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The Quota Movement in Gujarat: Implications for Modi and India's Democracy

The Patel agitation of Gujarat should not be seen merely as a one-issue movement. More than merely an attempt by youthful members of the Patel community who feel they have been denied their just share of jobs and admissions to coveted educational opportunities it is the tip of an iceberg which points towards a much larger problem of equality and the quota system. Its timing, demands, tone and style have ominous implications for the stability of the Modi regime, and for the problem-solving capacity of India's democratic governance.

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Protest movements, including those with a certain degree of violence, are not uncommon in India. They emerge as an act of complaint against a specific grievance, gather momentum if they have a cause that is widely shared and an effective leadership with good communication abilities is available to mobilise these elements into a mass movement. Often, the violence that results when protestors disobey orders meant to prohibit their actions soon adds 'police

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outrage’ as an additional support to their cause. The life cycle of the movement comes to an end when a settlement is made. As a matter of fact, as one has seen time and again, and most recently in the case of the Anna Hazare Movement against public corruption, protest movements become an additional entry point for new issues, leaders and political vocabulary in India’s noisy but effective democracy. ‘Rational’ protest thus complements institutional participation, spreading the message of democracy, empowering those who have been outside the tent, and contributing to the resilience of democracy in a non-Western setting.

In the light of the past experience of protest movements as part of India’s protest ‘culture’ – a necessary complement to the methods of formal participation such as voting, lobbying or contacting leaders – one could perhaps consider the current Patel movement in Gujarat as one among many. The ongoing agitation by some members of the Patel community of Gujarat is in every sense a protest movement but one cannot dismiss it just as another cog in India’s gigantic democratic wheel. The circumstances under which it has come up and its timing call for a deeper analysis of its singularity. There are several points to take into consideration.

First and foremost, the Patels are the second key constituency to defect from Mr Narendra Modi’s winning 2014 coalition. The Patels of Gujarat – entrepreneurial, self-reliant in the sense of not being dependent on state subsidies, and financially secure – represent the ideal social base to incarnate the Modi *mantra* of private initiative and self-reliance. The community has been among the most ardent supporters of Mr Narendra Modi as Chief Minister and subsequently, as Prime Ministerial candidate. Their defection, like that of retired soldiers currently agitating for ‘one rank, one pay’ – also a strong supporter of the kind of leadership that Mr Narendra Modi personifies – is a significant event. For India’s political opposition, still seething from the drubbing they got in the last parliamentary elections of 2014, the likely unravelling of the coalition that paved Mr Modi’s way to power might galvanise them into a broad-based, anti-regime coalition. This, in India, is often the harbinger of great tectonic movements in the political structure, as those with long memories of the Nav Nirman Movement of Gujarat – that united several strands of India’s Left, Centre and Right against Indira Gandhi – might recall.

The second crucial point to be taken note of is the nature of the demands made by Mr Hardik Patel, the 22-year-old leader of the two-month-old agitation. In suggesting “Get rid of reservation or make everyone its slave” (*The Hindu*, 28 August 2015), the movement is harking back to an emotive and violent phase of the anti-reservation movement in Gujarat in

the 1980s. India's complex quota system, which seeks to balance the principle of merit in recruitment to public services and highly-prized places in medical, engineering and other branches of education with a preferential treatment to designated communities belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, is the cornerstone of institutionalised distributive justice that underpins Indian democracy. No government – least of all the current regime which cannot even pass crucial legislation through the parliament (see Vinod Rai, “The GST Imbrolio in India: Political and Economic Costs”, no. 286 – 24 August 2015) – can undertake such a major reform at short notice. Nor can Mr Modi – who has often characterised quotas and subsidies as the staple of the erstwhile governing coalition, the United Progressive Alliance's political style – change his political direction radically and extend the preferential treatment to the Patels at short notice.

In the third place, the scope, rapidity, intensity and reach of the anti-government movement in Gujarat where the Modi regime is reputed to have built a solid social base come across as astounding. Though the leadership of the movement has denied it, there is talk of substantial financial support from the diasporic Patel community. One can easily imagine at whom the twelve-member social media team and the two-million twitter messages (*The Hindu*, 28 August 2015) are aimed at. This cuts into the global support base of Mr Modi. Further, in the Patels, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has a challenging opponent. Normally order-loving, when mobilised, the Patels can make trenchant adversaries. As the core supporters who went on a rampage when Mr Hardik was arrested, the Patels, though normally content to pursue life within the broad framework of the law, have been ferocious agitators when the occasion demanded it. The Bardoli Satyagraha of Sardar Patel which had inspired Mahatma Gandhi, still remains a historical marker. (Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel were among the iconic leaders of India's struggle for freedom from the British colonial rule in the 20th Century.) That Mr Hardik has already expressed a preference for ‘Sardar Hardik’ as his *nom de guerre* – in preference to ‘Hardik Kejriwal’ or ‘Hardik Modi’ is an evocative throwback to the glory days of Gujarati movements. (Mr Arvind Kejriwal is widely seen as a maverick reformist in the current Indian political milieu, especially in the country's capital region.)

The fourth aspect of the Patel movement points towards the personal vulnerability of Mr Modi. With Mr Narendra Modi, India has a Prime Minister who has battled his way to the top of the political ladder starting at the bottom, and won a clear majority for the first time in the last 30 years. However, not many have registered the fact that Mr Modi belongs to the

backward castes – a class-status that he has used only selectively – and this is something that will come back to haunt him electorally. Will Mr Modi stand up and be counted among the backward classes and defend their ‘quota privileges’ from other contenders, or will he play the politics of quotas, or, in yet another scenario, will he be the statesman and play the constitutional card?

