

Community power: how the Patels hold sway over Gujarat

(Sardar Patel descended from the Jats of North India)



[Arvind J Bosmia](#) December 01, 2012, First Published: 18:11 IST(1/12/2012)

Sixty years ago, they were sharecroppers and known as Kunbis. Today, they are at the core of Gujarat's power establishment. They hold sway over politics, economy and the educated professions. The Patels--Leuvas as well as the Kadvas--owe their success to merit and empowerment brought about by tenancy reforms, which made them owners of land they had once tilled. The Kunbi Patels, to distinguish them from Leuva Patidar Patels of central Gujarat, descend from the Kurmis of north India. The Kurmis of north India still languish in the most backward class category despite two decades of reservations, but their Gujarati descendants have progressed without any quota.

The Patels' success starts after independence when tenancy reforms were earnestly implemented in Saurashtra, Kutch and the Bombay State, which then comprised parts of Gujarat. As the bulk of tenant farmers were Patels, the community's economic status changed overnight. Their numerical strength--they formed 24% and 27% of Gujarat's population--brought them representation in the legislature and posts in government ministries. They have never looked back since then.

By the mid-sixties their confidence was high and they started foraying into trade and industry and assuring higher education for their children. They established community trusts, which ran quality schools in villages and hostels for college students in cities. By the eighties, their children dominated merit lists of medical and engineering colleges. The Patels were now a 'forward community' and had all the trappings that came with it.

Success, however, brought the Patels into head-on clash with the votaries of reservation in professional courses and government jobs. They led the fight against Congress chief minister Madhavsinh Solanki in 1981 when his government extended reservation for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/STs) to post graduate medical courses. They again took on Solanki in February 1985, when he formulated 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and accelerated promotions for reserved category government employees through a roster system.

By this time the Patels felt marginalised inside the Congress party and many of them had migrated to BJP. The Congress hardly missed them because its KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) social combination had brought it a record-breaking 148 seats in the February 1985 assembly elections. Within weeks a violent anti-reservation agitation had transformed into Hindu-Muslim communal riots. Solanki had to go: his formidable majority in the assembly was of no help, for the Patels controlled the streets. This was also the beginning of BJP's ascent in Gujarat.

Since then no government has trifled with the Patels: instead their core interests are accommodated. There was a rule that only farmers living in a 7-km radius can buy a farmland, eliminating serious competition. This rule helped Patels as farmers. When Patels became big-time builders, this rule was removed so that they could buy farmlands anywhere in Gujarat, giving them a huge advantage over builders from non-farmer community.

Farm income constitutes a miniscule percentage of the community's income and farming is done by sharecropper tribals. Legally speaking, under the tenancy act, these tribals should become the owners of farmlands but the state government has not dared do this. Instead, the government of the late Chimanbhai Patel proposed a contract-farming scheme under which public limited companies could take up farming, eliminating the need for sharecroppers. The BJP is now fine-tuning land rules to accommodate the community's interests.

More and more members of the community--educated and prosperous--want to settle in cities and sell off the farmlands. The problem is that bulk of their land falls under a category called navi sharat, which makes the government a default co-owner. This land can be turned into non-agricultural only after paying huge premiums to the government. To ease this 'problem', the state government is going to bring down this premium, making the Patels deemed full owners.

The resource-scarce districts of Amreli and Bhavnagar and Kutch have exhibited even greater Patel dynamism: through migration to Ahmedabad, Surat and Mumbai and joining the diamond industry as cutters and polishers. Several Patels have become billionaire owners of factories and export houses, illiteracy no bar. The Patels of north Gujarat--Mehsana, Sabarkantha, Banaskantha and Patan districts, where the Kadva sub-caste dominates in numbers--cash crops like Jeera and Isabgul and migration to USA have become tools for prosperity.

The Leuva Patels and Kadva Patels identify with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Iron Man of India, but the Leuva Patel Patidar of Central Gujarat, to which the great man belonged, resent this expropriation and may even be derisive of them. Sardar Patel's community is of **Jat** descent and they were brought to Gujarat as Jaagirdars during Mughal rule. They claim the same status as the **jats** of Bharatpur and Alwar, with Kshatriya pretensions.

But this should hardly matter to the Patels' march ahead. In the seventies there was a joke about the community's success that ran like this: a Patel college student writes to his father for Rs. 100 to buy a log table. The father sends the boy a money order of Rs. 500 with clear instructions that he buy a table made of the best teak.

Keshubhai Patel is probably the most famous Patel in the present elections. Will his community back him against Narendra Modi? That will be known when voters are counted but whoever wins the elections the Patels will never lose.

(The writer is a political analyst based in Ahmedabad. The views expressed are personal.)

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