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Why Patels Can't Complain

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BY THE AUTHOR**MORE IN****THIS SECTION**

An old man is lying on a cot in an open veranda. His moist eyes blink, but there is no body movement. He is Naresh Bhai Patel, Shwetang's bed-ridden father who has had complete paralysis for two years. "He can't speak or move," says Purvish Bhai Patel, Shwetang's cousin, "Shwetang was the only earning member of the family." Inside the house, a few women are seated on the floor in silence. An A4 size picture of the deceased is visible on a wooden stand. Among those present are his mother Prabha Patel and sister Palak who performed the 33-year-old's last rites a day earlier.

Family members claim that Shwetang was picked up by the police around 10 pm along with other youths of the colony on 25 August. At 11 the next morning, they received a call from the Bapu Nagar police station. His mother went there, and was asked to sign a blank sheet of paper to secure her son's release. She insisted on talking to her son first, but says she later signed the sheet under police pressure. As soon as she did so, she was taken to the mortuary of the government hospital nearby. It was only then that she learnt of her son's death at the hands of the police, acting against Patel youth after public property was vandalised by protestors of the community. It took the intervention of the Gujarat High Court for an autopsy to be conducted, and it revealed several injuries—especially one to the head—as Shwetang's cause of death.

Ironically, while the family says that Shwetang was not part of the quota protests, they express pride that he died for a 'cause'. "His sacrifice won't go waste," says Palak, "I have lost one brother but got thousands of new ones." Among them, she counts Hardik Patel, the young community leader who started this state-wise agitation for job and educational reservations for Patels. On 30

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t, Hardik visited the family and Palak tied him a
"I visited the families of all my fellow brothers



who sacrificed their lives for the community on that black night," says Hardik Patel over the phone to *Open*,
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"This is just the beginning. The movement will gain further momentum. I have also demanded compensation for families of the deceased."

Mobile internet and messaging services have been blocked in several parts of Gujarat as the government in Gandhinagar fears the effect of rumours, which could worsen the violence in the state. This fear is not unjustified. Purvish Patel shows us some pictures of his cousin's body taken right after the autopsy. It has wound marks on the arms, between the legs and on the head. Along with that, he shows us a video of policemen entering a housing colony, damaging vehicles parked on the road and beating up some boys. "Wait for mobile services to resume, then you would see evidence of police atrocities spreading like a wildfire," he warns. "The entire Patidar samaj will get to know about their heroes who battled for their honour and respect."

Shwetang was not the only one to die. Eleven deaths that day/night have been reported from different parts of Gujarat. For Patidars—or Patels as they are popularly known—they are martyrs. Even if it's to a cause that rests on a faulty premise.

For the past three months, Gujarat's Patidars, who form around 12 per cent of the state's population, have been in agitation mode demanding their classification as an Other Backward Class, a move that would assure them reservation benefits if conceded. Hardik Patel, the 21-year-old convener of the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), has already held 181 rallies across several districts and *talukas* of Gujarat to unite Patidars in this cause. The rally of 25 August at GMDC grounds was a culmination of the movement, drawing around



100 Patels together from different parts of the state

in a massive show of numbers. Encouraged by the

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response of the crowd, Hardik Patel made a charged speech, challenging the BJP government to either award the desired quota or face the music of angry Patels.

Everything was going well and the rally would have ended peacefully. But then Hardik shifted the goalposts. He decided to sit on a protest until Gujarat Chief Minister Anandiben Patel turned up to accept a document of their demands. "The moment he announced this, he had lost it," says Dr Shirish Kashikar, a political analyst based in Ahmedabad. Lalji Patel, Hardik's companion and head of the Sardar Patel Group (SPG, another Patidar outfit) who was present at the rally, suddenly withdrew his support. But there came a twist. The police started beating up the 2,000 odd people who were still present at the ground in the evening, and arrested Hardik Patel.

News of beatings and arrest went viral online, and Patel youths started attacking public property in various parts of the state. In response, the police hardened their stance towards those involved in the protests. It was the resultant clash between Patels and the police that took 11 lives. "Had the police not arrested Hardik and attacked the crowd, the movement would have died its own death as no one was convinced by what Hardik said and did," argues Kashikar. "It was the police who made a hero out of him."