It is but natural in political transactions that supporters expect some form of payback after the electoral battle has been won. The two contentions by retired soldiers – ‘similar pensions for similar ranks, regardless of the length of service’ – and extension of the quota system to the Patels who claim to be part of the backward community, are two concrete, evocative and expensive demands that, in the short run, would be difficult for the regime to concede. The question is: why have these demands come up at the present juncture? I think, the timing of the two movements – that of retired soldiers and the Patels of Gujarat – issues from the same conjuncture. Mr Modi has spent his first year in office promoting trade and foreign relations – not great crowd-appeasers or vote-winners in India’s domestic politics which remains attached to the issues of ‘*roti, kapda aur makan*’ (food, clothing and shelter). The impatience of Mr Modi’s core constituencies with his regime might have been accelerated with the Prime Minister gradually posturing himself as a latter-day Vajpayee. (Atal Behari Vajpayee was the first BJP leader to have served as India’s Prime Minister.) Mr Modi’s recent speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort in New Delhi, from where India’s Prime Ministers send out their Independence Day messages, was grounded on the post-electoral slogan of ‘*sabka saath, sabka vikash*’ (taking everyone on board, keeping the welfare of all on the agenda). This could not have been very reassuring for his core constituencies, chafing at having been ignored. So they have struck, at a moment, when the regime is at its most vulnerable.

The implications of the Patel movement and its handling by the authorities have connotations that go far beyond India’s domestic politics. The security-action which resulted in multiple deaths from police firing (including one in police custody, an incident that the Gujarat High Court has already taken up for further investigation) and the mobilisation of the army are all significant developments for Gujarat which had boasted of being free from any significant collective violence during the past decade. The Gujarat model of orderly development was one of the key arches of the political structure that the Modi regime offered those willing to invest in India. This core constituency – both domestic and international capital – must now be having second thoughts about the resilience of the Modi regime and its problem-solving capacity.

The last point raises the issue of the manner of handling of the Patel movement that points at the state of governance in Gujarat. The Chief Minister's choice of strategy in terms of police action has been criticised as "lackadaisical and amateurish" by the opposition political parties. But more ominous is the denial of legitimacy to the Chief Minister Anandiben Patel, her credibility as the legitimate leader in place. Mr Hardik Patel ruled out talks with Chief Minister Anandiben Patel. "She has no power. She is in the chair, but somebody else is holding the power". When Ms Patel was sworn in to succeed Mr Modi as Chief Minister, many suspected an intention on the part of the Prime Minister to rule his home-base by remote control. That is a significant pointer towards the inability or unwillingness of the Modi leadership to institute power-sharing, an important principle of governance in India.

The best way forward for the Modi Government is to treat this situation with the utmost urgency and political dexterity, seeking to build a national consensus on the quota regime of India. The government could, for example, make the case that the status of the Patels as a backward community cannot be legally established through executive fiat. The Supreme Court has already turned down a similar move to designate the Jats as a backward community, based on their self-perception as under-privileged. A National Commission of jurists, specialists in the intricacies of the quota system and eminent leaders could also be a solution. But, in politics, how things are done is sometimes more important than what is actually done. The slightest suspicion that the government is only intending to buy time will nullify the impact of any such initiative. As such, the government might consider some additional initiatives to regain credibility by conceding on a few issues. A change of leadership in Gujarat might create just the right atmosphere for negotiations to begin.

The time for Mr Modi to decide, and send feelers to the Opposition to build consensus is urgent, for every day will feed into the attempts of the opposition Congress party to revive its KHAM strategy. KHAM – an acronym which stands for Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim – was a political coalition that had sustained Congress rule in Gujarat for a long time. The current difficulties should provide grist to the Congress mill when it comes to reviving the old coalition, by alerting some of its key elements to the possible loss of their privileges in the event of any concession to the Patels.

Historical precedents must send an alert signal to the current holders of power in Delhi. The downfall of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who had won two great successive electoral battles – the Parliamentary Elections of 1971 and the Assembly Elections in several States in 1972,

riding the euphoria of India's convincing victory over Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh war – had started with her inept handling of the 1974 nation-wide Railwaymen's strike. This was followed by the Nav Nirman Movement in Gujarat which spread to Bihar; under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan who united the two movements, it moved the action to Delhi, eventually leading to the declaration of Internal Emergency. That Mr Nitish Kumar, the current Chief Minister of Bihar, has already extended his support to the Patels – or that Mr Hardik Patel makes his speeches in Hindi and not his native Gujarati – show the national potential of the movement. The Bihar Assembly elections of 2016 – a key battle for the BJP – holds a great potential for building an all-party coalition, with the momentum to spread nation-wide. All the necessary ingredients of such a movement are already there, waiting for a credible leader to mobilise them into an effective fighting machine.

The national leadership of the BJP is in a double bind. It cannot appease the Patels without alienating some of the other backward class communities, in Gujarat as well as in the other parts of India where similar demands are present in an embryonic state. Besides, as one can gather from the tone and style of Mr Hardik Patel, the BJP's ageing leadership finds itself dealing with a new, youthful crop of leaders, tech-savvy and focussed more on jobs and livelihood concerns, than symbols or political power. In the final analysis, how the BJP handles the Gujarat crisis is a test of the political astuteness of Mr Modi, and, in a comparative perspective, the problem-solving capacity of Indian democracy.

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