

# **The Economic Vision of Sardar Patel: Building a Self-Reliant Nation**

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## **Abstract:**

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, often celebrated as the Iron Man of India, played a transformative role not only in India's political unification but also in laying the groundwork for its economic self-reliance. This article examines Patel's economic vision through the lens of national integration, agricultural development, resource mobilization, and industrial policy. Drawing from historical records, policy documents, and scholarly analyses, this study demonstrates how Patel's strategic approach to economic consolidation created the foundation for India's planned economy. His emphasis on merging 562 princely states into a unified economic system, promoting cooperative movements, strengthening agricultural infrastructure, and advocating for self-sufficiency reflected a pragmatic nationalism that prioritized India's long-term economic sovereignty. The findings reveal that Patel's economic contributions, though often overshadowed by his political achievements, were instrumental in shaping India's developmental trajectory in the critical post-independence years.

## **Introduction:**

When India gained independence in 1947, the nation faced not just political fragmentation but profound economic disarray. The departing colonial administration left behind a country divided into British India and 562 princely states, each with its own economic policies, taxation systems, and trade regulations. In this turbulent context, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged as the architect of both political and economic integration. While his role as India's first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister is well documented, his economic vision and its implementation deserve deeper scholarly attention (Rajagopalachari, 1957). Patel understood that political unity without economic coherence would prove hollow. His approach was rooted in practical wisdom rather than abstract ideology. As Patel himself noted in his address to the Constituent Assembly,

"We must build a nation that stands on its own feet, produces what it consumes, and creates wealth from its own soil" (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949).

This statement encapsulated his economic philosophy, which emphasized self-reliance, agricultural productivity, and strategic industrialization.

Recent scholarship has begun to recognize Patel's economic contributions more comprehensively. Guha (2007) argues that Patel's integration of princely states created the largest common market in Asia, facilitating free movement of goods, labor, and capital. Similarly, Das (1995) highlights how Patel's support for cooperative movements and rural development programs established patterns that influenced India's Five-Year Plans. This article

synthesizes these perspectives while presenting new insights into how Patel's economic vision shaped India's developmental trajectory.

The following sections examine specific dimensions of Patel's economic contribution: territorial-economic integration, agricultural policy, industrial strategy, fiscal consolidation, and the institutional frameworks he helped establish. Each section draws upon primary sources, government documents, and contemporary scholarship to construct a comprehensive picture of Patel's economic legacy.

## **The Foundation: Economic Integration Through Political Unity**

### **The Challenge of Economic Fragmentation**

At independence, India's economic landscape resembled a patchwork quilt. The 562 princely states maintained separate customs barriers, currencies, and trade policies. Some states like Hyderabad and Mysore had relatively developed economies with their own railways and industries, while others remained feudal backwaters. This fragmentation created significant transaction costs and hindered economic efficiency (Menon, 1956).

The economic implications were severe. Traders faced multiple tariffs when moving goods across state boundaries. Industrial development suffered from lack of integrated markets. Agricultural producers could not access wider markets for their produce. The absence of unified monetary policy created currency confusion. As Copland (1997) documents, some princely states even minted their own coins, adding to the economic chaos.

Patel recognized that economic prosperity required removing these barriers. His approach to integration was methodical and strategic. Rather than simply annexing territories, he negotiated agreements that preserved local administrative structures while bringing economic policy under central coordination. The Ministry of States, which Patel headed, became the instrument for this economic transformation (Coupland, 1944).

### **Creating a Unified Economic Space**

The instruments of accession that Patel negotiated included specific economic provisions. States surrendered control over customs, currency, and interstate commerce to the central government. This created a common market of unprecedented scale. By 1950, goods could move freely from Kashmir to Kanyakumari without crossing any internal customs barriers—a transformation that dramatically reduced transaction costs and expanded market access for producers (Hodson, 1985).

The economic benefits manifested quickly. Agricultural producers in Gujarat could now sell to markets in Bengal without paying multiple transit duties. Industrial units in Bombay gained access to raw materials from across the country. The banking system could extend credit

more efficiently across a unified territory. Infrastructure development, particularly railways and roads, could be planned on a national scale rather than being constrained by state boundaries (Ministry of States, 1950).

