist and constitutionalist approach to dismantle caste and build an egalitarian Indian society. As a scholar of economics, law, and sociology, Ambedkar combined empirical analysis with activist zeal, advocating for a systemic overhaul of Indian society through state mechanisms, education and legal rights.

Caste as a Structural Problem

Ambedkar's seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), remains a cornerstone of Indian sociological thought. He critiqued caste not merely as a social evil but as an institutionalized system of graded inequality upheld by religious texts and social customs. He argued that the caste system perpetuates structural violence, denies basic human dignity to millions, and fragments society into impermeable hierarchies. For Ambedkar, any meaningful progress required the destruction of the very foundations of caste, not just the reform of its surface manifestations.

In contrast to Gandhi's reformist approach, Ambedkar viewed the caste system as antisocial, antinational, and antidemocratic. His critique extended to Hindu scriptures that legitimized caste practices, advocating a complete reconfiguration of the Hindu social order.

The Constitution as a Tool for Social Justice

Ambedkar's most enduring structural contribution was his role as chief architect of the Indian Constitution. He embedded a strong foundation for legal equality, individual rights, and affirmative action within its framework. The Fundamental Rights (Articles 14–18) and the Directive Principles of State Policy were direct reflections of Ambedkar's commitment to social democracy.

The reservation system (affirmative action) introduced for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was a historic measure aimed at correcting centuries of structural discrimination. By institutionalizing equality before the law and prohibiting untouchability (Article 17), Ambedkar's vision sought not only representation but also redistributive justice.

Education as Emancipation

Ambedkar's faith in education as the primary means of liberation was thus unwavering. Born into extreme social exclusion, he personally experienced caste-based humiliation, which deepened his belief that education is the ultimate weapon against social bondage. His famous exhortation—"Educate, Agitate, organize"—encapsulates his strategy for Dalit empowerment.

He established educational institutions such as the People's Education Society (1945) and emphasized access to quality education for marginalized groups. For Ambedkar, education was not only about knowledge but also about enabling oppressed groups to challenge systemic barriers and participate equally in public life.

Political Empowerment and Institutional Representation

Ambedkar firmly believed that political power was key to social change. He demanded separate electorates for Dalts during the Round Table Conferences, arguing that true representation could not be achieved within upper-caste dominated political structures. Although the Poona Pact (1932)—negotiated under Gandhi's pressure—led to reserved seats instead of separate electorates, Ambedkar remained critical of majoritarianism.

His formation of the Independent Labour Party and later the Scheduled Castes Federation signified his belief in autonomous Dalit political assertion and action. He also served as the first Law Minister of independent India, using his position to advocate for robust institutions, codified rights and inclusive policies.

Conversion to Buddhism: A Moral and Structural Rejection

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, along with that of half a million followers, was a symbolic and structural act of defiance against the Hindu caste order. It was a radical reorientation of identity—a move from ritual degradation to ethical humanism. His embrace of Navayana Buddhism emphasizes rationality, compassion, and equality, offering a spiritual alternative to caste-based Hinduism.

Ambedkar's structural approach to social reform remains one of the most powerful intellectual interventions in contemporary India. By combining constitutionalism, education, and political representation, he created a durable architecture of justice and empowerment. His ideas laid the foundation for many contemporary Indian social policies and continue to shape debates on caste, equity, and democratic governance.

In contrast to Gandhi's moral persuasion and Patel's political pragmatism, Ambedkar's legacy is one of systemic transformation—anchored in law, rights, and institutional accountability.

Patel's Contribution to Social Cohesion

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, often hailed as the "Iron Man of India," played a decisive role in shaping post-independence India's territorial and administrative unity. His sociological legacy lies not only in statecraft and integration but also in establishing conditions for social cohesion, political stability, and national identity. While Gandhi and Ambedkar worked on moral and structural reform, Patel focused on pragmatic consolidation, ensuring that India's enormous diversity could function under a unified, sovereign framework.

Political Unification and Nation-Building

At the time of India's independence in 1947, the country faced a formidable challenge: over 565 princely states existed as autonomous or semi-autonomous entities. Patel, as the first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, led the historic integration of these states into the Indian Union using a combination of diplomacy, persuasion, and firm action when required.

This process was not merely administrative; it was deeply sociological. Patel's unification campaign neutralized potential sites of regional conflict and ethnic division, fostering a collective identity that transcended local loyalty. His use of the Instrument of Accession and the swift military action in Junagadh and Hyderabad prevented balkanisation and secured the territorial integrity that allowed democratic institutions to flourish uniformly.

Administrative Rationalization and Institutional Cohesion

Patel also oversaw the formation of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and other civil services, which became the backbone of India's postcolonial governance. These institutions were envisioned as neutral, merit-based systems for administering a diverse society fairly and efficiently. This was sociologically significant because it helped create institutional unity across linguistic, religious, and caste lines, ensuring that the state could function as a cohesive unit.

