PATIDARS FOR OBC QUOTA: IS HARDIK PATEL ACTUALLY SPEARHEADING AN ANTI-RESERVATION MOVEMENT?

Sandip Roy

As the Patels gathered for their maha-rally in Ahmedabad, a friend in that city posted on Facebook:

“Under almost house arrest as the Patels arriving in their fancy cars rally for a right to be “backward”. All roads nearby my house are closed for traffic.”

Hardik Patel along with other protesters. PTI

The irony of what appears to be a very affluent community gathering in the thousands demanding reservations has left most of us on the outside scratching our heads.

A report on Quartz sums up what it dubs the “Caste Conundrum” in its very headline.

The affluent Patel clan owns a quarter of US motels. In India, it wants to be called “backward”.

A 2012 book about the US motel industry reckons there are some 22,000 hotels and motels owned by Indians in the US, together valued at $128 billion. 70% of these are owned by Gujaratis. Three-quarters of those are Patels.

And it does not particularly help the Patels’ cause as victims when one of the rally-goers, one Suryakant Patel tells The Hindu, “I had to sell my land to educate my son, who could not get admission in medical college here. I had to send him to the US to study computer science.”

As columnist Aakar Patel tells The Los Angeles Times “It’s laughable. They have had access to modernity and capital for a century and a half. Almost every person in central Gujarat, where Patels dominate, has family members in the US and UK.”

The Los Angeles Times headlines its story “Patels are a success story from India to the US. Why do they want affirmative action?”

But do they really?

It’s interesting to really listen to what Hardik Patel, the twenty-two year-old who seems to be spearheading the agitation has to say.

“Either the government grants us reservation or discontinues the entire concept of reservation. These is no other option.”

Our focus has been largely on the first half of his statement trying to fathom why such a well-to-do community should be demanding reservation. But it is really the second half of his “either-or” statement that is likely to catch fire.

In the name of demanding reservations is Hardik Patel really spearheading an antireservation movement?

What he has said is that he’s OK with reservations as long as they are linked to economic status not caste. This is an idea that finds great resonance in modern India where many feel the job pie has not grown the way the reservation pool has.

That sentiment comes through clearly from Haribhai Patel who came to the Mahakranti rally. He tells the Indian Express:

“My son did diploma in engineering, but couldn’t get a good job. He now runs his own shop but the earning is not good enough. Had I belonged to OBC category, things would have been different.”

And then the clincher.

“I believe that the time has come to give reservation on the basis of economic condition rather than caste.”

It’s not a new idea or a new grouse. The BJP too had put “aarthik aadhar par” reservations in its manifesto way back in 1996. The United States has also struggled with the notion of economic affirmative action that would benefit poor whites as opposed to race-based quotas which have been challenged in court.
Focusing on the Patels’ affluence, their diamond and textile businesses and farmlands, misreads the reality of that resentment which is not related to what they have but what they feel their children are shut out from.

Hardik Patel in his address to the rally says that Nitish Kumar in Bihar is “one of us” as is Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh. He is appealing to a larger brotherhood of Patidars which he claims is really 27 crore.

But the logic of a society based on pure merit actually has takers far beyond the Patels, 27 crore or not. Christophe Jaffrelot writes in the Indian Express that the RSS has described caste-based reservations as divisive and unfair to the meritorious and upper caste poor. When V P Singh tried to implement the Mandal report in 1989-90, The Organizer wrote “The havoc the politics of reservation is playing with the social fabric is unimaginable. It provides a premium for mediocrity, encourages brain-drain and sharpens caste-divide.” The self-immolation protests that shook the country in those days show that that resentment never simmers too far below the surface. Those movements agitated against the reservation tent to try and dismantle it. Hardik Patel is agitating to become part of the tent knowing that if everyone gets reservation, it will collapse under its own weight.

There is obviously a larger philosophical debate to be had about the issue and it will never yield clear consensus. In a very competitive job market, the Patel who finds he is unable to get into that coveted engineering college while the OBC candidate does not will not be able to calmly digest that as corrective social justice for centuries of caste-based oppression. The OBC candidate will point to how much the weight of history and the institutional advantage the upper caste has and does not acknowledge. But to the candidate in the examination centre, that weight is invisible. What’s visible are the marksheets and the names on the admission rolls in college. If there were enough seats at that college or the job market to go around for everyone, those with affirmative action and those without, it would be a different story. “A Patidar student with 90% marks does not get admission in an MBBS course, while SC/ST or OBC students get it with 45% marks,” says Hardik. He himself graduated with less than 50% marks from an Ahmedabad college which puts him even further back in the line. But he is tapping into an old emotive faultline with his complaint.

The danger of the Hardik Patel-led agitation is that it will blow open this can of worms in the most explosive manner imaginable. Already Hardik uses language that is incendiary. “We are following the way shown by Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel, but we can also go the Bhagat Singh way.” He poses with guns. He talks about Patels seizing their rights if they are not given them.

Gujarat is struggling to contain the fallout. There are bandhs in the state. 3G has been disconnected. The political analysts are puzzled about how a 22-year-old political nonentity could draw this kind of mammoth crowd to a rally about an issue that is hardly groundbreaking. Even Arvind Kejriwal built up his resume by cutting his political teeth with Anna Hazare. Why are lakhs of Patels putting their trust blindly in this 22-year-old B.Com graduate with no particular political expertise? Could a Hardik Patel grow so big without political backing somewhere? Hardik insists he is apolitical. But in a state that is as tightly under BJP control as Gujarat, led by Narendra Modi’s handpicked successor Anandiben Patel, why has this young man not been nipped in the bud?

Narendra Modi was once asked about the clamour for caste based reservation. He replied with a variation of his sabka saath sabka vikas mantra. “Education facility for each and everyone, then who will ask for the reservation? If the job opportunities are there for all, who will ask for reservation? So we have to create era of the plenty… Because our whole economic system is a scarcity system. We have to convert it from scarcity to plenty. And Gujarat is a model for plenty.”

The question now is whether the Patel Maha Kranti rally in Gujarat could become the “model” for something else - a much larger national conversation about the very basis of reservations itself.

What begins with the Patels need not stay confined to the Patels.

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