Ironically, Patidars had once begun a movement against caste- based reservations in Gujarat. That was back in 1985. Now they are demanding quotas themselves. "Our young boys are not getting admission to government medical and engineering colleges due to reservations. They are not getting government jobs. What options do they have other than demanding what is their right? And they deserve this," says Hardik Patel.

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But there are enough facts to counter the PAAS leader's assertions. "It is all magnified and completely absurd" to

claim that Patels are 'socially backward' and so they need reservations," says Dr Gaurang Jani, professor of Sociology at Gujarat University. "Wherever Patidars live in the state, even the women's literacy rate is above 80 per cent. Patidars got [most of] the land during the 1950 land reforms, and today they control the entire economic infrastructure of Gujarat." A socially powerful community, it would seem, is trying to wield even more power through a blatant display of strength.

Since independence, say sociologists, Patidar power has been on the rise and Patels currently form the most dominant and affluent caste group in Gujarat. Their economic prosperity has translated into political influence. Of the 182 seats in the state's Legislative Assembly, 52 members are of this community alone. There are seven ministers, including the Chief Minister, who are Patels by caste. Of the 14 chief ministers the state has had before Anandiben Patel, three were Patels. There is even a famous saying in the community: 'Don't send your children to government schools, don't take a ride in government bus service, don't visit a government hospital, but get a government job to rule [over the rest].' Dr Jani argues that 30 per cent of government jobs under the General category are taken by Patels.

Largely agrarian at one time, large numbers of them started with regular food staples and moved on to cash crops like cotton, sugarcane and groundnut. Having prospered, many of them invested their farm surplus in businesses that ranged from diamond trading to construction and education. "Today, they are in full control of agriculture as well as industry," says Jani.

"You would never see a community with just 12 per cent administration in control of virtually the entire business and

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The rise of Hardik Patel, however, is something of a mystery for common Gujaratis, Patels as well as non-Patels. “It is beyond imagination that such a well off and intelligent community has accepted the leadership of a 21-year-old young who doesn't look convincing at all,” says Pravin Mishra, associate professor at MICA, Ahmedabad. “He speaks without any knowledge and changes his stand faster than his clothes,” says Kashikar.

The young PAAS convener's emergence has also hurt other Patel leaders who had asked for reservations on their brethren's behalf. Lalji Patel of the SPG is one such person. Before Hardik Patel created the PAAS, he was in charge of the SPG's Viramgam unit. The 25 August rally was a joint call made by the SPG and PAAS. But now, the two have parted ways. “I am open to join Hardik only if he is open to a peaceful agitation,” says Lalji Patel. “We were planning to move an application to the State OBC Commission for the inclusion of Patels in the OBC list. But the current violence has come as a roadblock. [Still], we will do it soon.”

The rivalry could heat up. When Hardik Patel announced 25 August as ‘Patidar Kranti Diwas’, Lalji Patel was quick to announce 26 August as ‘Patidar Shahid Diwas.’ Lalji Patel is also planning a ‘Kalash Yatra’ for the young men who died in the violence. His 21-year-old rival has announced another round of agitation on 6 September; he plans to march from Dandi that day and reach Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad ten days later.

However, some Patel youths *Open* spoke to deny any influence on them of either. “We are not with Hardik or Lalji Patel,” says Hitesh Patel, a 28-year-old software engineer who lives in Bapu Nagar, Ahmedabad. “We are with the Patidar samaj. People didn't come because

OPEN k called us. It was a call of the entire community for their own benefit. It is P for P—Patel for Patel.”

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Purvish Patel echoes that sentiment. “Currently, it is Hardik. Tomorrow it might be someone else. The movement will continue because we want it to,” says Shwetang’s cousin.

Some experts blame the trouble on the state’s policies of the past few years. “It is not only Patidars. There is unrest among all communities. In the last ten years, the government has not been able to create enough jobs. Those given by the government are on a fixed salary contract basis. Agriculture is going down, small industrial units are shutting shop,” says Jani. “All this has led to a sense of frustration among the youth.”

