SHABDBRAHM E-ISSN: 3049 4230
VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2, OCTOBER 2025

THE IRON MAN IN FICTION: SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL'S PORTRAYAL IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *Train to Pakistan* (1956) AND NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *Rich Like Us* (1985)

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Abstract

Despite the fact that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, also known as the "Iron Man of India," is not typically a principal character in Indian fiction written in English, his symbolic presence is frequently recurrent at pivotal historical junctures. The purpose of this article is to examine and contrast two seminal novels that were published almost thirty years apart: Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), which takes place during the horrors of Partition in 1947, and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), which takes place during the Emergency that occurred between 1975 and 1977. Patel serves as a contentious emblem of state authority, strongman rule, and the unresolved legacy of the Nehruvian–Patelian accord in both of the writings that were written as a result of fundamentally different political conditions. However, Sahgal re-invokes Patel as a spectral ideal—an uncompromising protector of constitutional order—against the authoritarianism of Indira Gandhi. Singh portrays Patel as a remote, metallic, and ultimately powerless force against communal hysteria. Sahgal's portrayal of Patel is in contrast to Singh's portrayal of him.

The paper argues that the literary "Iron Man" is less of a fixed historical person than it is a floating signifier. It is alternatively hailed, feared, and lamented as the embodiment of the strong state that independent India both needed and learnt to dread. This is accomplished by juxtaposing various portrayals side by side.

Keywords: Sardar Patel, Khushwant Singh, Nayantara Sahgal, Partition, Emergency, Strongman

Introduction:

Despite the fact that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel passed away in December of 1950, his posthumous existence in Indian fiction has been surprisingly consistent. Patel came to represent a particular fantasy of masculine, decisive, and unsentimental governance. This fantasy stood in implicit contrast to Jawaharlal Nehru's cosmopolitan liberalism and Mahatma Gandhi's moral politics. Patel was given the nickname "Iron Man" because of his role in bringing together 562 princely states to form a unified India. The Partition riots of 1947 and the Emergency of 1975–1977 are two of the most significant crises that independent India has ever faced. Patel is used as a foil in two great Indian English novels that were written thirty years apart from each other. These books explore the nature and limits of state power under these circumstances.

Historical Context and Patel's "Iron Man" Persona

Prior to entering into the novels, it is vital to go back and remember the reasons why Patel was given the nickname "Iron Man." As India's first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, he deftly navigated the upheaval that ensued as a result of the Partition of India. He was responsible for overseeing the rehabilitation of refugees, putting an end to communal violence, and ensuring that the new nation maintained its territorial integrity. His method was characterised by a toughness that was occasionally criticised as authoritarian, although it was always aimed at achieving unity. The literature that deals with Partition and India after it gained its independence frequently grapples with these concerns, employing fiction as a means of humanising the abstract forces of history. By use story to critique societal divisions, Singh and Sahgal, who both write from personal proximity to these events (Singh as a witness to Partition, Sahgal as a member of the Nehru family), indirectly mirror Patel's efforts to construct a cohesive India. Singh was a witness to the Partition of India between India and Pakistan.

Patel as Distant Steel

A brutal and unflinching account of the 1947 Partition, *Train to Pakistan* takes place in the fictitious border community of Mano Majra, where Sikhs and Muslims have peacefully coexisted for decades. The partition of India and Pakistan took place in 1947. The story focusses on local people who are caught in the whirlwind of communal violence, and trains serve as a metaphor for the horrifying mass migrations and massacres that occur throughout the novel. The story is centred on characters such as Juggut Singh, who is a Sikh dacoit, Nooran, who is a Muslim girl, and Iqbal, who is a social worker. The story culminates in a sacrifice that prevents a massacre from occurring among the characters.

Patel is not portrayed as a character in the book, nor is he addressed specifically anywhere in the text. In order to condemn the inadequacies of leadership in preventing widespread slaughter, Singh makes a conscious effort to avoid naming high-level political personalities. Instead, he places an emphasis on the human tragedy that occurred on the ground. On the other hand, the ideas of the novel have a strong resonance with Patel's historical responsibility. Patel, in his capacity as Home Minister, campaigned for population exchanges as a means of reducing violence and fought relentlessly to restore calm in regions that had been ravaged by riots. There is a striking similarity between the novel's depiction of rising communal tensions, in which rumours and external agitators destroy the harmony of the community, and the actual issues that Patel had to face, such as coordinating the responses of the police and the military to safeguard trains carrying refugees.

Symbolically speaking, Patel's "iron" resolve is invoked through the novel's investigation of moral choices in the midst of chaos. Patel's pragmatic, no-nonsense attitude to administration is echoed by the role of the magistrate, who embodies bureaucratic authority. The magistrate urges evacuations in order to avert additional violence. This is a fact that Patel himself regretted in speeches, observing that "the poison [of communalism] has assumed a virulent form." Singh's account highlights the irony of Independence, which is that independence was accompanied with fratricide. The conclusion of the book, in which a group of Muslims are saved by the bravery of an individual, can be interpreted as a fictional tribute to Patel's efforts to protect minority groups and preserve national unity, despite the fact that the system did not function properly. The work of Singh has been criticised for its ability to humanise the numbers of the Partition, in a manner that is analogous to how Patel's communication displays his displeasure with the human cost.

