

Indian prime minister Narendra Modi appeals for calm after violent caste protests

The Patels are a privileged Gujarati caste, but firebrand leader is demanding that they are included in state quotas for "backward classes" in tense contest for jobs and college places



Prime Minister Narendra Modi Photo: AP

By Philip Sherwell, Asia Editor

2:27PM BST 26 Aug 2015

Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister, has appealed for peace in his home state of Gujarat after paramilitary troops were deployed and a curfew imposed to quell a violent caste protest.

An estimated half a million Patels earlier brought the main city of Ahmedabad to standstill for a rally where their firebrand young leader demanded more government jobs and college places for the Patidar caste.

But after Hardik Patel was arrested, stone-throwing protestors torched cars, buses and police stations as the rioting spread to other cities and towns. Three protesters were reported to have been shot dead in clashes with police, while several officers were injured.

The protests are rooted in the complex and highly-sensitive world of the Indian caste system and the government's job and college quotas for disadvantaged communities. Some analysts have warned of the dangers of a "caste war" if the tensions are not eased.



A Patidar or member of Patel community holds a mask of Indian freedom fighter and first Home Minister of Independent India Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Photo: AP

The Patidars are traditionally viewed as an affluent and privileged caste from land-owning classes. Gujarat's chief minister and several state leaders are Patels.

But they claim that they are the victims of positive discrimination as they struggle to compete for jobs and college places with less privileged castes from the official-designated "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs).

India operates quotas for castes such as the for Dalits, or "untouchables". The Patels, who make up between 12 and 20 per cent of Gujarat's 63 million people, claim that they are losing out as a result.

Hardik Patel has threatened to link up with castes with similar complaints about the quota system and take the fight to New Delhi. "This is a fight for our rights," he said. "We will continue with our campaign on the roads and the streets."

The 22-year-old started a fast that he said he would continue to demand places his caste under the OBC category.



Indian convenor of the 'Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti' Hardik Patel raises the Indian national flag near the statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the first Home Minister of India, during the Patel Patidar community's Kranti Rally in Ahmedabad Photo: AFP

His appeal is particularly strong with young college-age Patels who say they are losing out on places at educational institutions to members of OBC castes, despite gaining better exam records.

But leaders of OBC communities said they were preparing to fight any moves to include the Patels in the quota system as they said this would squeeze them out of college positions and government jobs.

As tensions mounted, Mr Modi delivered a televised address in his native Gujarati appealing for calm.

"I appeal to all brothers and sisters of Gujarat that they should not resort to violence," he said.

"Violence has never done good for anyone. All issues can be resolved peacefully through talks."

The curfew is the first to be imposed in the state since 2002 when at least 1,000 people, mainly Muslims, were killed in communal riots while Mr Modi was chief minister.

Mr Modi, a leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, was blamed by foes for allegedly failing to act to end attacks on Muslims, although he has denied the criticism.