Patel's vision extended beyond merely removing barriers. He actively promoted economic coordination among states. The States Ministry facilitated agreements on resource sharing, particularly regarding water resources and minerals. This cooperation laid the groundwork for later interstate river agreements and mineral development policies. The Constitution's provisions for center-state economic relations, shaped significantly by Patel's inputs, created a framework that balanced national integration with regional autonomy (Austin, 1966).

### **Resource Consolidation and Strategic Assets**

An often-overlooked aspect of Patel's integration strategy was the consolidation of strategic economic resources. Several princely states controlled valuable mineral deposits, forests, and water resources. The integration brought these assets under national control, enabling more rational resource planning. Hyderabad's coal and uranium deposits, the forests of central India, and the mineral wealth of states like Jodhpur and Bikaner all became available for national development (Bhatia, 1963).

The economic value of this consolidation was immense. India could now plan industrial development based on its total resource endowment rather than being constrained by the fragmented control of strategic materials. The steel industry could access iron ore from multiple sources. Energy planning could consider the totality of coal, hydroelectric, and other resources. This comprehensive resource base became crucial for India's subsequent industrialization efforts under the Five-Year Plans (Planning Commission, 1951).

### **Agricultural Development: The Foundation of Self-Reliance**

#### **Understanding Patel's Agricultural Philosophy**

Patel's economic vision was fundamentally rooted in agricultural development. As someone who came from a farming family in Gujarat and led the Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 against oppressive agricultural taxation, Patel understood rural India's challenges intimately. He believed that national self-reliance must begin with food security and agricultural prosperity. This conviction shaped his approach to economic policy throughout his tenure as Deputy Prime Minister (Patel, 1949).

In the immediate post-independence period, India faced severe food shortages. The partition had separated Punjab's grain-producing regions, creating supply challenges. Traditional agricultural systems had stagnated under colonial rule. Patel recognized that

addressing these challenges required both immediate relief measures and long-term structural reforms. His approach combined practical interventions with visionary institution-building (Khilnani, 1997).

### **Cooperative Movement and Rural Organization**

One of Patel's most significant economic contributions was his championing of the cooperative movement. Drawing from Gujarat's successful cooperative experiments, particularly those associated with milk production, Patel advocated for extending the cooperative model across India. He believed cooperatives could empower farmers economically while preserving their independence—a middle path between individual peasant farming and collective agriculture (Shah, 1995).

The cooperative model addressed multiple challenges simultaneously. It provided farmers with collective bargaining power against merchants and moneylenders. It enabled pooling of resources for purchasing inputs like seeds and fertilizers. It created marketing channels that bypassed exploitative intermediaries. Most importantly, it maintained farmers' ownership of their land while allowing them to benefit from economies of scale (Attwood, 1992).

Patel's support for cooperatives manifested in concrete policy measures. He ensured that the Constituent Assembly included provisions supporting cooperative organizations. The allocation of resources for cooperative development in early budgets reflected his priorities. Perhaps most significantly, his endorsement gave legitimacy to the cooperative movement, encouraging state governments to establish supportive institutional frameworks (Mehta, 1984).

### **Land Reform and Agricultural Restructuring**

While Patel is sometimes portrayed as conservative on land reform issues, his actual positions were more nuanced. He supported abolishing zamindari and other feudal land systems, recognizing that these structures impeded agricultural development. However, he advocated for a phased approach with fair compensation, reflecting his concern for both economic efficiency and social stability (Byres, 1988).

The integration of princely states provided opportunities for agricultural restructuring. In many states, feudal land relations were even more entrenched than in British India. The transition period allowed Patel to encourage progressive reforms. The Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act of 1948, passed under his influence, became a model for land reforms in other states. It protected tenant rights, limited landlord exploitation, and laid groundwork for subsequent land ceiling legislation (Dandekar & Rath, 1971).

## **Infrastructure for Agricultural Development**

Patel understood that agricultural productivity required infrastructure investment. Irrigation, rural electrification, roads connecting villages to markets, and storage facilities all received attention during his tenure. The allocation of resources to major irrigation projects, including early planning for what would become the Bhakra Nangal Dam, reflected his commitment to transforming India's agricultural potential (Dholakia, 2005).