Train to Pakistan (1956); In Khushwant Singh's classic, Patel appears only twice, and never by his full name—he is simply "the Sardar" or "the big man in Delhi."

First, through a radio broadcast:

"Then came the voice of the Sardar… 'Brothers and sisters,' he said in his heavy Gujarati-accented Hindustani… The voice was metallic and unsympathetic" (Singh 82–83).

Second, in person, during a lightning visit to Mano Majra immediately after a trainload of murdered Sikhs arrives:

"From [the American car] stepped out a tall man in a brown homespun cap… It was the Sardar himself. He looked stern and angry… He did not speak to anyone. He just glowered at the crowd… Then he got back into his car and the convoy moved on" (Singh 165–166).

Singh's Patel is the embodiment of centralized, bureaucratic authority: mediated by technology, encased in motorcade steel, incapable of (or unwilling to) engage with the visceral horror on the ground. His silence is more eloquent than any speech. The state sees the carnage, registers anger, and departs. The planned massacre of Mano Majra's Muslims is only prevented by the subaltern heroism of the gangster Jugga, not by any intervention from the "Iron Man." Singh thus presents Patel as necessary (without his iron grip, India might have disintegrated) yet tragically inadequate when confronted with popular bloodlust.

Patel as Spectral Ideal: *Rich Like Us* (1985)

In *Rich Like Us*, which is set against the backdrop of India's post-Independence era, which spans from the 1930s to the Emergency in 1975 under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, personal stories are intertwined with political criticism inside the narrative. Sonali, a civil servant who was demoted for her integrity, and Rose, a British woman married into an Indian family, are the protagonists of the novel. Both of these women will navigate cultural and familial difficulties throughout the course of the story. It reveals the corruption that occurred during the Emergency, as well as the degradation of democratic values and the human toll that authoritarianism took during that time, including the use of censorship and forced sterilisations.

It should be noted that Patel is not actually depicted or quoted in the book anywhere. A prominent critic of political dynasties, Sahgal focusses on the betrayals of Nehruvian socialism, with implied digs at Indira Gandhi's rule. Sahgal is Nehru's niece and a vocal critic of political dynasties. The novel's narrative begins before Patel's death in 1950, and its historical flashbacks touch on the struggle for liberation; nonetheless, Patel's name does not feature in any of the important summaries or interpretations of the novel. Nevertheless, his legacy as the "Iron Man" looms in the background, notably in topics concerning the integration of the nation and the resistance to authoritarianism within the country. When compared to the novel's picture of a broken society during the Emergency, where power is exploited for personal benefit, Patel's firm hand in reconciling India stands in stark contrast. This is similar to Sahgal's real-life criticisms of the Congress party's slide from its fundamental beliefs.

The manner in which Patel is portrayed arises symbolically as a result of the novel's investigation on ethical leadership. The bureaucratic integrity that Patel advocated for is exemplified by characters such as Sonali, who refuse to compromise with dishonest practices. Patel's cautions about economic inequality and his campaign for land reforms are echoed in

the book's critique of "*Rich Like Us*" elitism, which is characterised by the fact that riches and power shield a select few while enslaving the majority. According to Sahgal, politicians such as Patel have been publicly commended for their grounded nationalism, which contrasts with the nationalism of later leaders. Patel's involvement in negotiating with princely kingdoms is quietly invoked in the novel's historical vignettes on colonialism and independence, according to one study. This highlights the irony of a nation that is "rich" in heritage yet impoverished in governance.

A generation later, when the whole concept of a strong state has become oppressive under the rule of Indira Gandhi, the novel Emergency by Nayantara Sahgal takes place. Despite the fact that Patel is not physically present in this instance because he has passed away, his legacy is frequently cited as a moral baseline against which the excesses of the Emergency are weighed. Kishori Lal, a crippled public official, had the following thoughts just before he is killed for refusing to sign illegal demolition orders:

"There had been a time when men like Sardar Patel walked this earth… men who would have died rather than sign away someone's home… The Sardar had been made of iron, but it was clean iron" (Sahgal 145).

Later, the narrator Sonali reflects on the erosion of constitutional values:

"We had begun with giants—Nehru, Patel, Rajagopalachari—men who had fought the British with one hand and built the institutions with the other. Somewhere along the way we had traded them for pygmies in silk saris and dark glasses" (Sahgal 212).

Even the cynical businessman Ram, normally allergic to idealism, concedes:

"If the Sardar had been alive in '75, Madam would have thought ten times before declaring Emergency. He would have broken her" (Sahgal 189).

