

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: The Making of the Iron Man

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Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was born in a self-sufficient landowner family of the Patidar caste in the state of Gujarat. There was no educational environment. He himself did not know his date of birth. It is possible that his mother knew it according to the Indian calendar, but she did not know the exact year or the English date. October 31, 1875 is considered to be Vallabhbhai Patel's birthday and is based on his matriculation examination certificate.

October 31, 1875, is considered to be Vallabhbhai Patel's birthday, which is based on his matriculation exam certificate. Vallabhbhai used to say that he had filled in his date of birth in the examination hall using his own imagination.

When the Congress participated in the 1937 elections, it became necessary for the first time to officially determine his date of birth for that purpose, and it was taken from his matriculation certificate.

Raised in an atmosphere of traditional Hinduism, he studied at a primary school in Karamsad and a high school in Petlad, but was largely self-educated. Patel married at the age of 16, passed his matriculation at 22, and cleared the district pleader's exam, which enabled him to practice law. In 1900, he set up an independent district lawyer's office in Godhra, and two years later, he moved to Borsad.

Vallabhbhai Jhaverbhai Patel was born on October 31, 1875, into a poor rural family in Nadiad, Kheda district of Gujarat. His father, Jhaverbhai, was a farmer who owned 10 to 12 acres (4-5 hectares) of land in Karamsad village near Nadiad. Jhaverbhai was a strong, honest, and straightforward man of independent nature, to whom the villagers would come for advice in times of trouble. Vallabhbhai inherited from his father the skill of organizing and planning political movements whenever an opportunity arose.

When he was in primary school, he knew more about the surrounding fields and villages than his school textbooks. His father would take him to the fields every morning so that he could teach him multiplication tables and explain simple math problems. Until he was 17 or 18, Vallabhbhai lived in Karamsad, a small village in Kheda district, and learned to do specific farm work. Raised in an environment of traditional Hinduism, he received his primary education at a primary school in Karamsad.

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Received: January 10, 2026; Revision Received: February 06, 2026; Accepted: March 05, 2026

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Hardworking and dutiful from childhood, Vallabhbhai used to help his father in the fields when he was a student at the local primary school in Karamsad. For his secondary education, he had to walk 9 miles (about 14 kilometers) from his village. He was an outspoken leader since his early school days. As a young student, Vallabhbhai once picked a fight with a teacher who frequently used a cane, punished students severely, and imposed heavy fines on students who could barely afford to pay. Vallabhbhai was so angered by this that he convinced all the students in that class to protest by not attending. The strike continued into its third day, at which point the principal relented, called Vallabhbhai who was recognized as the student leader and assured him that the students would never be punished so harshly again.

Not much has been documented about his early school days, except for an interesting story he used to share. A teacher in the lower grades would answer any questions asked of him with verbal abuse and then say, "Why do you ask me? Learn on your own." This expression somehow became the guiding key to Vallabhbhai's life. Whatever he learned, he learned through his own efforts, and until Gandhiji became his teacher, his life developed along lines he set for himself, without anyone's help or guidance. Even when he accepted Gandhiji as his teacher, he never surrendered his individual independence.

The headmaster of the Karamsad school harbored a great ambition that every student who passed the seventh grade should pursue further studies to become a senior trained teacher. However, since childhood, despite receiving hardly any encouragement or assistance, Vallabhbhai wanted to become a great man, and in those days, becoming a great man meant becoming a lawyer or a barrister. It is possible that immediately after completing his vernacular Gujarati studies, he did not have a specific plan of becoming a lawyer or a barrister in mind. However, he was highly determined to learn English, and there was no English school in his village. His elder brother, Vithalbai, had already been sent to an English school in Nadiad, and their father did not wish to place an additional burden on the boys' maternal uncle by sending his second son there as well.

Fortunately, a private English school opened in the village around that time, offering education up to the third grade. He joined that school, and by the time he graduated from the third grade, he must have been around 17 years old. Subsequently, he moved to Petlad, which had an English school that taught up to the fifth grade. Half a dozen students joined him and rented a house together. Every Sunday, each of them would bring enough food from home to last a week, and they took turns cooking. Such was the poverty and simplicity of Vallabhbhai's student life.