The emphasis on agricultural infrastructure had long-term economic implications. Better irrigation reduced dependence on monsoons, enabling year-round cultivation. Improved roads allowed farmers to access wider markets and obtain better prices. Storage facilities reduced post-harvest losses. Rural electrification, though still limited, began the transformation of village economies. These investments, initiated during Patel's tenure, created foundations for India's Green Revolution two decades later (Rangarajan, 1982).

## **Industrial Policy and Economic Nationalism**

### **Balancing Public and Private Sectors**

Patel's approach to industrial development reflected pragmatic economic nationalism. While he supported state involvement in strategic industries, he also recognized the importance of private enterprise. This balanced perspective influenced the formulation of India's Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948, which demarcated roles for public and private sectors while reserving key industries for state control (Government of India, 1948).

The policy reserved armaments, atomic energy, and railways for exclusive state ownership—sectors Patel deemed vital for national security and sovereignty. It identified six industries for mixed public-private participation, including coal, iron and steel, aircraft manufacturing, and shipbuilding. This framework allowed state leadership in strategic sectors while permitting private investment in most manufacturing (Kidron, 1965).

Patel's influence ensured that the policy protected existing private enterprises while creating space for public sector expansion. This reflected his understanding that rapid industrialization required mobilizing both public resources and private entrepreneurship. The protection offered to small-scale industries, which Patel particularly valued, created a tier of manufacturing that employed millions while producing consumer goods domestically (Dhar & Lydall, 1961).

### **Self-Reliance and Import Substitution**

Self-reliance constituted a core principle in Patel's economic thinking. Having witnessed how colonial dependence had impoverished India, he emphasized developing domestic manufacturing capacity. This meant reducing imports of goods that India could

produce, building indigenous technological capabilities, and ensuring that economic development served Indian rather than foreign interests (Venkatasubbiah, 1958).

The emphasis on self-reliance manifested in several policy directions. Tariff protection for infant industries prevented foreign competition from stifling domestic manufacturing. Restrictions on foreign investment in certain sectors preserved Indian control. Support for indigenous research and development, though limited by resource constraints, began building technological capabilities. These measures, controversial at the time, laid foundations for India's later industrial growth (Shenoy, 1971).

Critics have argued that excessive protectionism later hindered India's economic development. However, in the immediate post-independence context, Patel's approach was defensible. Indian industry was nascent and fragile. Without protection, foreign competition would have prevented industrialization. The creation of basic industrial capacity—steel, cement, chemicals—required state support and market protection. Later policy failures should not obscure the rationale behind early industrial strategy (Bhagwati & Desai, 1970).

### **Strategic Industries and National Security**

Patel's experience with partition and its security challenges shaped his views on strategic industries. He recognized that national defense required indigenous capacity to produce armaments, aircraft, and other military equipment. The Ordnance Factories, inherited from British India, received investment and modernization. Plans for aircraft manufacturing and shipbuilding, though implemented slowly due to resource constraints, began during this period. This strategic industrial base, modest as it was, proved crucial during subsequent conflicts, particularly the wars of 1962, 1965, and 1971 (Cohen, 2001).

### **Fiscal Policy and Resource Mobilization**

#### **Financial Integration and Monetary Unification**

The integration of princely states required financial harmonization. Multiple currencies circulated across India—some states had their own coinage, others used different Indian rupee versions. Patel oversaw the process of monetary unification, replacing diverse currencies with a single national currency. This seemingly technical achievement had profound economic implications (Reserve Bank of India, 1950).

A unified currency facilitated trade by eliminating exchange costs and uncertainties. It allowed the Reserve Bank of India to conduct monetary policy effectively across the entire nation. It created a single financial system where banks could operate nationally, mobilizing savings from surplus regions to deficit areas. The integration of state treasuries into a unified

fiscal system improved financial administration and enabled better resource allocation (Vakil & Brahmanand, 1956).

### **Tax Reform and Revenue Administration**

Patel's role in establishing effective taxation systems deserves recognition. The integration brought diverse tax regimes under central coordination. Some states had no income tax, others imposed confiscatory rates. Sales taxes varied wildly. Customs duties differed from state to state. Rationalizing this chaos was essential for economic development (Chelliah, 1971).

