

LEAD

## The Patidar idea of reservation

**Satish Deshpande**

SEPTEMBER 05, 2015 00:01 IST

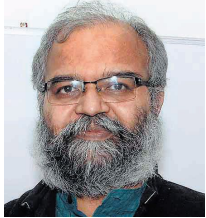
UPDATED: MARCH 28, 2016 15:28 IST

**The constitutional view of reservation requires evidence of discrimination or backwardness, but the dominant view today seems to be that any caste can get reservation if it can bend the state to its will.**

Successful sons of the market in popular perception, the Patidars are agitating to become the sons-in-law of the State. This disorienting, almost bizarre, event has the pundits flustered because there is really nothing to analyse in the demand itself. As everyone knows, including the Patidars themselves, they have no case – but they certainly have

# THE HINDU

to the interpretive level, from factual logic to ideological motivations. At this level, **>the Patidars** invite us to re-examine four familiar themes located at the intersections of caste, state and market.



A different idea now

Satish Deshpande

**>The first theme is the idea of reservation** and its relationship to the idea of India. As an idea, reservation predates the nation — it was meant to repudiate the religiously sanctioned apartheid and oppression of caste society, and to establish the community of formal equals that is a precondition for nationhood. This dimension of reservation has been forgotten, and today it is understood more as a means for redressing caste-linked discrimination and “backwardness”, and for enabling the inclusion of hitherto excluded and under-represented groups. On none of these grounds do the Patidars qualify for reservation, and they know this. The fact that they are asking for it nevertheless indicates that their idea of reservation is quite different.

The Patidar idea of reservation seems to be that it is simply a welfare benefit that the state can grant to any community at its discretion. From this perspective, the main qualifications for getting reservation would be: an electorally significant population, and the skills needed to mobilise the community, manage the media and mount a successful campaign to coerce the state. That this is the Patidar’s notion of reservation is only an inference, but it is well supported by known facts. First, the justifications explicitly cited by the Patidars — increased competition, unemployment, lack of access to higher and professional education — are hardly unique to them. Second, they have made no systematic effort thus far to present the kind of evidence of backwardness or under-representation that is normally required to justify claims for reservation. Finally, the Patidars do happen to be one of the largest and best organised communities in Gujarat.

The contrast between the two views could not be more stark. In the constitutional view, reservation is explicitly and exclusively about redressing caste discrimination and inequality. By its very definition, reservation cannot promote the interests of the dominant castes; if anything, it would work against them. In the Patidar view, any caste can get reservation if it has the power to bend the state to its will. What is worrisome is not the opposed conceptions themselves, but the fact that the Patidars, like most people, are probably unaware of the constitutional view. Ultimately, what really matters is not whether the Patidars succeed or fail, but that their view of reservation is the dominant one today.

## Role of the ‘general category’

The second theme highlighted by the Patidars is the nature and role of the “general category”. From the constitutional perspective, the general category is the sphere of equal citizenship where caste is not allowed to matter. It is the ultimate goal of the republic to

caste. But because of the undeniable presence and continuing reproduction of caste inequalities and discrimination, the lower caste majority must be protected with quotas. In other words, the function of reservation is to empower beneficiaries so that later generations begin to compete successfully in the general category. Thus, when candidates eligible for reservation begin to enter the general category, it is a sign that reservation is working. When the general category begins to reflect the caste composition of society, it will be time to abolish reservation.

Like other upper castes, the Patidars used to think of the general category as a quota for themselves. They were enraged by the introduction of the quota for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and led the Gujarat anti-reservation agitations of 1981 and 1985 which demanded that the State “end all reservations everywhere”. At that time, the Patidars maintained solidarity with their upper caste allies as proud members of the general category who despised quotas. The Gujarat stir of 1985 pioneered the rhetoric of merit and the anti-reservation arguments that were later borrowed by the anti-Mandal agitation in North India. Today, the Patidars want to surrender the sanctimony of merit and abandon the moral high ground of the general category for two reasons.

The first has to do with the escalation of competition within the upper castes. In the 1980s, the Patels were confident of facing competition because of what sociologist I.P. Desai called “inbuilt structural advantages”. In other words, they had the money, power and connections to buy expensive coaching, or to acquire merit “directly” by manipulating exam results or grabbing donation seats. But now, in the Vyapam era of overheated merit-markets, the Patidars from the lower strata are being squeezed out. The second reason is the entry of reservation-eligible lower castes into the general category, about which Hardik Patel, the 22-year-old spokesman of the movement, has complained.

The Patidar perspective on the general category may be self-seeking, but it has one important virtue. It highlights what the constitutional view glosses over, namely that though it is egalitarian in caste terms, the general category allows a free rein to the inequities of wealth and social capital.

## **Caste pride**

The third theme the Patels draw attention to is not directly related to the Constitution: it is the perennial one of the mutual impact of class and caste identities. The Patidar campaign raises the subtle issue of the role of caste pride in the context of real or perceived downward mobility.

Given that their list of complaints is sure to be shared by most other castes, why is it only the Patidars who are agitating? Contingent factors may provide part of the explanation, but surely the sense of what is proper for Patels is also involved. The relational nature of caste

separates Patidars from those whom they consider their inferiors. Discontent may be triggered by the subjective anguish of being mistaken for lowly others, regardless of objective deprivation. Conversely, caste pride may dictate that aspirational levels be set unrealistically high relative to one's resources and capabilities, so that frustration with failure sets in sooner than it has to.

A different dimension of the caste-class interface is that of solidarity. Like many other communities, the Patels are a single caste stretched across several classes. Are shared surnames and common customs enough to unite the diamond kingpins, detergent barons, real estate moguls and successful emigrants at one end of the spectrum with the small farmers, diamond workers, petty businessmen, and unemployed, prospectless youth at the other end?

At the moment this is a rhetorical question because no one is facing a test of solidarity and nothing is at stake. A more immediate question is that of class solidarities across caste lines. Are the Patidars who are genuinely striving for quotas going to get more support from like-minded quota seekers like the Gujjars and the Kurmis, than from their quota-indifferent caste fellows? Past experience suggests that cross-caste alliances are going to remain tentative and lukewarm. But whichever way one looks at it, the robustness of caste identities is not in doubt.

### **Caste and the market**

The fourth and final theme raised by the Patidars is, of course, the ideological hegemony of the market. By far the most fascinating aspect of the Patidar agitation is its deafening silence on the failure of the market model in which they had placed boundless faith. Some have suggested that the silence is dictated by political loyalties, since the Patidars formed the core constituency of the Modi regime in Gujarat. But the more likely explanation is that the sway of market ideology is so strong that protest or criticism is not even recognised as an option. Moreover, the inability to be rational about the market is a global epidemic today as the eminently avoidable crashes and recessions of the recent past have demonstrated. It is quite possible that for faithful practitioners like the Patels, the market is like a force of nature that one cannot protest against, just as one cannot agitate for a good monsoon.

The real reason to worry about the market in India is the critical role it plays in regulating caste conflict. It is not entirely coincidental that liberalisation and the OBC quota followed closely on each other in 1990-91. In market-friendly India, the art of the possible has been seen as the balancing of the "gush up" for big corporates with the "trickle down" for the electorally indispensable poor and lower castes. Groups like the Patidars may upset the balance because, now, they want to drink from both streams.

Printable version | Nov 28, 2018 3:50:57 PM | <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-patidar-idea-of-reservation/article7616378.ece>

© The Hindu