An incident from Sardar's life is very famous, which showcases Vallabhbhai's sense of responsibility, determination, and dedication to public welfare. Since the commute between Petlad and Karamsad had to be done on foot, once while going from Karamsad to Petlad, Vallabhbhai lagged behind his group of friends. The other friends walking ahead were engrossed in conversation, so they did not even realize that Vallabhbhai had fallen behind. When these friends who had moved ahead did not see Vallabhbhai with them, they stopped and looked back. They saw Vallabhbhai a little distance away, bending down in the middle of the road and doing something. It was not clear what he was doing. One of the friends tried to call out to him loudly, but Vallabhbhai kept working without listening to anyone. After finishing his work, when he reached the group, his friends immediately asked, "You are always ahead of us in walking. Why did you fall behind today? What were you doing bending down in the middle of the road?" Vallabhbhai replied, "There was a large stone right in the middle of the road, and it had been lying there for a long time. It was causing an obstruction to everyone

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walking. Yesterday, when we came this way, I had decided that I would uproot this stone and throw it away, so that all commuters could get permanent relief." A friend jokingly asked, "So, did the stone come out or not?" Vallabhbhai said with a triumphant look, "A task initiated by Vallabhbhai is never left incomplete."

After completing the fifth grade, he went to Nadiad for further studies. At that time, boys were encouraged to read English and memorize paragraphs. Vallabhbhai, who loved reading English books, liked this very much. Learning by memorizing paragraphs from these books became easy for him. His knowledge of English was good, and according to his fellow students, he was active in organizing debates and giving speeches in English. Although he appeared fond of English in school, he later made no effort to develop his English beyond what was necessary for practical purposes. His fellow students looked upon him as their leader. His sixth-grade teacher, who was a Parsi, was a very strict disciplinarian and made generous use of his cane. One day, he fined a student, and when the boy refused to pay, he expelled him from the class. Vallabhbhai thought about this and decided to teach this teacher a lesson; therefore, he immediately convinced all his fellow students to leave the class. He then persuaded the boys of the entire school to go on strike and even organized picketing to prevent anyone from entering the classrooms. They took over a dharamshala (inn), arranged for drinking water and other supplies, and the strikers spent three days there until the strike continued. The headmaster of the school was a clever man. He called Vallabhbhai and assured him that no student would be given excessive or unjust punishment in the future. On the basis of this assurance, a settlement was quickly reached.

Another incident involves a teacher who ran a sort of business selling paper, pencils, exercise books, and similar items. This teacher used to force the boys in his class to purchase these goods from him. When Vallabhbhai found out about this, he organized an effective boycott of the teacher, which ultimately forced him to shut down his business. Apart from such small disputes, Vallabhbhai also participated in activities of a more public nature. Once, a school teacher stood for the municipal elections. Vallabhbhai organized all the boys in the school to work in support of this teacher. The opposing candidate was so confident of his success that he foolishly declared that if he lost, he would shave off his mustache. Vallabhbhai accepted this challenge and worked with such enthusiasm and skill that his teacher was elected by a large majority. As soon as the news was announced, Vallabhbhai gathered about 50 fellow students along with a barber, marched to the defeated candidate's house, and demanded that he fulfill his end of the bargain!

Finally, in 1897, he passed his matriculation examination from Nadiad High School, at which time he was about 22 years old. He was immediately faced with the problem of deciding what to do next. Grand projects had been shaping up in his mind since childhood. In a speech delivered in 1921 during the Non-Cooperation Movement, he described how his mind worked at that time:

"When Mr. Mohanlal introduced me to you, he mentioned that there was a time when I used to imitate the British and their manners. This is absolutely true. It is also true that whatever leisure time I had was spent in playing games. At that time, I believed that imitating foreigners was the best policy for our unfortunate country. I had been taught that our people lacked character and capability, while the foreigners who ruled over us were good and capable of improving our condition, and that we could only remain slaves. This kind of poison was being injected into our minds. I was eager to go abroad to see the people of England who, despite being 7,000 miles away, could rule over us for so long. I came from a middle-class family. My father lived

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a simple and noble life and passed away in the temple he loved. He did not have enough money to fulfill my desires. I was told that I could go to England only if I earned 7,000 to 10,000 rupees. No one was willing to give me that much. Ultimately, I realized that if I wanted to go to England, I would have to earn my own money. Therefore, I studied hard for my law examinations and resolved to save enough money to go to England."