By depersonalizing governance and promoting bureaucratic professionalism, Patel laid the groundwork for pan-Indian

civic norms to emerge. These structures helped balance regional autonomy with national interest, which is essential in a country as varied as India.

Secular Nationalism and Minority Integration

Although a conservative nationalist, Patel strongly believed in secular unity. During the tumultuous Partition period, he took decisive steps to protect minorities, particularly in Delhi and Punjab, and worked to restore interreligious trust. He supported the rehabilitation of refugees while insisting that India's identity be inclusive and non-sectarian.

This secular commitment was crucial in fostering social cohesion amidst communal strife and reinforcing the idea of India as a pluralistic republic, not a theocratic state. His emphasis on equal citizenship over religious identity aligns with the constitutional values promoted by B. R. Ambedkar.

Pragmatism over Ideology: A Cohesive Strategy

Unlike Gandhi's idealism or Ambedkar's radical legalism, Patel was deeply pragmatic. His strength lay in *realpolitik*—the ability to turn abstract ideals into a workable framework. For example, while he respected Gandhi's moral authority and Ambedkar's legal genius, he focused on ensuring order, unity, and administrative functionality as prerequisites for societal progress.

His belief that “a united India is a strong India” underscores his sociological intuition that a fragmented society cannot deliver justice, peace, or progress. Thus, he prioritized national cohesion as the foundation upon which other reforms could be built.

Symbolic Legacy and Cultural Integration

Patel's legacy extends into the realm of symbolic cohesion as well. His image as a no-nonsense leader, unifier of India, and protector of civilizational integrity has been invoked to promote national unity across political and social spectrums. The erection of the Statue of Unity in Gujarat—the world's tallest statue—is a testament to his continuing symbolic value in the narrative of cohesive and sovereign India.

Sardar Patel's contributions to Indian society are indispensable in understanding the sociological foundations of national integration. By neutralizing the centrifugal forces of princely fragmentation, institutionalizing impartial governance, and asserting a secular and united identity, Patel laid the structural groundwork for social and political cohesion. His efforts ensured that India's constitutional ideals—authored by Ambedkar and inspired by Gandhi—were implemented within a stable and unified framework.

Together, Patel's pragmatism, Gandhi's ethics, and Ambedkar's justice form a complementary triad that continues to shape India's evolving identity and aspirations for *Viksit Bharat*.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Contrasts in Sociological Thought

While Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel are often studied in isolation or viewed through narrow political lenses; their collective contribution to India's sociological evolution reveals both deep complementarities and striking tensions. Each approached the challenges of caste, social justice, national identity, and development through distinct paradigms: ethical-moral, legal-structural, and administrative-pragmatic. However, their combined efforts laid the groundwork for a pluralistic, democratic, and cohesive Indian society.

Convergence: Nation-Building with Justice, Unity, and Reform

Despite their methodological differences, all three leaders shared a common vision of a modern, inclusive India, albeit through different routes

- **Social Justice:** Gandhi's Sarvodaya, Ambedkar's constitutional safeguards, and Patel's administrative integration were all directed toward uplifting marginalized populations and stabilizing society.
- **Unity in Diversity:** Each believed in India's composite culture and plural identity. Gandhi fostered communal harmony through moral appeals; Ambedkar institutionalized protection for minorities and Dalits; Patel structurally unified India's diverse regions and communities.
- **Educational Reform:** Gandhi's Nai Talim, Ambedkar's push for universal access, and Patel's support for standardized civil administration all reflect the belief in education as a transformative tool for individual and national empowerment.
- **Non-colonial Modernity:** All three resisted Western models of modernity, which perpetuated inequality. Gandhi promoted Swaraj and localism, Ambedkar envisioned egalitarian constitutionalism, and Patel built sovereign institutions on Indian soil.

Contrast: Method, Ideology, and Reform Strategy

Gandhi emphasized moral reform through self-purification and ethical leadership. His critique of caste was reformist: he aimed to remove untouchability while retaining a moralized varna system. Ambedkar rejected this view, seeing caste as systemic oppression requiring complete elimination through legal and institutional change. Patel focused on pragmatic state building, balancing ideals with governance. 2. Gandhi saw religion as a moral force for unity, promoting interfaith harmony while maintaining Hindu elements. Ambedkar critiqued religion for perpetuating inequality and converted to Buddhism to break from caste hierarchy. Patel prioritized secular state-building over religious identity during Partition. 3. Gandhi envisioned a minimal state of self-sufficient, decentralized villages. Ambedkar advocated for a strong constitutional state to enforce justice and rights. Patel supported a centralized state with strong institutions and administrative machinery.

