



From Iron Man to Iconic Monument in the Contest over History Development and Identity in the Making of the Statue of Unity

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Abstract: The Statue of Unity, inaugurated on October 31, 2018, and measuring 182 meters, is the highest statue globally, honoring Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, a pivotal leader in post-independence India. Although it represents national pride and solidarity, its establishment has been tainted by several complex conflicts across economic, environmental, socio-political, and cultural spheres. This study conducts a thorough and critical examination of the several aspects related to the statue's design, fabrication, and public response. The Statue of Unity fundamentally embodies both veneration and aspiration, designed to commemorate the “Iron Man of India” for his role in national unity. The monument's substantial financial expenditure has ignited discussions over prioritization in a country contending with poverty, healthcare inadequacies, and educational disparities. Environmentalists have expressed apprehension over ecological damage and the relocation of indigenous populations, while legal experts have condemned the procedural deficiencies in land acquisition and clearance approvals. The statue has emerged as a site of cultural and political contention, marked by accusations of historical appropriation and political opportunism about Patel's legacy. This paper contends that, through a meticulous analysis of these elements—bolstered by empirical evidence, scholarly discourse, and global comparisons—monumental projects such as the Statue of Unity can serve as instruments of collective memory and identity, yet they also pose the danger of marginalizing local communities and obscuring significant socio-economic challenges. It advocates for a balanced strategy in national remembrance that emphasizes ethical governance, participatory planning, and cultural inclusion.

Index Terms- Statue of Unity, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Monumental Endeavors, Historical, Commemoration, National Identity, Developmental Controversies, Political Symbolism

I. Introduction

The aspiration to construct gigantic edifices is as ancient as civilization itself. From the pyramids of Egypt to the Eiffel Tower, from the Colossus of Rhodes to Mount Rushmore, these structures frequently function as ideological instruments employed by nations to influence collective memory, reinforce political power, and proclaim national identity. In this context, India's Statue of Unity, erected on October 31, 2018, serves as both an homage to the esteemed statesman Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and a tangible representation of India's shifting political environment. The monument, standing at 182 meters, was conceived and finalized under the direction of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who formerly held the position of Chief Minister of Gujarat. Located adjacent to the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in Gujarat's Narmada region, the monument was erected to commemorate Patel's contribution to the unification of over 560 princely states following India's independence, a remarkable achievement that conferred upon him the designation “Iron Man of India”. The statue has been celebrated as a national accomplishment and a representation of India's architectural prowess; however, it has not escaped debate. Critics contend that its prohibitive expense, ecological repercussions, and displacement of indigenous populations pose significant ethical and policy dilemmas. The monument has been perceived by many as a political strategy to appropriate Patel's legacy for current political agendas. This study aims to examine the intricacies by objectively evaluating the debates surrounding the Statue of Unity. It seeks to examine the following enquiries: What does the statue signify within the historical and political framework of India? What impact has it had on local populations and ecosystems? What are the economic ramifications, and how do they correspond with developmental objectives? Ultimately, what has been the perception of the statue on both national and worldwide scales? This study aims to provide a thorough examination of one of India's most ambitious and contentious architectural projects.

II. Historical Context and Symbolic Importance

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel holds a distinctive and lasting place in India's political and national history. Born in 1875 in the hamlet of Nadiad, now in Gujarat, Patel's ascent from humble origins to the forefront of India's political unification exemplifies a remarkable narrative of leadership, resilience, and pragmatism. Patel, a barrister educated in England, saw a surge in his political career during the Indian independence struggle, becoming a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi. His first engagement in orchestrating the peasant demonstrations in Kheda, Borsad, and Bardoli not only highlighted agricultural concerns on a national scale but also garnered him the endearing appellation of “Sardar,” meaning leader. Patel's greatest lasting influence resides in the tumultuous years subsequent to independence in 1947. As India's inaugural Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, he began the formidable job of assimilating over 560 princely kingdoms into the Indian Union. The princely states, differing significantly in

size, governance, and loyalty, presented a fundamental threat to the geographical and political unity of the emerging Indian republic. By skilfully employing diplomacy, political discussion, and, when required, the application of force—exemplified by the situation in Hyderabad—Patel guaranteed that the aspiration for a unified India transformed from an ideal into a tangible political and administrative reality.

