

POLITICS

The Patels Are on the Warpath, and the BJP is Very Worried

An unexpectedly popular movement led by a 21-year-old demanding caste-based reservation for the powerful Patels in Gujarat is unnerving the BJP, which has enjoyed the community's unstinted support for decades



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People from the Patel or Patidar community attend a reservation rally led by Bardik Patel (center) at Bapunagar in Ahmedabad on Saturday. Credit: PTI

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Leaders from the Patel or Patidar community raise their hands at a reservation rally led by Hardik Patel (centre) at Bapunagar in Ahmedabad on Saturday. Credit: PTI

Ahmedabad: Given the ever-changing equations of caste-based politics in India, it is not rare for a community to withdraw support for a party. But when just such an ultimatum was issued to the Bharatiya Janata Party by members of the powerful Patel community of Gujarat – the strongest and most loyal caste block that has consistently championed the party in its most secure state – the BJP must feel the ground shifting beneath its feet.

Over the course of just a month, a group of young turks from the BJP's Patel-dominated strongholds of North Gujarat and Saurashtra have successfully mounted an agitation that has been rocking state politics, with implications that reach beyond the state.

The Patels, many of whom have also spread to Surat in South Gujarat pulled by its cash-rich diamond and synthetic textile industry, are seeking a place for their community among the 27 percent. Other Backward Classes (OBC) enjoying the fruits of reservation. Sending out a clear message about their determination, the agitation was launched from Mehsana in North Gujarat – the home district of Chief Minister Anandiben Patel, BJP national president Amit Shah, and of course, Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Spearheading the movement is 21-year-old commerce graduate Hardik Patel, son of a local businessman from Viramgam tehsil in Ahmedabad district. What began as a small gathering of educated youngsters, soon spread to Saurashtra and the urban centres of Vadodara in central Gujarat and state capital Gandhinagar. Rapidly evolving into a statewide movement, the agitators forced the state's political leadership to sit up and take notice of them when they mounted a vehicle rally in the diamond capital of Surat attended by a staggering five lakh people.



Hardik Patel at Saturday's rally. Credit: PTI

The next rally, the largest of them all, is planned on Tuesday in the state's commercial capital Ahmedabad, where the organizers claim they will mobilise a crowd of 40 lakh people. The venue is the sprawling Gujarat Mineral Development Corporation (GMDC) grounds, where public sales and exhibitions are organised routinely.

The organisers, who call themselves Patidar (Patels comprising the Kadva and Leuva denominations which are usually at loggerheads) Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), have gathered so much ground support that they just ignored a call by the Gujarat government to hold a consultation meeting on Saturday evening. They accused the government of trying to thwart their rally by giving such short notice for the consultation, and further asserted that they would not only stop their agitation but would try to make a national movement out of it.

The agitation has also mustered support from the Gujar community leaders in Rajasthan who had earlier led a similar, and even violent, movement for reservation in 2009. Gujar leader Kirori Singh Bainsla, who led his community's agitation for 5 percent reservation, is expected to attend the Tuesday rally.

The PAAS has already held more than a dozen rallies across the state and has also managed to draw some measure of support from the Brahmins and the Sindhis, whose associations are backing the agitation stating that the criterion for reservations should only be economic and not social and educational backwardness.

The conspiracy theories

Not surprisingly, many theories are floating around that attempt to explain the sudden and unexpected success of these youngsters in mobilizing people, as well as their possible political backers. Two theories have proven particularly popular – the first identifies Nitin Patel, the number two in the Anandiben Cabinet, as the invisible force behind the agitation in an apparent bid to emerge as the undisputed leader of the community; the second claims that the agitation is the handiwork of BJP's national president Amit Shah, who is keen to dislodge the Anandiben Patel government, given the long drawn animosity shared by the two leaders.

Yet another theory, the latest one by a Gujarati newspaper website quoting “central intelligence agencies”, claims that it is none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is fostering the agitation, apparently as a ruse to usher in a national policy of reservations based on economic status to replace the present caste-based quota system.

The agitation has shaken the government so much that it has formed a seven-member committee to resolve their demand. The committee, headed by senior minister Nitin Patel, was constituted after a successful rally in Gandhinagar organised by Hardik Patel.

Patels, the BJP's mainstay in Gujarat

It is the Patels, who form 14-15 percent of the State's population but play an outsized role in its political and economic spheres, that have largely determined who rules Gujarat over the past three decades. Modi was no exception to this, preceded as he was by Keshubhai Patel twice and followed by Anandiben Patel. And before Keshubhai Patel, Gujarat was jointly run by late Chimanbhai Patel as the Chief Minister from his regional outfit Janata Dal (Gujarat) and the former as the Deputy Chief Minister from the BJP.

The overwhelming influence of the Patels in the state's political affairs meant that even an all-powerful Modi—who during his tenure as CM systematically decimated senior Brahmin community leaders and ministers—took care to always accommodate Patel leaders. The present BJP government too has half a dozen ministers, including Chief Minister Anandiben and her two key ministers, Nitin and Saurabh, who belong to the community.

The Patels also control the diamond industry that cuts and polishes as much as 80 percent of the diamonds exported from India. They also lord over the burgeoning real estate sector; it is the Patels who own money-spinning educational trusts, and it is the Patels who dominate the groundnut oil lobby. The largest number of landlords and cash crop-rich farmers in Gujarat are the Patels.

