

Lakhs joins Patel rally demanding reservation

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Patidars raise their arms as they shout slogans during a rally in Ahmedabad on Tuesday to demand reservation : REUTERS

21-year-old stir leader Hardik Patel begins fast; Ahmedabad tense

AHMEDABAD, AUG 25

Lakhs of people belonging to the community of Patidars, or Patels, thronged Ahmedabad's roads on Tuesday morning to demand what they called their 'right' of reservation under the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category in education and government jobs.

The 'Maha Kranti' rally was organised a day before the Gujarat State Assembly begins a three-day session.

The rally, which began as a mega show of strength of Gujarat's most influential community, ended with sporadic violence in parts of the city and two groups – Sardar Patel Group and Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS) - spearheading the agitation splitting on ideological grounds.

A hard nut

After a fiery speech at the GMDC Grounds here, Hardik Patel, who is the face of the agitation and

convenor of PAAS, announced that he would go on a hunger strike till Chief Minister Anandiben Patel personally comes to the venue to collect their memorandum. He gave a 48-hour ultimatum to the government on this.

“I will sit on fast until Chief Minister Anandiben comes here personally and assures us that our demands will be met,” Patel said. The government declined to comment on Hardik’s 48-hour deadline.

On Sunday, Chief Minister Anandiben Patel had ruled out inclusion of Patidars in the reservation list, which already has 146 castes listed.

But, Hardik Patel threatened to take the reservation movement outside Gujarat by involving Patidar community in States of Rajasthan, Bihar, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. “Our population in Gujarat is 1.80 crore, but nationally we are 27 crore. Chief Minister of Bihar Nitish Kumar is from our community and Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh is also from our community. There are 117 Patidar MPs, so there should be our dominance there,” Hardik said. “Gujjars from Rajasthan have extended their support for our movement. We are prepared to go to Gandhinagar and to Jantar Mantar in New Delhi if our demands are not met,” he added. Amid slogans of ‘Jai Sardar, Jai Patidar’, the crowd marched towards the Collector’s office.

While Lalji Patel, leader of the SPG, distanced himself from Hardik’s demands, calling it an effort to undermine the prestige of a Chief Minister.

‘BJP will pay’

Earlier in the day, addressing the gathering of more than five lakh Patidars, Hardik challenged the BJP-led State government, saying that if it paid no heed to their demands, the saffron party suffer in the Assembly elections of 2017. “Only if our rights are safeguarded will we let the lotus (the BJP’s party symbol) bloom in 2017. Else, the lotus will never bloom again,” the 21-year-old leader stated in his speech.

Hardik invoked names of Sardar Patel, Bhagat Singh and Anna Hazare and also mentioned Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying he had learned leadership from them. Patel even targeted Modi by saying that “even we want *sabka saath, sabka vikas* (a Modi slogan), but we will contribute to it through reservation. Reservation is our right. Give us our right (reservation) happily or we will snatch it. Whoever will talk of the interest of Patels will rule us,” he said addressing the gathering comprising women, children and elderly from Saurashtra, south and North Gujarat.

Grinds to a halt

The city came to a standstill as schools and colleges, offices and shops remained closed as hundreds of thousand of Patidars marched towards the Collector’s office and returned to the rally venue.

Barring a few incidents of vandalism at shops and malls, the rally was largely peaceful.

“There were a few isolated incidents of violence, and attack on media. That is unfortunate and condemnable. But as far as the rally was concerned, it has completed peacefully,” said Gujarat Health Minister Nitin Patel.

BSF deployed

As a measure of precaution, for the first time, Border Security Force (BSF) was deployed at the residence of Chief Minister in Gandhinagar.

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