This monumental accomplishment, unmatched in contemporary political history, bestowed upon Patel the epithet “Iron Man of India,” epitomising his steadfast resolve and unwavering patriotism. His strategy for national integration was based not only on constitutional duties but also on a vision of togetherness that surpassed regional and ethnic divisions. Despite these significant achievements, Patel's legacy was, for decades, marginalised in India's post-independence history, which was predominantly shaped by the prominent personalities of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. The relative marginalisation of Patel has been a focal point of political debate, especially among ideological factions aiming to redefine India's national narrative. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which gained notoriety via cultural nationalism, has often reproached the Congress party for marginalising Patel's accomplishments in favour of Nehru's legacy. The decision to erect the Statue of Unity may be regarded as both a rectifying action and a political declaration. This seeks to restore and redefine Patel's significance in the nation's communal memory. The symbolism of the Statue of Unity surpasses traditional memorial functions. It is not only a monument; it serves as a storytelling instrument. The designation “Statue of Unity” conjures notions of unity, fortitude, and inseparability. Positioning the statue adjacent to the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, an area marked by significant socio-political conflicts about displacement and environmental deterioration, renders the statue a symbol of national pride and contentious progress. The monument's impressive height of 182 meters exemplifies political will and foresight, elevating Patel to both literal and figurative prominence among national leaders. The statue surpasses worldwide equivalents like the Statue of Liberty and the Spring Temple Buddha, underscoring India's aspiration to affirm its civilizational heritage internationally.

This magnificence raises intricate enquiries: whose oneness is embodied by the statue? Does it represent a unity that encompasses India's heterogeneous ethos—its religious plurality, regional variety, and democratic dissent—or does it signify a more monolithic conception of nationalism? Critics contend that the monument conveys a centralised, uniform identity that may neglect the intricate and decentralised characteristics of Indian democracy. The act of monumentalization, particularly on such a grand scale, risks diminishing a multifaceted leader like Patel to a static emblem, vulnerable to modern political reinterpretations. Moreover, the utilization of Patel's likeness by political groups has exacerbated concerns around historical ownership and ideological heritage. Although Patel was a famous figure in Congress, he is now widely honoured by the BJP, demonstrating how political symbols are frequently recontextualised to align with contemporary narratives. This act of symbolic appropriation, albeit impactful, raises concerns regarding the genuineness of the commemorative purpose. The Statue of Unity serves as both an homage and a text—inscribed not in pen but in bronze and concrete. It narrates a tale of post-independence stabilisation while simultaneously embodying contemporary hopes and worries. It exists at the intersection of memory, identity, and politics, prompting us to reflect on not just what we memorialise, but also how and why we engage in such acts.

III. Fiscal Disputes and Economic Consequences

The building of the Statue of Unity incurred an astonishing cost of ₹2,989 crores (about USD 430 million). The administration justified this expense by referencing national pride and tourist potential; nonetheless, opponents have persistently challenged the prudence of such a financial commitment in a nation where millions still lack access to fundamental services.

3.1 Opportunity Costs and Developmental Priorities

India performs poorly on several human development indexes, encompassing healthcare, education, and sanitation. The 2018 NITI Aayog report indicated that over 190 million Indians were undernourished, and more than 600 million lacked access to proper sanitation. These figures highlight the magnitude of unfulfilled fundamental requirements. Critics contend that the substantial money allocation for the monument should have been more judiciously utilized to enhance the nation's healthcare system, broaden educational access, and guarantee availability of clean drinking water and sanitation. Economist Jean Drèze, recognized for his contributions to developmental economics, has characterized the endeavor as “austerity for the poor and extravagance for the elite.” His criticism embodies a widespread belief that the state favors symbolic nationalism above substantive wellbeing. During the same fiscal time of the statue's construction, several public health institutions in India had a deficiency of essential medical equipment, while rural schools faced challenges related to insufficient classrooms and teaching personnel. These differences prompt significant ethical and political examination about the allocation of public expenditures. Furthermore, the economic principle of opportunity cost indicates that each rupee allocated to the monument represents a rupee not invested in poverty reduction, public health, or infrastructure development. This trade-off is particularly difficult in a rising economy such as India, where the government's investment ability is limited by budget deficits and increasing public debt.

3.2 Financial Sources and Absence of Transparency

The funding approach for the monument has also faced controversy. The government asserted that a substantial share of the financing was derived from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) donations made by Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) like Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), Indian Oil Corporation, and Bharat Petroleum. Although collaborations between public initiatives and corporate donors are not intrinsically problematic, the lack of clear and honest disclosures about specific donations, terms of engagement, and accountability procedures is disturbing. The main construction contract was granted to Larsen & Toubro (L&T), a distinguished Indian multinational, for ₹2,989 crore. Although L&T's technological proficiencies are unquestionable, detractors raise concerns over the absence of worldwide competitive bidding. Considering the project's worldwide reputation and magnitude, many assert that inviting global corporations to participate in the bidding process may have guaranteed improved price, innovation, and transparency. Allegations of cost inflation and procedural opacity have also emerged. A study by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India highlighted disparities between budget allocation and actual expenditure, indicating the necessity for stringent audit processes in large-scale infrastructure projects.