Contemporary Relevance: Gandhi, Ambedkar, Patel and the Vision of Viksit Bharat through NEP 2020

As India strides toward its centenary of independence in 2047 with the aspirational vision of *Viksit Bharat*—a self-reliant, equitable, innovative, and inclusive society—the intellectual legacies of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel acquire renewed significance. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, envisioned as a transformative framework for India's future, echoes many of their core sociological ideas: moral development, social justice, institutional strengthening, and national unity.

Gandhian Influence: Education for Ethical and Holistic Development

Gandhi's concept of Nai Talim—which emphasized education through productive work, character building, and moral values—finds strong resonance in NEP 2020's focus on experiential learning, value-based education, and life skills. The policy promotes holistic development by integrating ethics, empathy, and environmental awareness—principles that are central to Gandhian pedagogy.

Moreover, Gandhi's emphasis on local languages, crafts, and rural upliftment aligns with the NEP's thrust on mother tongue instruction, vocational education, and community engagement, helping to bridge the urban-rural educational divide. His vision of decentralization and participatory learning supports the policy's goal of making education more contextualized and inclusive.

Ambedkarite Vision: Social Justice, Inclusion, and Constitutional Morality

Ambedkar's legacy is visible in the NEP the 2020s emphasis on equity, access, and the upliftment of marginalized communities. The policy acknowledges persistent disparities in education among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and women—groups that Ambedkar tirelessly advocated for.

The provisions for: Scholarships and support systems for disadvantaged groups, Gender Inclusion Fund, Increased representation of SC/ST/OBC faculty, \ and Institutional autonomy with accountability reflects Ambedkar's belief in structural reform and affirmative action.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's insistence on rationality, scientific temper, and constitutional values is embedded in the NEP's goals of promoting critical thinking, civic responsibility, and democratic citizenship. The policy affirms that education must not only prepare individuals for employment but also for participation in a democratic and ethical life.

Patelian Framework: National Integration and Institutional Strengthening

Patel's contributions to institutional unity and national cohesion are mirrored in the NEP the 2020s efforts to create a coherent national education architecture that respects diversity while promoting integration.

The formation of centralized bodies, such as National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC), National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) and The National Research Foundation (NRF) reflects Patel's vision of a robust administrative and infrastructural backbone capable of sustaining a diverse but unified nation.

Moreover, the NEP's promotion of Indian knowledge systems, unity in diversity, and constitutional values reflects Patel's vision of nurturing a shared civic identity without erasing regional and linguistic pluralism. His emphasis on discipline, meritocracy, and institutional ethics aligns with the NEP's call for teacher professionalism, governance reform, and digital transparency.

A Unified Framework for Viksit Bharat

The *Viksit Bharat@2047* vision aims to build an inclusive, educated, empowered, and globally competitive India. In this journey: Gandhi reminds us to stay rooted in ethics, sustainability, and local empowerment.

Ambedkar urged us to institutionalize justice, dignity, and equal opportunity for every citizen.

Patel demands that we secure unity, integrity, and efficient governance as the foundation of progress.

The NEP 2020 serves as a socio-educational blueprint that channels their combined wisdom, seeking to balance: Moral growth (Gandhi), Structural inclusion (Ambedkar), and Administrative efficiency (Patel).

In the post-pandemic, globalized world order, India's march toward *Viksit Bharat* must be rooted in the plural philosophies of development. Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Patel offer not merely historical guidance but a triadic sociological compass to navigate challenges of inequality, fragmentation, and institutional inertia. The NEP 2020 represents a modern enactment of their legacy—an integrated approach to education, justice, and unity, capable of transforming India into a truly developed and equitable nation.

Conclusion

The sociological contributions of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel represent the three foundational pillars of modern India. Each approached the challenges of colonial rule, social inequality, and nation-building with distinct perspectives—Gandhi through moral and ethical reform, Ambedkar through legal and structural transformation, and Patel through administrative unity and political pragmatism. Together, they laid the groundwork for an India that strives to be just, cohesive and inclusive.

Using sociological theories such as Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism, this paper analyzes how these leaders contributed to India's social order, engaged with inequality, and redefined national identity. While their methods varied, their shared commitment to India's upliftment created a powerful triad of ethical ideals, legal foundations and political integration.

In the present context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reflects a conscious effort to carry forward these legacies. It seeks to balance value-based education (Gandhi), structural inclusion and access (Ambedkar), and nation-wide institutional coherence (Patel). As India prepares for *Viksit Bharat 2047*, their combined vision offers a timeless blueprint for progress that is not merely economic but also moral, social, and democratic.

Thus, the lives and legacies of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Patel remain not only relevant but indispensable to the sociological imagination and the developmental aspirations of 21st-century India.

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