

Patidar Anamat Andolan

Reinventing a Social Identity

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The Patels in Gujarat are reinventing their social identity to address the plight of their aspiring youth. This article traces the trajectory of their agitation and inquires into the reasons behind their protests even after coming from a position of relative social and economic privilege.

No more is the Patel youth of Gujarat fighting pitched street battles against pro-reservationist forces as it did in the first half of the 1980s. Today it is rallying around a demand for being included among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) eligible for reservation in higher education institutions and government jobs. But it is its sense of proprietorship over Gujarat that is unmistakably evident now as it was then.

However this sense of proprietorship has not prevented them from resorting to the language of relative deprivation for ventilating its grievance. They have also warned the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of defeat in the impending polls if their demands are not met. That made it clear that even in their agitation demanding social privileges, they were aware of their numerical strength, political clout and economic wherewithal to determine political fortunes in the state.

It is not the political parties which decide the agenda of state policies, but the social bases that give legitimacy to political parties to pursue their agendas that hold the key. In this sense, the Patels of Gujarat have always remained a force to reckon with for any party aspiring to rule the state.

Patels in Pre-Independent India

The rise of the Patels in the social circuit of Gujarat is of recent origin. The intervening British colonial period churned the social map of India resulting in different political implications for different social groups spread over diverse regions. While most of the extant ruling groups went into political exile after the ascendancy of the British, social groups serving administrative and fiscal needs of the new regime gained in social status.

The land-owning-cultivating Patels were one such group who scaled the economic ladder by becoming revenue collectors under the British. At the same time, they accumulated political capital by being in the forefront of anti-colonial nationalist struggle. Thus, by the time of independence, the Patels had successfully transitioned to the forefront in Gujarat. Their numerical strength crucially enabled them to stay ahead in electoral politics in post-independence India. Their entrepreneurial spirit helped them make a successful transition into the urban artisanal and service sectors. That in turn strengthened their linkages with global economy.

The socio-economic self-sustenance achieved by this social group appears unprecedented in the post-independence political history of India. Unlike the Yadavs of North India who aspire to cling to power in alliance with the Muslims, the Patels of Gujarat have formed political parties for brief intervals single-handed and managed to install their regime in case of a fragmented post-election scenario in the state.

Patels and Hindutva Politics

Having taken a beating on the caste front in the 1980s, the Patels veered towards Hindutva to regain their political supremacy. Even though the reins of power in the BJP remained in the hands of a non-Patidar for more than a decade in the post-Keshubhai reign, the Patidars did not disapprove of it. After all they were also involved in usurping power from the Muslims at various levels within a communally polarised state.

The BJP reaped the benefits as Hindutva came to occupy an ideologically hegemonic position in the state. The internal fissures within its support base, barring on factional lines between pro-Modi and anti-Modi groups, rarely came into open or assumed serious proportions.

Exclusion of the Powerful

Against this backdrop, the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti's (PAAS) demands assumes significance as it mirrors forth the frustration amongst the Patel youth hailing from non-affluent sections of the community. They feel the asymmetry of being excluded from certain social avenues at a time when their caste brethren wield power in the state.

It also underlines the fact that despite the high decibel Vibrant Gujarat summits announcing the accelerating interest of the global investor community in the state, the political discourse for capturing state power in Gujarat, as in most other states, continues to crucially hinge on caste support or caste alliances. And so long as this remains the face of political reality, pressurising the ruling dispensation to accede to their caste-centric demands will remain a bargaining chip with discontented groups.

Bleak Present for Patels

What remained obscured in this overwhelming trajectory has been their relatively unsuccessful entry into sectors which demand intellectual capital. Thus, in spite of being one of the foremost diasporic communities from India, the Patels are hardly known to figure in Silicon Valley, California. Reservations has served a bridge for social groups who have found themselves historically disadvantaged in achieving skills required in professions like information technology (IT). The Mandal agitation fuelled the ambitions of vast sections of non-scheduled caste, non-scheduled tribe, agrarian communities to make transition into these modern segments as they happen to be the main vehicles of social mobility in present times, and, as a result, have enormous social prestige attached to them.

It is this resentment at not making anywhere to the top of such modern professions in proportion to the resources they possess that has been gnawing a sizeable section of the Patel youth.

Unlike the Yadavs, whose political ascendancy began in post-independence India, the Patidars, otherwise a shudra caste, having undergone precocious advancement since the British period, identified themselves with the interests of the traditionally forward communities. For long they vented their anger at the reservation policy for their social impasse. But this alignment with the forwards has not helped them achieve the desired breakthrough in intellectual spheres of modern life. Their agrarian, peasant, non-intellectual social roots are propelling them to reinvent their social identity to address the plight of their aspiring youth. Though indicative of a staid political imagination, the demand for inclusion in the reserved category is an expression of this predicament.