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**EXPLAINED**

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# Gujarat protests: Who are the Patidars, and why are they angry?

The Patidar community in Gujarat is battling falling agricultural incomes and an overall socio-economic squeeze, which has led to powerful frustrations building up among the youth.

Written by Gopal Kateshiya |

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Police personnel patrol the Vastral area in Ahmedabad after mob violence and firing on Wednesday. (Express Photo by: Javed Raja)

### Who are the Patidars?

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Patidars or Patels claim themselves to be descendants of Lord Ram. They are divided into two main sub-castes: Leuva Patels and Kadva Patels, who claim to be descendants of Ram's twins Luv and Kush respectively. There are other sub-castes like Satpanthis, who are mainly centered in Kutch district and have some social customs akin to Muslims, such as following a Pir. And there are Chaudhary Patels, who are concentrated in North Gujarat, and are recognised as OBC. Barring the eastern tribal belt, Patidars are spread all over Gujarat, with a higher concentration

in North Gujarat and Saurashtra. Leuvas marginally outnumber the Kadvas. They dominate Saurashtra and Central Gujarat, while Kadvas are the leading community in North Gujarat. South Gujarat has a mixed population thanks to the migration of community members from other parts to Surat.

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‘Patidar’ means one who owns a strip of land. In medieval India, members of the community were among the more industrious farmers, and rulers of erstwhile princely states hired them as tenants of the best and largest tracts of land in their kingdoms. Post independence, tenants got land ownership rights, and thus Patidars became lords of large swathes of prime agricultural land.

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### **How well off are Patidars financially?**

In medieval society, they were well placed in the caste hierarchy. The village chief was called Patel or Mukhi. In independent India, having got prime agricultural land, they were better off

than other agriculturalists, and therefore recognised as an upper caste. They consolidated their position further with the advent of new crop varieties and agricultural equipment.

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In rural areas, the community has better landholding than OBCs and, according to Patidar leaders, have gained from the agricultural boom in the state over the last decade. This has led to large numbers of Patidars taking up businesses and migrating to cities or launching enterprises abroad. In the United States, for example, the motel industry is dominated by Patels. Patels living in cities are better off than their rural counterparts, and are perceived as being placed higher within the community.

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However, community leaders say landholding is going down. "Only 10 per cent of farmers from our community hold more than 10 bigha of land each. The rest have become small or marginal farmers, and would like to look at other options. Only 15 per cent of community members are wealthy. But Patels in general have a habit of showing off. This has created a perception that

the entire community is affluent,” says Jerambhai Vansjaliya, vice-president of Umiya Mataji Mandir Trust, Sidasar, one of the largest organisations of Kadva Patels in the state.

But then, there are examples like the BJP MP from Porbandar, Vitthal Radadiya, a Leuva Patel, who reportedly gifted Rs 100 crore worth of land and property to his widowed daughter-in-law when she married again last year. The community is seen as being economically powerful, but not as well educated as some other upper castes like Brahmins.

### **How do they control politics and industry in Gujarat?**

Given their enterprising nature, a few Patels moved on from agriculture, and ventured into industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Odhavji Patel of Morbi came up with the Ajanta brand of clocks, and Karsan Patel set up Nirma. Popat and Chhagan Patel of Rajkot pioneered the oil engine industry in Rajkot. Valjibhai Patel of Rajkot started cinema houses, a real estate business and private education institutes. Dr Dahyabhai Ukani founded Ban Lab and ventured into the pharma industry. Tulsi Tanti, also from Rajkot, explored the harnessing of wind energy and founded Suzlon in the 1990s. More recently, Patidars of Morbi have earned a name in the ceramic tiles industry, and established Morbi as the tile town of India. Many from Central Gujarat districts like Anand and Kheda took flights to the UK and US, and established themselves as successful businessmen there. Some others entered the diamond polishing industry, and have turned Surat into India’s diamond city.

Last Diwali, Savji Dholakia hit the headlines after he gifted his employees flats and cars. Vansjaliya says that out of 6,146 industrial units with an investment of more than Rs 10 crore, 1,700 are Patidar-owned. However, according to him, only 15 per cent of Patels are affluent, and the rest are middle class or poor.