With Patels ganging up, other communities too have started flexing muscle. On 23 August, many of Gujarat’s OBC groups gathered at Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad under the banner of the OBC Ekta Manch to circle wagons around their right to reservations. Alpesh Thakur, a young OBC leader, had called this rally. “Patidars don’t want reservations. They are just trying to show their dominance and play a role in the abolition of reservations,” argues Thakur, sitting in his office in Shankarnagar Society in the Ranip area of Ahmedabad. On the wall behind his chair hangs a huge double-edged sword. Thakur runs the Kshatriya Thakur Sena, an outfit he founded five years ago to shield the rights of his Thakur community. He seems to draw inspiration from the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and he happily admits it. The symbol of his outfit has a lion with a message: ‘Sangathit Samaj, Shaktishali Samaj’ (United society, strong society). He claims that his Sena has 500,000 OBC members across Gujarat. “They say that the diamond business is going down and hence they need reservations. Are we responsible for the slowdown in this business?” asks Thakur. “Reservations are a soft

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target. Our community has become more aware and our boys are working hard to get jobs. This is what is troubling them.”

Thakurs are Gujarat's strongest OBC caste group, making up 36 per cent of the state's population. Alpesh Thakur, however, is trying to rally the support of Scheduled Castes and Tribes are well for retaining the status quo on affirmative action. “Patidars say that they make or break a government,” he says. “But the fact is no Patel can win without the support of OBCs. Their language has forced us to show our strength.” He plans a state- wide *yatra* starting on 10 September from the Saurashtra region in the hope of drawing OBCs and SC-STs out for a fight. “We are a fighter community. We were at the forefront in the Hindutva fight. But now we will also take care of the minority community. Once we are out, then Patidars won't stand for long,” he warns.

Earlier in the day, the Thakur Sena leader made a visit to the house of Prahlad Ji Thakur, who was allegedly killed by Patidars on 26 August in the Nikol area of Ahmedabad. “By holding such an agitation, Patidars have in lost it. It has united all other castes and the results would be visible in the forthcoming elections,” says Thakur.

Apart from Patidars, a big loser in the turn of events could be the state government under Anandiben Patel. Its initial flip- flop in granting permission for the SPG- PAAS rally has raised a question mark on its preparedness to handle a situation like this. In the wake of the rally, which it finally allowed, the administration turned all the highways toll-free and let vehicles park for free at the Sabarmati riverfront. The government tried to convince Patidars through newspaper ads that reservations were not possible for them, and how Sardar

Patel was against it. But the 25 August order to *lathi* charge and arrest Hardik Patel brought all these efforts to nought.

There is no clarity on who ordered it. Anandiben Patel has denied issuing any such command. "If she didn't order it, it means the police force is not under her control," alleges Shankarsinh Vaghela, leader of the opposition in the Assembly. Such questions have arisen within the BJP too. "She herself is a Patel, but not for Patels," says a BJP MLA in Gujarat, "Patels are our most loyal voters and police atrocities on them has ensured they'll move away from us."

Serious lapses in handling the trouble, others say, has hurt the Chief Minister's reputation as an able administrator. So far, they note, no one from the government has visited any of the grief-stricken residential areas, nor has anyone announced any financial help. This has opened the state government to charges of being insensitive. "We have met leaders of the PAAS and heard out their demands," says Nitin Patel, health minister and spokesperson of the Gujarat government. "We haven't given them any assurances, but we are working to see how the government can step in to offer help."

The main opposition Congress is eyeing all this as an opportunity to chart a comeback in a state long lost to it, and its leaders have been cautious in making statements. "Congress was already getting public support because of the failure of the government. This incident has exposed the development myth of Gujarat," says Bharat Singh Solanki, Gujarat Congress president. He refuses to state his party's view on reservations for Patels. "We are not in power and hence cannot take a position on that," he dodges. The Congress would not

antagonise Patels, but the fear within the party is of losing OBC support by adopting no official stance

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either way. It does not help that Siddharath Patel, the former Gujarat Congress president, has come out openly in support of his caste brethren. “The Patidar samaj is united,” he has said, “Their demand is genuine and they should get it.”

The state is headed for local polls in October and the current political turmoil would unquestionably have an impact on the outcome. “Let Patels show their strength there,” taunts Alpesh Thakur, adding, “We will ensure they lose maximum seats. This is just the beginning.”

The state that has earned prominence and rewritten the definition of development is now on the verge of a bitter caste battle, which would only earn it a bad name. Things may look calm now, several days past the violence of late August, but the tensions beneath could flare up yet again.

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