The Indian Constitution's provisions for center-state financial relations, influenced by Patel's inputs, created a framework that balanced revenue needs with federal structure. The division of tax powers between Union and state governments, the establishment of the Finance Commission, and mechanisms for revenue sharing all emerged from deliberations in which Patel participated actively. These arrangements, though modified over decades, continue to structure India's fiscal federalism (Rao & Singh, 2005).

### **Development Finance and Investment Planning**

Resource mobilization for development posed immense challenges. India needed massive investment in infrastructure, industry, and social services, but domestic savings were limited and foreign capital was scarce. Patel's approach emphasized mobilizing internal resources through public borrowing, taxation, and encouraging private savings. The institutional framework for development finance—including specialized lending institutions for industry and agriculture—began taking shape during this period (Mujumdar, 1954).

**Table 1**

*Key Economic Achievements During Patel's Tenure (1947-1950)*

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Achievement</b>
Political-Economic Integration	Integration of 562 princely states creating unified common market; elimination of internal customs barriers; consolidation of strategic resources
Agricultural Development	Promotion of cooperative movement; initiation of land reforms; investment in irrigation and rural infrastructure; establishment of agricultural credit institutions
Industrial Policy	Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948 establishing mixed economy framework; protection for strategic industries; support for small-scale sector
Fiscal Integration	Monetary unification; establishment of unified tax administration; creation of Finance Commission; framework for center-state financial relations

Institutional Framework	Establishment of Planning Commission (1950); strengthening of civil service; creation of administrative structures for economic management
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*Note. Compiled from Ministry of States Reports (1948-1950), Planning Commission documents, and historical analyses by Guha (2007) and Das (1995).*

## **Institutional Legacy and Long-Term Impact**

### **Planning and Development Administration**

Though the Planning Commission was formally established in March 1950, shortly after Patel's death in December 1950, its conceptual foundations reflected his thinking. Patel recognized that achieving economic self-reliance required coordinated development planning. During his tenure, discussions about planning mechanisms, resource allocation strategies, and development priorities laid groundwork for India's planned economy approach (Hanson, 1966).

Patel's contribution to planning was philosophical rather than technical. He emphasized that planning must serve national interests, not ideological abstractions. Plans should be achievable with available resources rather than utopian. Development should balance different sectors and regions. These pragmatic principles influenced India's planning approach, tempering more radical proposals with practical considerations (Chakravarty, 1987).

### **Administrative Structures for Economic Management**

Effective economic management required capable administrative institutions. Patel's role in establishing the Indian Administrative Service and other civil services created the bureaucratic capacity needed for developmental administration. The integration of state services into national frameworks ensured uniform administrative standards. These institutional foundations enabled India to implement complex development programs in subsequent decades (Potter, 1996).

The Ministry of States itself exemplified Patel's institutional approach. It coordinated economic integration while respecting regional sensitivities. It balanced central authority with local autonomy. It managed complex negotiations while maintaining clear strategic objectives. This model of federal economic governance, though imperfect, provided a framework that accommodated India's diversity while enabling national economic policy (Rao, 1957).

### **Constitutional Provisions for Economic Development**

Patel's participation in drafting the Constitution shaped its economic provisions. The Directive Principles of State Policy, though not legally enforceable, articulated economic objectives: right to livelihood, equitable distribution of resources, prevention of concentration of wealth, living wages for workers, and protection for children and women. These principles, influenced by Patel and others, guided subsequent economic policy-making (Basu, 1965).

## **Critical Assessment and Contemporary Relevance**

### **Limitations and Constraints**

Any assessment of Patel's economic vision must acknowledge limitations. His tenure was brief—just over three years—constraining what could be achieved. Resource scarcity forced difficult choices between competing priorities. Political compulsions sometimes compromised economic rationality. The urgency of integration occasionally overshadowed longer-term economic considerations (Brass, 1994).

Some critics argue that Patel's economic approach was too cautious, that more radical reforms were necessary. Land reform could have been more thoroughgoing. Income and wealth redistribution received insufficient emphasis. The protection offered to certain vested interests hindered structural transformation. Industrial policy could have been more ambitious. These critiques have merit, though they must be weighed against the political and social constraints Patel faced (Bardhan, 1984).

### **Contemporary Relevance**

Patel's economic vision remains relevant to contemporary India. His emphasis on economic integration resonates with current efforts to create a genuine national market through reforms like the Goods and Services Tax. His advocacy for agricultural development and rural prosperity speaks to ongoing challenges of rural distress and farmer welfare. His balanced approach to public and private sectors offers insights for current debates about economic policy (Ahluwalia, 2002).