3.3 Tourism Potential and Economic Rationales

Proponents justify the project's substantial expense by highlighting its capacity to enhance tourism and stimulate the local economy. Situated in the secluded Kevadia district of Gujarat, the statue was conceived as an attraction for both national and international visitors. In its inaugural year, the monument drew over 2.9 million people, yielding an estimated revenue of approximately 80 crores from admission fees and ancillary services like lodging, transportation, and dining. Although these data appear encouraging at first glance, a further examination uncovers a more complex truth. Research by the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITM) indicates that, despite a rise in tourist arrivals, the advantages have been inequitably allocated. Major hotel chains and government-operated tourist entities have monopolized the majority of economic benefits, while small vendors, local craftsmen, and tribal people have had negligible enhancements in their livelihoods. The establishment of the Statue of Unity Tourism Circuit, with attractions such as the Valley of Flowers, Jungle Safari, and Cactus Garden, was anticipated to produce sustainable job possibilities. Nevertheless, insufficient planning, absence of skill development initiatives, and restricted access to financing for local businesses have obstructed this goal. Furthermore, the seasonal characteristics of tourism and insufficient transportation connectivity persist as considerable obstacles. Critics contend that the tourist model associated with the monument replicates previous deficient patterns in which prominent places attract excessive investment, while culturally rich yet under-promoted areas suffer neglect. Mass tourism is associated with environmental difficulties, such as waste management challenges, ecological deterioration, and pressure on local water supplies.

3.4 Comprehensive Economic Considerations

The financial discussion around the Statue of Unity centers on a fundamental question: can colossal undertakings be justified exclusively by intangible returns like national pride and symbolic capital? Do they signify a misallocation of limited resources that could otherwise promote equitable development? Economic historian Tirthankar Roy contends that public monuments, when purposefully integrated with a comprehensive socio-economic strategy, may provide enduring benefits. In the absence of such congruence, they risk becoming white elephants—impressive yet economically unviable constructions. The destiny of analogous sculptures globally, shown by the lacklustre tourism influence of Africa's Renaissance Monument in Senegal, acts as a cautionary narrative. Although the Statue of Unity unquestionably enhances India's architectural and symbolic legacy, its financial rationale continues to be a subject of public discourse. The absence of transparency in financing, possible opportunity costs, and varied economic results underscore the intricacies associated with implementing mega-infrastructure projects in a developed state. The key takeaway is not to forsake such programs, but to guarantee that they are designed, implemented, and assessed with a comprehensive perspective on societal advantage, financial responsibility, and democratic accountability.

IV. Ecological and Social Consequences

The erection of the Statue of Unity has elicited considerable environmental and social apprehensions, especially due to its placement on Sadhu Bet, an islet adjacent to the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. The region is both environmentally delicate and culturally important, having been inhabited by indigenous people for decades. The contrast between a significant national enterprise and an ecologically sensitive, socially dynamic area has resulted in intricate issues of environmental degradation, cultural disturbance, and legislative difficulties.

4.1 Environmental Issues

Initially, environmentalists and ecologists saw the possible risks of constructing a substantial structure inside a riverine ecosystem already burdened by years of damming and water management. The building necessitated significant blasting, dredging, and land reclamation, techniques that unavoidably modified the area's natural hydrology. The alteration in river flow patterns affected aquatic biodiversity, with enduring consequences for fish reproductive cycles and water quality. The region's vegetation and animals also experienced relocation. Reports from the Gujarat Ecology Commission and other independent environmental organizations have indicated a reduction in local animal activity, attributing it to habitat degradation and heightened human meddling. Deforestation, especially for supporting tourism infrastructure such as roads, hotels, and parking facilities, has intensified soil erosion and hindered carbon sequestration. Furthermore, the arrival of millions of visitors has exacerbated ecological strain. Elevated automotive traffic and pedestrian activity have contributed to heightened air and noise pollution, and the lack of effective waste management systems has caused littering and the poisoning of local water bodies. Waste produced by restaurants, hotels, and informal vendors frequently contaminates the river, exacerbating the Narmada's already compromised environment. Climate specialists have cautioned about the "urban heat island" phenomenon induced by extensive concrete edifices such as the Statue of Unity. These phenomena can modify local microclimates, impacting both biodiversity and agricultural practices in adjacent settlements.

