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Caste Conflict

Why the Patels are Protesting

By *Ananya Vajpeyi*



In late August, a 22-year-old named Hardik Patel brought the Indian city of Ahmedabad, in the prosperous western state of Gujarat, to a [complete halt](#). He was addressing a rally of people who shared his last name, "Patel," members of a Gujarati caste known as "Patidar" (literally, "landowner"). Half a million people turned out on the streets—a spectacle of public support never before witnessed in Gujarat, even though the state has produced two of modern India's most popular leaders: Mahatma "M.K." Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

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generally. The Patels are demanding to be included in the state's program for affirmative action in education and employment, a system of positive discrimination that in India is known as "reservations policy." Reservations in schools, universities, and government jobs are designed to counteract the manifold inequalities historically caused by the caste system. The primary beneficiaries of reservations are supposed to be the groups that are socially the weakest. The Patidars have traditionally been among the most powerful groups in western India, but they claim that the reservation system drastically and unfairly limits their own access to education and jobs.

The Patidars' protest is a [worrying development](#) for Modi. The Patidars, both in

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