The principle of self-reliance, though often criticized as promoting inefficiency, has regained currency in discussions about economic security and resilience. Recent global disruptions—financial crises, pandemics, supply chain vulnerabilities—have highlighted risks of excessive international dependence. Patel's vision of building robust domestic capabilities while engaging selectively with the global economy offers a framework for thinking about economic security in an uncertain world (Rodrik, 2011).

### **Lessons for Economic Policy-Making**

Several lessons emerge from Patel's approach to economic development. First, political unity and economic integration are mutually reinforcing—neither can be fully achieved without the other. Second, economic policy must be grounded in practical realities rather than ideological preferences. Third, institution-building matters as much as immediate policy interventions. Fourth, economic development requires balancing multiple objectives—growth and equity, efficiency and security, national integration and regional autonomy (Nayyar, 1996).

Perhaps most importantly, Patel demonstrated that economic vision must serve national sovereignty and people's welfare rather than abstract principles. His pragmatic nationalism—neither isolationist nor subservient to foreign interests—offers guidance for navigating contemporary economic challenges. In an era when globalization's benefits and costs are being reassessed, Patel's balanced approach deserves reconsideration (Sen, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's economic vision was integral to building modern India. His strategic approach to integrating 562 princely states created a unified economic space that facilitated development. His emphasis on agricultural prosperity and cooperative organization addressed rural India's fundamental challenges. His balanced industrial policy promoted both public sector leadership in strategic areas and private enterprise in most manufacturing. His fiscal and monetary reforms created frameworks for economic management that endured for decades.

The institutional legacy Patel helped create—planning mechanisms, administrative structures, constitutional provisions for economic development—shaped India's developmental trajectory. While his tenure was brief and his vision faced numerous constraints, the foundations he laid proved remarkably durable. Subsequent economic policies, even when departing from specific positions Patel held, operated within frameworks he helped establish.

Historical assessment of Patel has often focused on political integration while neglecting his economic contributions. This oversight has obscured crucial aspects of India's early development. Correcting this requires examining archival materials, policy documents, and implementation records to reconstruct how Patel's economic vision shaped practical outcomes. Scholarship has begun this reassessment, but much work remains.

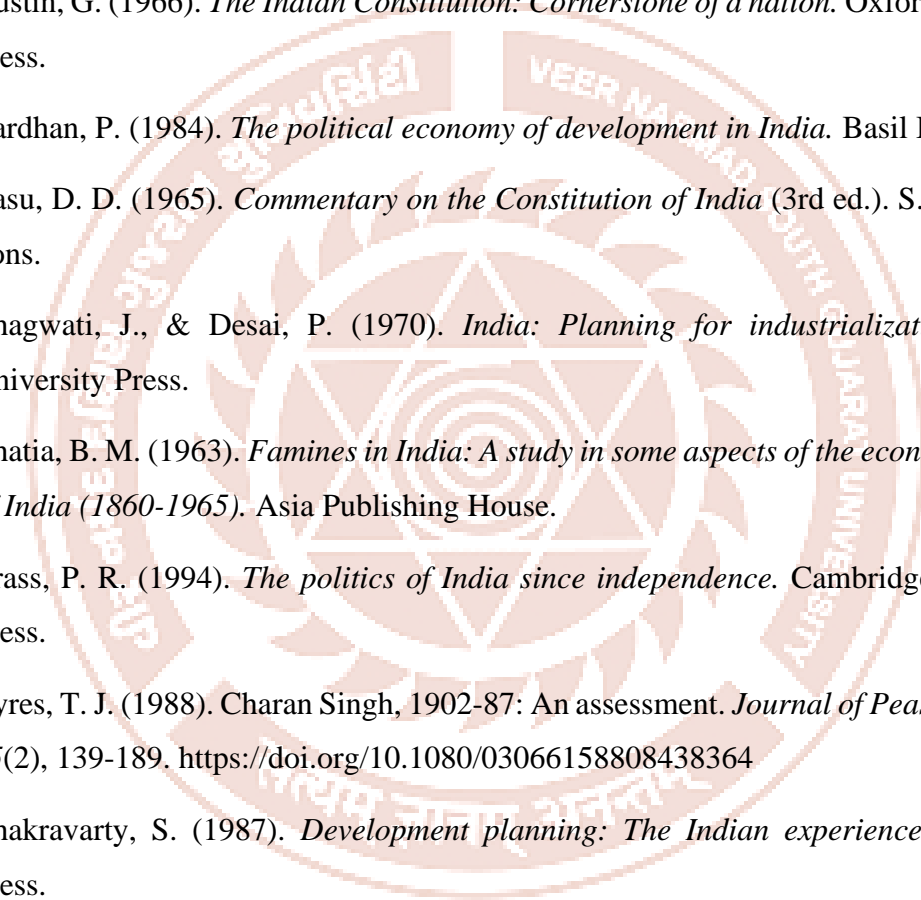
The contemporary relevance of Patel's economic thinking extends beyond historical interest. His pragmatic approach to balancing national sovereignty with economic development, public and private sectors, agricultural and industrial priorities, and central coordination with regional autonomy offers insights for current policy debates. As India navigates challenges of global integration while maintaining economic resilience, Patel's vision of self-reliant development within a framework of practical nationalism warrants serious consideration.