4.2 Displacement of Indigenous Communities

The socioeconomic expenses incurred by the indigenous tribal tribes historically residing in the vicinity of Sadhu Bet are equally urgent. Communities such as the Tadvi, Vasava, and Bhil possess profound cultural, spiritual, and economic connections to the land. Their livelihoods rely on agriculture, fishing, and forest resources, all of which have been adversely affected by the development surrounding the monument. Multiple investigations and grassroots initiatives have emphasized that numerous indigenous families were evicted without sufficient consultation or permission. Protests emerged throughout the planning and construction phases, as tribal leaders and activists insisted on compliance with the Forest Rights Act, which requires community involvement in decisions impacting forest areas. Numerous communities said that environmental impact studies were either inadequately performed or not presented clearly to the local population. Despite the Gujarat government's announcement of resettlement and compensation initiatives, encompassing monetary disbursements and commitments to provide alternative dwellings, several field studies and media enquiries have uncovered significant deficiencies in execution. Certain families obtained partial compensation, others were displaced to regions devoid of essential services, and other individuals expressed sorrow at the forfeiture of ancestral territories that have spiritual and historical significance. This compelled displacement has resulted in socio-economic marginalization. Displaced populations indicate increasing unemployment, disintegration of conventional social frameworks, and psychological distress. The potential for employment in tourism-related enterprises has mostly gone unrealized due to insufficient education, training, and access to money.

4.3 Legal and Ethical Discourse

The environmental and socioeconomic upheavals inspired a surge of legal activity. Public Interest Litigations (PILs) were submitted to the Gujarat High Court and the National Green Tribunal (NGT), challenging the project's environmental approvals. The petitioners contended that the mandated environmental impact studies were either circumvented or insufficiently handled. Although several legal challenges were ultimately dismissed, they highlighted essential concerns of environmental justice and participatory governance in public debate. The Statue of Unity ethically prompts significant enquiries regarding the essence of growth within a democratic society. Can national pride rationalize the ecological destruction of protected areas or the relocation of marginalized communities? Is it permissible to prioritize symbolic magnificence over participatory and sustainable development frameworks?

The government has subsequently implemented steps such as the designation of eco-sensitive zones, the initiation of tree-planting campaigns, and the creation of job programs for tribe children. Critics contend that these actions are only palliative rather than genuine restitution. Many saw these endeavors as retrospective justifications intended to validate what was really a top-down enforcement of developmental agendas. Environmental ethicists and social theorists assert that genuine development must be inclusive, ecologically sustainable, and culturally respectful. The Statue of Unity project is frequently used as an illustration of how large-scale initiatives may marginalize local perspectives and environmental considerations in the quest for political and symbolic gain. The Statue of Unity serves as a technical wonder and a symbol of national pride; however, it also represents the environmental and societal repercussions of unrestrained monumentalism. Ecological deterioration, insufficient community involvement, and coerced displacements underscore the necessity for sustainable development to harmonize ambition with responsibility and symbolic with substance.

V. Political and Cultural Implications

The political and cultural ramifications of the Statue of Unity are as consequential as its material and environmental dimensions. The unveiling has rekindled discussions over the appropriation of historical legacies and the utilitarian role of monuments in modern political narratives.

5.1 Expropriation of Patel's Legacy

The image and historical significance of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel have been pivotal in the political disputes of modern India. As a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress and a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, Patel advocated for a vision of India grounded in secularism, unity, and social change. In recent years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has re-framed Patel's legacy, emphasizing his robust leadership and administrative prowess as representative of its political values. The statue's unveiling soon after the BJP's electoral victory in Gujarat and its completion during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration represent more than a simple homage; they are integral to a larger initiative to associate Patel's historical significance with the prevailing government's ideological stance. BJP leaders have often juxtaposed Patel's resolute leadership with what they see as Nehru's indecisiveness, indirectly criticizing the government of the Congress era. This selective re-contextualization has faced criticism from historians and political analysts, who contend that it constitutes historical revisionism. The prevailing narrative accentuates Patel's nationalism while minimizing his Congress affiliations and dedication to pluralism, therefore transforming him into an emblem of majoritarian nationalism. This strategy possesses political utility: it enables the BJP to exalt a Congress leader while dissociating itself from the Congress party's overarching heritage.

