

India's Statue of Unity is latest venture of Hindu nationalist leaders

The statue depicts Sardar Patel, an icon of India's independence—whom the Bharatiya Janata Party has claimed as one of its own.

by [Jason Overdorf](#) in the [December 5, 2018](#) issue



Indian prime minister Narendra Modi (right) dedicates the 597-foot-tall *Statue of Unity*, depicting Sardar Patel, in Gujarat on October 31, 2018. Prime Minister's Office ([GODL-India](#)).

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) On his small organic farm in Gujarat, the home state of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, Lakhanbhai Musafir flings out his arm in disgust in the direction of the *Statue of Unity*—the tallest statue in the world.

“Modi calls this development,” said Musafir, an advocate for local tribes. “It’s his obsession to make himself immortal, like Emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal.”

Towering over the Narmada River, the \$410 million statue depicts Vallabhbhai Patel, known as Sardar Patel, one of the most important figures in India’s fight for

independence from Britain. The bald, stoop-shouldered subject presents an image of humility—though at nearly 600 feet tall and clad in some 1,850 metric tons of bronze it is commanding all the same.

The *Statue of Unity* was inaugurated October 31 opposite the Sardar Sarovar Dam, marking the official launch of Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party 2019 reelection campaign. As a symbol, however, it may represent a different kind of unity from the multicultural, secular one that has defined India's identity since the election of its first prime minister in 1947 and the framing of its constitution two years later.

Though Patel was not a vocal supporter of *Hindutva* (or "Hinduness"), the BJP is claiming Patel as one of its own. Tarun Vijay, a former BJP member of parliament, said Patel stands in stark contrast to India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Patel was not a "half-converted Englishman," he said. "Patel belonged to the Indian soil. . . . He had the firmness of Napoleon—unshakeable, rock-like decisiveness."

Under Nehru's leadership, India adopted a constitution that guaranteed the rights of religious minorities and enshrined separate laws on issues like marriage and inheritance for Hindus, Muslims (about 13 percent of the population), and Christians (some 2 percent). For many people, that multicultural vision remains the fundamental ethos of India.

But for Hindu nationalists, that "pseudo-secularism," as some call it, is an affront. Their core ideology of *Hindutva* envisions a state in which Hindu faith and culture are front and center. Since Modi's election in 2014, Hindu nationalists have used increasingly bold tactics to make that vision a reality, according to his critics, from rewriting textbooks to emboldening mobs that have killed two dozen people for allegedly eating or transporting beef.

Modi launched the *Statue of Unity* project and laid its foundation stone in 2013, during the lead-up to the 2014 general election, as he wooed moderates with business-friendly reform. At the time, he had been chief minister of Gujarat for more than a decade, including during the 2002 riots that killed more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslim. His administration's response to the attacks has been hotly debated, with many researchers blaming officials for failing to quell the violence.

Early Hindu nationalist groups, the BJP's precursors, did not take a leading role in India's struggle for independence. It was a Hindu nationalist, Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Mohandas Gandhi in 1948, because he felt Gandhi had proved too accommodating to Muslims.

"The BJP desperately needs to seize upon Patel because it has no other reverential figures" from the freedom movement, said Indiana University professor Sumit Ganguly.

For Hindu nationalists, Patel presents a compelling alternative to Nehru—whose great-grandson, Rahul Gandhi, is the present leader of the Congress Party, the main opposition.

Known as "the Iron Man of India," Patel helped convince some 550 princely states to cede their power to the new government after independence. He thus suits many nationalists' craving for muscular leaders, analysts observed—also reflected in how the movement has embraced a warrior-like version of the Hindu deity Rama and the monkey-god Hanuman who fought beside him, and even in Modi's boasts about having a 56-inch chest circumference.

Right-wingers have suggested that Patel opposed Nehru's interpretation of secularism and would have forged a different country had he been India's first leader, said Mujibur Rehman, an assistant professor at Jamia Millia Islamia University, who recently wrote a book on the Hindu right, titled *Rise of Saffron Power*. Patel was a lifelong member of the Congress Party, but Hindu nationalists argue that he supported a more assimilationist secularism devoid of "appeasement" of minorities.

"They see him as an anti-Nehru figure," Rehman said.

After the division of British India into majority-Hindu India and majority-Muslim Pakistan, which displaced millions of people, Patel argued that "what remained must be one nation," said Hindol Sengupta, author of a recent biography of Patel titled *The Man Who Saved India*.

"Patel was strongly secular," Sengupta said. "He wanted parity for all faiths."

Patel opposed Nehru's decision to let the United Nations determine the fate of the Kashmir region, still contested today.

“If Sardar Patel had become the prime minister, today a part of our beloved Kashmir would not have been under Pakistani occupation,” Modi said in a parliamentary speech in February.

The statue of Patel overlooks Sardar Sarovar Dam, which has been at the center of protests and court cases for decades. The dam has already displaced hundreds of villages; constructing the statue added another 16 to that number, according to Musafir.

“We told the government if you spend 10 million rupees to repair the existing canals, the farmland of this entire area can be irrigated, but they said they don’t have the staff or the money,” he said. “Yet to build this one statue they are spending 30 billion rupees,” the equivalent of US\$410 million.

By locating the giant statue opposite the massive dam, the BJP sought to highlight technological progress, which Modi has promoted in plans for “smart cities” and bullet trains. Projected to attract 15,000 tourists a day, Patel’s statue includes an elevator up its spine that allows visitors to look out over the dam through Patel’s eyes.

Amarsingh Tadvi, who heads a construction crew, is a fan of the statue and the man it depicts.

“Nehru thought about his family and his family’s development, but Patel was more selfless,” he said. As for Modi, “he’s a great man of India. Modi and development are like the two sides of a coin.”

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