Ultimately, Sardar Patel's economic legacy lies not in specific policies, many of which have been modified or abandoned, but in his demonstration that economic development must serve the nation's fundamental interests. His integration of political vision with economic strategy, idealism with pragmatism, and national ambition with realistic assessment of

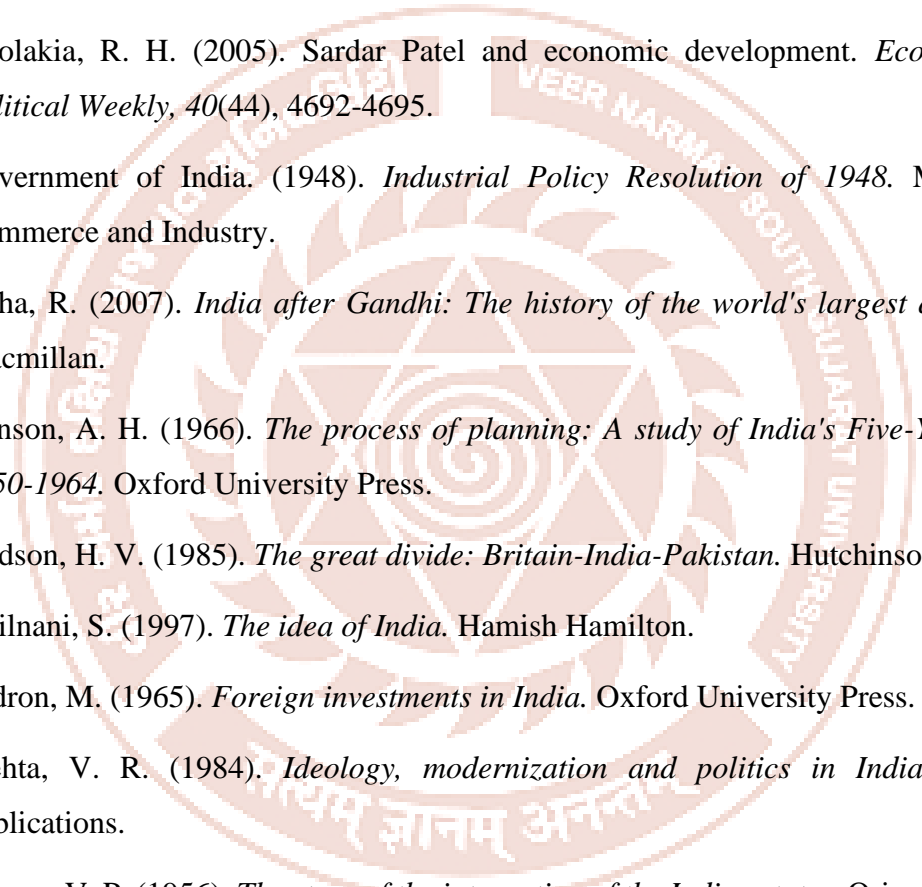
constraints created a model of statesmanship that remains instructive. In commemorating Patel, we honor not just political unification but the economic foundations of India's development.

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