In Sahgal's liberal–Nehruvian imagination (she was, after all, Nehru's niece), Patel ironically becomes the protector of democratic moderation precisely because of his reputation for merciless might. Sahgal's imagination is influenced by Nehru. Two qualities that appear to be in opposition to one another are reconciled through the use of the "clean iron" metaphor: authoritarian decisiveness and moral incorruptibility. On the other hand, the Emergency is portrayed as "dirty iron," which refers to the same strongman urge that is now being used against the people rather than when it was being used for their benefit.

Comparative Analysis: The Iron Man as Floating Signifier

When the works are compared, Patel's fictional treatment is revealed to be very different from one another. The fact that he is explicitly and negatively associated with the carnage that occurred during the Partition of India in *Train to Pakistan* shows him as a figure of aristocratic detachment, highlighting irony and responsibility. *Rich Like Us*, on the other hand, makes use of absence in order to generate sentimentality for Patel's integrity while simultaneously criticising the divergence from his values that occurred during the Emergency. Both works explore the process of nation-building through the lens of Patel: Singh does so via trauma and realism, while Sahgal does so through satire and feminism.

When seen from a thematic perspective, these depictions highlight Patel's legendary reputation as the "Iron Man." In fiction, he transcends biography to reflect the fragility of unity, which is shattered by Partition in Singh's work and degraded by authoritarianism in Sahgal's. This is a reflection of broader tendencies in Indian English literature, which involves the reimagining of historical individuals in order to address modern concerns regarding subjects such as identity and governance. At the end of the day, the novels give the impression that Patel's legacy, albeit being "iron" in terms of determination, is pliable in terms of cultural memory, being moulded by the authors' critiques of power.

The depictions of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in the novels *Train to Pakistan* and *Rich Like Us* shed light on his ongoing significance in Indian fiction as a symbol of unity in the midst of divide. A direct and ironic allusion made by Singh criticises the shortcomings of leadership during the Partition, while Sahgal's absence, which is not explicitly stated, expresses regret over the loss of his values during the post-colonial instability. The combination of these works substantiates Patel's position not only as a historical character but also as a literary touchstone that can be used to contemplate India's experience. In subsequent research, it may be possible to investigate comparable depictions in other narratives, such as Partition or Emergency, in order to further dissect the fictional development of "Iron Man."

The change is very noticeable. In 1956, the strong state, which was led by Patel, is criticised for its inability to prevent the extermination of the Jewish community. When 1985 rolls around, the same powerful state is being lamented because its absence has made it possible for a new authoritarianism that is not legitimate to thrive. As a result, Patel becomes a palimpsest, which means that the same historical character gets reconstructed to accommodate the political worries of two decades that couldn't be apart from one another.

Guha depicts Patel as the "realist" counterpart to Nehru's "humanism," crediting him with practical achievements like state integration, which solidified India's territorial unity.

"After Gandhi's assassination, Patel set aside whatever reservations he had about Nehru's leadership and served under him until his own death in December 1950. The two men arrived at an effective sharing of responsibilities. As Prime Minister, Nehru focused on relations between the different provinces, forging an independent foreign and economic policy, and promoting security for Muslims as well as equality for women. As Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Patel focused on the integration of the princely states, the reform and modernization of the administrative system, and the passing of the Indian Constitution. From 30 January 1948 – the day Gandhi was murdered – to 26 January 1950, when the Constitution came into effect, Nehru and Patel worked shoulder to shoulder to help create a united and democratic republic" (Guha).

Beyond the Two Novels: The Persistent After life

Later works of fiction and film continue to explore the contradiction that is established here, which describes Patel as simultaneously enabling and dangerous. Sardar, a biography directed by Shyam Benegal and released in 1993, portrays Patel in a heroic light. He plays the role of the resolute realist who coerces Nehru into accepting Partition in the 2017 film Viceroy's House, which was directed by Gurinder Chadha. Even in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children (1981)*, the "iron-willed Home Minister" who puts down the Hyderabad insurrection is unmistakably Patel. Rushdie's novel was published in 1981. It is impossible for the "Iron Man" to rust away.

No one can forget the role of Patel as he himself said,

"We have unified India; now build it strongly" (Speech in Junagadh; p. 68).

Further, he said,

"We have to strengthen... anticipate... Communists... destroy its autonomous existence" (Letter to Nehru on Tibet/China; p. 509)

Conclusion:

Despite the fact that they are writing from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum—one is a sardonic agnostic Sikh, and the other is a liberal Brahmin who is intimately connected to the Nehru dynasty—Khushwant Singh and Nayantara Sahgal converge on Patel as the crucial symbolic battleground for debating the nature of legitimate state power in India. In *Rich Like Us*, he is the remembered "clean iron" that could have averted the Emergency's moral rust. In

Train to Pakistan, he is the voice that is far away and metallic, and he is unable to halt the killing.

The two novels, when seen as a whole, shed light on a more profound reality: India's obsession with (and fear of) the strongman did not start with Indira Gandhi, nor has it ended with her. The republic that he helped to build is still haunted by the spirit of the first Iron Man, a nation that has never quite decided whether it requires more iron or less iron.

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