It appears that Sardar's decision to become a lawyer was also influenced by the fact that it was the cheapest course of study and the best available profession. His goal was modest: to become a district pleader. However, he could not afford a university education. Pursuing an LL.B. degree would take six years, and he did not consider it worthwhile to spend so much time on these studies. He was growing older, and he wanted to pass his examinations as quickly as possible so he could travel to England. In those days, one could prepare for the district pleader's examination at home using books borrowed from local lawyers. He cleared the district pleader's exam three years later. Many prominent lawyers, including his brother Vithalbhai, sought a partnership with Vallabhbhai, but he chose to start his own practice and selected Godhra. Opportunities in Godhra were quite limited, but Vallabhbhai likely reasoned that since his elder brother Vithalbhai had been practicing in Godhra since 1895 and had recently moved to Borsad, he would get a good start with the help of his brother's friends and acquaintances. However, he had so little money at that time that he had to borrow funds to open a small office and set up his household.

Unfortunately, shortly after Sardar's arrival in Godhra, a plague broke out! One of his friends fell victim to it. Vallabhbhai took care of him, but the disease proved fatal. Upon returning from the funeral, Vallabhbhai realized that he too had been infected. He quietly sent his wife to Karamsad, despite her reluctance, and went to Nadiad, where he stayed alone until he was completely recovered.

After staying in Godhra for two years, Vallabhbhai moved to Borsad in 1902. This early change in his plans was related to his brother Vithalbhai. The Resident First Class Magistrate, the Mamlatdar, and the First Class Sub-Judge of Borsad were angry with Vithalbhai because he had played a major role in establishing a commission to investigate allegations of bribery and corruption against the former Sub-Judge. They were eager to seek revenge and were looking for an excuse. Upon hearing this, Vallabhbhai decided to settle in Borsad. He lived away from Vithalbhai and maintained such outward behavior that all the officials assumed the two brothers were not on friendly terms. In fact, people were sometimes amused by their appearing on opposing sides.

After staying in Godhra for two years, Vallabhbhai moved to Borsad in 1902. Initially, Sardar Patel worked alongside his brother Vithalbhai, but later, he began practicing independently. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was an outstanding criminal lawyer, and before long, he earned great respect in Borsad. His common sense, courage, temperament, and deep understanding of human psychology proved to be invaluable in his chosen profession. However, he was not satisfied with his destiny as a local lawyer. He wished to go to England to become a barrister, but his father did not have the financial means to enable him to fulfill that ambition.

Through hard work and frugal habits, Vallabhbhai managed to save enough money within three years of starting his practice in Borsad. Consequently, he applied for admission to the Middle Temple in London in 1905. He wrote to Thomas Cook & Sons, a travel agency, to arrange his journey to London. By a twist of fate, just as all the formalities were nearly complete, the company's final letter containing his travel documents which was correctly addressed to Mr. V. J. Patel, Pleader, Borsad was delivered to his elder brother Vithalbhai, who shared the same

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initials. Vithalbhai himself was eager to go to London, and he requested his younger brother to let him go instead, suggesting that Vallabhbhai could go later. Vallabhbhai respected his elder brother so deeply that he accepted his request without any hesitation.

CONCLUSION

Thus, from his very childhood, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was hardworking, dutiful, and self-educated. He received his primary education at the school in Karamsad and subsequently studied in Petlad. As a student, he was a lover of justice and possessed great prudence, never leaping to hasty conclusions without thoroughly understanding the facts. His leadership and sense of social responsibility were evident even in his minor endeavors, such as the student strike against the school teacher and other justice-driven activities. During his student years, he became proficient in English and jurisprudence, and in 1900, he began practicing as a district lawyer in Godhra. His commitment to public service and justice brought him immense respect and success in Borsad.

Since childhood, Vallabhbhai was determined, simple, collaborative, and decisive qualities that eventually earned him the title of the 'Iron Man of India'. His life teaches us that hard work, devotion to duty, and selfless social service are the core elements of a true leader. The traits of perseverance, self-reliance, and firm determination are clearly visible in the student life of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. He was highly disciplined in his studies and understood the value of time. Even in difficult circumstances, he kept moving forward fearlessly. He was always ready to take responsibility among his friends and consistently demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities. Public welfare, honesty, and integrity remained the defining pillars of his character.

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Acknowledgments

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Jani, S.O. (2026). Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel: The Making of the Iron Man. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 379-383. DIP: 18.02.040/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/ 110140