5.2 Monumental Nationalism

The Statue of Unity exemplifies a broader concept of "monumental nationalism", which involves the purposeful use of grand national symbols to evoke communal pride and reinforce political power. In India, this phenomenon corresponds with a revival of cultural nationalism aimed at reclaiming a revered civilizational history and affirming a cohesive national identity. Such significant undertakings are frequently implemented with discourse on national strength, unity, and revival. The immense stature of the Statue of Unity, surpassing both the Statue of Liberty and the Spring Temple Buddha, signifies India's emergence as a self-assured and culturally prominent force on the global arena. The monument serves as both a memorial and a medium for political communication. Critics contend that these monumental symbols frequently conceal intricate socioeconomic realities. By prioritizing unity and strength, they may overlook issues of social fairness, historical variety, and federalism. The focus on a singular national identity can marginalize regional cultures, minority perspectives, and alternative interpretations of history. In this regard, monumental nationalism, although physically striking, may lead to political uniformity. Globally, similarities may be observed with other countries where monumental structures have fulfilled political purposes—such as the Atatürk Mausoleum in Turkey, Christ the Redeemer in Brazil, or the Motherland Calls statue in Russia. In every instance, monumentalism has functioned as a manifestation of national pride and a tool for political legitimization.

5.3 Cultural Reception and Artistic Evaluation

The response of the Statue of Unity within India's cultural and creative groups has been ambivalent. Although many acknowledge the architectural achievement and logistical obstacles surmounted during construction, some have criticized the statue's aesthetic decisions and the absence of participation cultural contributions. The statue, crafted by noted sculptor Ram V. Sutar, embodies a hyper-realist style akin to socialist-era monuments. This style, although impressive and identifiable, has been criticized for its deficiency of creative creativity and symbolic nuance. Certain art critics contend that the statue's visual language prioritizes its imposing magnitude above substantive creative expression. The choice to procure bronze cladding materials internationally and to centralize the design process has attracted criticism from local artisans and traditional craftspeople. Gujarat, recognized for its abundant sculptural and textile heritage, was predominantly overlooked in the creative and logistical implementation of the monument. This has resulted in cultural alienation and a lost opportunity to create a more geographically relevant artwork. Academics specializing in public art have expressed apprehensions over the hierarchical structure of the project. In contrast to several internationally recognized monuments that arise from prolonged public discourse and cultural engagement, the Statue of Unity was conceived and constructed over a brief period with minimal consultation. Consequently, although the monument may resonate with nationalist feeling, it may not elicit the same profound emotional or cultural connection from the

general populace. The political and cultural implications of the Statue of Unity transcend its mere physical existence. It is a contentious emblem—applauded by some as a sign of national pride, and criticized by others as a politically driven reinterpretation of history. Consequently, it encourages continuous discourse over how nations elect to commemorate, depict, and honor their histories.

VI. Public Reception and International Perspectives

The Statue of Unity has garnered varied reactions from the people and global onlookers. Some laud it as a technical wonder and a representation of India's rise as a global power, while others criticize its fundamental reasons and repercussions.

6.1 National Public Sentiment

The statue has been accepted with pride by certain segments of the Indian public, particularly in Gujarat. Educational excursions, familial getaways, and government-funded tours have become it a favored locale. Local media coverage and governmental marketing have contributed to the construction of a narrative of national success. Civil society organizations, scholars, and opposition leaders persist in expressing disagreement. They contend that the statue's symbolic importance is being used for political purposes, asserting that genuine reverence for Sardar Patel would include respecting the constitutional principles he championed—democracy, federalism, and inclusive governance.

6.2 Global Acknowledgement and Evaluation

The monument has been prominently covered in technical journals, travel blogs, and mainstream media worldwide. It has received acclaim for its magnitude and aspiration, with parallels made to the Statue of Liberty and the Spring Temple Buddha in China.

International human rights organizations and development economists have reiterated domestic apprehensions. Reports by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have highlighted the relocation of indigenous populations and its environmental repercussions. The international response thus illustrates the dual nature of the statue's significance; it serves as both a symbol of national pride and a central element in vital worldwide discussions over justice, development, and memory politics.

VII. Conclusion

The Statue of Unity occupies a pivotal intersection of history, politics, ecology, and culture. This memorial to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel aims to honor a symbol of Indian unity and power. However, its creation and the associated conflicts highlight the intricate landscape of public memory, political symbolism, and development strategy. The statue embodies the conflicts between colossal pride and material requirements, national unity and local difference, as well as historical veneration and current appropriation. Although it has certainly enhanced Patel's legacy in public awareness, the methods employed to do this need serious examination. In the future, governments should embrace a more inclusive and ethical methodology for commemorative initiatives. Consultation with stakeholders, environmental sustainability, and transparent financial procedures must be standard rather than atypical. Monuments need ideally inspire pride while also embodying democratic principles, pluralism, and social fairness. In conclusion, the Statue of Unity is not only a statue; it serves as a reflection of the ambitions, conflicts, and problems of contemporary India. Consequently, it will persist in being disputed, analyzed, and understood for future generations.

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