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## Decoding the truth behind Gujarat's Patidar agitation

As agriculture has become unattractive Patidars are seeking government jobs in cities

Sohini Das | Ahmedabad  
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*A bus set on fire in Surat on Tuesday after the arrest of Hardik Patel, convener of 'Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti'*

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status of a Other Backward Castes (OBC), quite an implausible demand it may seem at first. More so, as most Patidars (known by the surname 'Patel' and who comprise nearly 20 per cent of Gujarat's 65 million population) are not only economically affluent, but also socially and politically influential. It was the Patidars who had participated in the anti-reservation rallies in Gujarat in the 1980's. Things have indeed come a full circle. Or is this the biggest revolt against the so-called 'Gujarat Model'?

A deeper look, however, reveals a slightly different picture. As Jerambhai Vansjaliya, a community leader of the Kadva Patels who roughly dominate around 32-35 assembly seats in Gujarat says, "Contrary to popular perception, only 15 per cent of the Patels are rich. Yes, it is true that they are landowners, but average landholding size is reducing with every passing generation. Moreover, agriculture is not considered as lucrative as it was some

years back."

Take for example, in the Patidar-dominated Saurashtra region, cash crops like jeera, groundnut, cotton have been affected this year, with production dipping. As their traditional profession of agriculture loses its sheen, Patidars are turning towards cities, and more specifically government jobs in cities.

Let's look at some statistics that are being thrown around by the Patidar leaders here. Nearly 60 per cent of the Patidars live in villages; of them about 30 per cent have landholdings of less than 10 bighas. Vansjaliya says that as the sons and daughters of these marginal farmers are looking for options other than agriculture, the going gets tough for them. Another interesting facet he highlights is that when it comes to giving the daughter away in marriage, Patel parents are increasingly choosing 'job-waale daamaad' (employed groom) over a farmer groom, for the sheer income security the former provides.

Patidars, however, have a fair share in the industrial scene in Gujarat. Apart from big names like Karsanbhai Patel of Nirma, Pankaj Patel of Zydus Group, or Savji Dholakia of Harekrishna Diamonds, there are nearly 6,146 industrial units in Gujarat which have a turnover of over Rs 10 crore. Of this, nearly 1700 units belong to Patels, 720 belong to Jains, 320 belong to Brahmins and the remaining to other castes, says Vansjaliya.

Community observers claim that Patidars who do not have enough capital to start a business, have to look for jobs. Here they lose out to factions within their own community, Chaudhary or Anjana Patels, who have OBC status.

Congress leaders like Arjun Modhwadia in Gujarat lash out at the so-called 'Gujarat Model' and say that while Narendra Modi has been publicising his development model across the globe, the fact that youth are frustrated in Gujarat exposes the truth of the failure of government policies. "Gujarat's growth story has been that of jobless growth; and this has begun to hurt now. The rosy picture that Modi painted about Gujarat's agricultural growth is all false with marginal farmers struggling for their livelihood," he says.

What is ironical here is that Patidars had at one time protested against OBC reservation in the 1980s. Gujarat always played on caste-based vote bank since the 1960's. After Patidars and Kshatriyas were mobilised by Bhailal Patel in 1967, the caste factor came into play again when OBC leader Madhavsinh Solanki of Congress introduced reservation. His Kham (Kshatriya-Harijan-Adivasi-Muslim) theory isolated the Patidars, who went to side with the BJP in the anti-reservation protests of the 1980's. BJP brought in the Hindutva card (bringing all backward communities under the BJP umbrella) to counter the Kham effect.

The same caste politics can, however, seriously affect the ruling BJP government. Hardik Patel, convenor of the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), has famously said during his rally, "The lotus will not bloom in 2017". Patidars can swing the election results in as much as 75-80 assembly constituencies, and the BJP is definitely caught in a fix at the moment trying to figure out how to handle the issue.

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is, the state government has mis-handled the situation this week with police excesses and surprisingly detaining Hardik in the middle of a volatile situation. A handful of theories doing their rounds in the political and administrative quarters in Gujarat say that there has been a discreet involvement of people in power who have tried to manipulate the movement to suit their interests. It is highly speculated that it is the attempt by a strong Patel leader (not Anandiben Patel) to establish him or herself as the undisputed leader of the community and encash on the popular sentiment among Patidars in Gujarat that it is time to reclaim what Narendra Modi, an OBC himself, had usurped power from the Patel leader Keshubhai Patel 2000's.

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