The community accounts for roughly 1.5 crore of Gujarat’s 6 crore population. Given their numbers and economic clout, Patels dominate politics in the state. The community was a committed votebank of the Congress till the 80s. But the KHAM reorganisation of underprivileged sections by Madhavsingh Solanki, and the rise of Hindutva took the Patels to the BJP. Since then, Patidars have been BJP supporters, and state Cabinets have been dominated by Patels. Besides Chief Minister Anandiben Patel, there are six Patidars in the present Cabinet. The community has 37 MLAs in the 182-member Assembly.

### **Why are they angry and demanding a share of the OBC quota?**

Quotas have meant that Patidar youth must do that much better in competitive examinations to land a government job or a seat in a government medical college. Youths from rural areas are at a double disadvantage due to their socio-economic background. The community is infamous

for its skewed sex ratio, and Patel youths, especially in the rural areas, find it difficult to get a bride. Parents of girls prefer a groom with a government job or business in a city to one with agricultural land in rural areas. Over the years, economic downturns and crop failures have led to a preference for government jobs over farming. Cities like Rajkot have seen training centres such as “Patidar IAS Academy” open with the aim of getting more Patels into the All-India Services. The diamond industry too has been under stress of late, and some diamond polishers have committed suicide in Surat after being laid off. Saurashtra, dominated by Patels, is a major cotton and groundnut belt, but farmers have not got good prices for their crops in the last two seasons. The stress has contributed to the perception that as Patels suffer, OBC youth, helped along by quotas, have been steadily improving their socio-economic situation.

### **What does the agitation mean for the BJP government?**

The agitation, led by 23-year-old Hardik Patel under the banner of Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS) and Lalji Patel, president of Sardar Patel Seva Dal, popularly called Sardar Patel Group or SPG, seems to have struck a chord with the youth and rural masses. Community leaders like Vansjaliya admit they are overwhelmed by the support the agitation has received. The agitation seems to have rattled established community organisations and their leaders. Facing possible irrelevance, the four major Patidar community organisations gave advertisements in local dailies earlier this month, saying they supported the movement and were ready to mediate between its leaders and the government. The fact that the government has not so far acceded to the demands of the agitators may result in some sections of Patidars abandoning the BJP in the coming local body elections. Patidars can potentially swing at least 80 of the 182 Assembly constituencies. Hardik Patel warned during the mega rally in Ahmedabad that the lotus of the BJP may not bloom again in 2017.

### **PROMINENT PATIDARS**

#### *Industrialists*

- \* KARSANBHAI Patel: Founder of Rs 2,500 cr Nirma group, which also runs Nirma University
- \* TULSI Tanti: Founder of Suzlon Group
- \* PANKAJ Patel: CMD of Cadila Healthcare and promoter of Zydus Group, 5th largest pharma company in India
- \* MAHENDRA G. Patel: MD of Ahmedabad-based Lincoln Pharmaceuticals Ltd
- \* JAYANTIBHAI Patel: CMD of Meghmani Organics Ltd, a chemicals manufacturing company that makes pigments and pesticides
- \* PRAYASVIN B Patel: CMD of Elecon Engineering Company Ltd, pioneer in the manufacture of material handling equipment

### *Diamond Barons*

- \* SAVJI Dholakia: Harekrishna Diamonds, Surat; famously gifted cars and flats to employees as Diwali gifts
- \* GOVIND Dholakia: Shree Ramakrishna Exports, Surat
- \* VALLABH Patel: Chairman of the world's leading diamond company, Kiran Gems, a Diamond Trading Company
- \* LALJI Patel: Owner of Dharmanandan Diamonds Pvt Ltd; bought Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s monogrammed suit for Rs 4.31 crore

### *Politicians*

- \* ANANDIBEN Patel: Chief Minister of Gujarat
- \* KESHUBHAI Patel: Former Chief Minister
- \* VITTHAL Radadiya: Porbandar MP
- \* PRITI Patel: Britain's Minister of State for Employment

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- \* DIPAK G Patel: Chairman, Ganesh Housing Corporation Ltd
- \* RUSHABH Patel: MD, Parshwanath Group of Companies
- \* SURESH Patel: CMD, Surya Group

Hardik Patel

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