The Chief Minister's plea

A worried Anandiben in a public appeal on Sunday explained that Constitution of India does not permit the state government to provide any reservation benefits to communities not listed as “backward classes”, while going by a Supreme Court order that the reservation quota could not exceed 50 percent.

In all, there are 146 communities, including some Muslim sub-castes, that fall under the OBC category in Gujarat on the basis of their social and educational backwardness and get quota benefits under it. The state has a 27 percent quota for OBCs, 15 percent for Scheduled Tribes, 7 percent for the Scheduled Castes (or Dalits) and the rest for disabled persons and ex-servicemen.

Anandiben Patel expressed her concern over the possibilities of caste conflicts in the state following the Patidar reservation agitation and said the young leadership of the Samiti might not be aware of the dreadful consequences of the anti-reservation agitation in 1984-1985, which pushed back the state's progress by several decades. “You are fortunate to be born and witnessing only a developed Gujarat but you should realize the dreadful consequences of the social conflicts your agitation for reservation might create,” she told the agitation leaders.

The Chief Minister reminded them of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's contributions in abolishing princely states after Independence. While the Iron Man of India had worked for unifying India, “in his name, you are now trying to divide the

society,” she told the leaders of the agitation, which included a ‘Sardar Patel Group’ in its fold. “If the Sardar was alive today, you think he would have approved of your agitational methods to seek your goal?” she asked.

She said the government had constituted a seven-member cabinet sub-committee to hear representations from various communities demanding reservation to find possible ways but this could not be found “through an agitation.”

She hinted that the government was prepared to consider an economic package for the non-reserved categories if they find it difficult to send their wards to private and self-financed educational institutions charging high tuition fees or provide job opportunities.

‘Gandhi, but also Bhagat Singh’



People from Patidar or Patel community hold placards and shout slogans during a protest rally demanding reservation for their community in Vadodara on Friday. Credit: PTI

In response to the Chief Minister’s call, Patel Anamat (Reservation) Andolan Samiti convenor Hardik Patel, had this to say, “The chief minister is trying to mislead the people. Our agitation will continue till the government concedes

to our demand or abolishes caste-based reservation for all sections altogether, keeping only the economic criteria for reservation benefits.”

“We have two specific demands: One, inclusion of all the denominations of Patels (Kadva and Leuva) among the OBCs who right now are 27 percent and have 147 communities, including a section of backward 17 Muslim communities. We are not asking for an increase in the 27 percent but inclusion in it. This means, the government may have to split the quota accordingly,” explains 22-year-old Alpesh Patel, who is in the third year of a bachelor of law course and son of a diamond-polishing worker in Surat and responsible for the huge Surat rally. “The second demand, he adds, “is creation of 5 percent socially and educationally backward category reservation.”

Hardik Patel has further gone on record saying that “We are following the way shown by Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel, but we can also go the Bhagat Singh way. The state government would be responsible if our August 25 rally turns violent.” He goes on, “We can make or break governments. If the government doesn’t agree to our demands, we will scale it up to a Gujar-style stir in Gujarat.” Patel asserts, “Ignoring our demand may cost the ruling party heavily in the October elections (to 493 municipal bodies, including municipal corporations of all major cities).”

An ironical turnaround

“This is a complete somersault by the Patels who are seeking a quota under the OBCs,” points out political scientist Achyut Yagnik. “They do not fit under the law in the reservation quota given their social and educational status,” says sociologist Gaurang Jani.

What has added grist to the movement is that at least one BJP MLA, Nalin Kotadiya from Dhari in Saurashtra’s Amreli district, has threatened to resign if an amicable solution does not come of the agitation. He says, “As many as 82 percent of my voters are Patels and I have to take a stance for a genuine demand.” he says.

Asked why the agitation was needed when the Patels control virtually the entire State on all issues that matter, Kotadiya told this correspondent, “Such pitched agitations did not occur earlier because the education level among the Patels was low, but it has improved now. So, if someone walks away with a job or college admission with 60 percent and another with 80 percent gets left

out, it is going to pinch him. That is what is happening now and so these youngsters are worked up.”

Yagnik takes the argument further. He says, “The agitation began from North Gujarat, where the Kadva and Leuva Patel share neighbourhoods with Anjana Patels, who are already a part of the OBCs because of their socio-economic status. So, it pricks the other Patel when an Anjana Patel with a weaker educational score pips the Kadvas and the Leuvas to the post. But it should not be forgotten that the ‘higher caste’ Patels are richer landlords and the others are not.”

Yagnik points to how the agitation then went to Saurashtra since many Patidars from North Gujarat have moved there. The next logical location was Surat in South Gujarat where Patels from Saurashtra and North Gujarat have moved in large numbers.

Overall, the Patel agitation has come as a bolt from the blue for a government dominated by the leaders of the community. This is the first time in Gujarat’s political history that the Patidars have taken to the streets for reservation without any overt political backing, and the implications are significant. It is also acutely ironical, given that it was the Patels who with the BJP were at the forefront of the violent agitations against OBC reservation in Gujarat in 1980 and 1985.



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