

## Column: Why you must support Hardik Patel

Sunil Jain | The Financial Express | August 27, 2015

<https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/why-you-must-support-hardik-patel/126063/>

***OBC quota: In his own way, like Rajiv Goswami, the Patel leader Hardik Patel is challenging the injustice of reservations.***

Prime Minister Narendra Modi did spectacularly well to diffuse the impact—at least on the surface—of caste/religious politics by playing the development/growth card in the last elections but, whether he likes it or not, he will have to deal with the tricky issue of caste-based reservations, thanks to Hardik Patel. How he deals with it will be interesting since, while addressing a rally which several lakhs of Patels thronged to—estimates vary between 5 and 10 lakh—the 21-year old Hardik not only threatened the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would lose next year’s elections in Gujarat if the Patels were not included in the OBC category, he also sought to make a pan-India coalition when he said ‘even Nitish Kumar is ours ... in Andhra Pradesh Chandrababu Naidu is ours ... in Gujarat, we have six MPs while in India we have 117 MPs’.

As for Gujarat chief minister Anandiben Patel’s argument that the Supreme Court had put a 50% cap on reservations—implying that no fresh reservations could be made—his reply is a quick ‘If Supreme Court can open at 3.30 in the morning for a terrorist, then why not for the youth, the future of this nation?’

The movement may well fizzle out if Modi-Anandiben are able to exploit various factions within it, but it is important to keep in mind that the youth are Modi’s most powerful supporters. This is the group that Rajiv Goswami—who tried to immolate himself in protesting against VP Singh’s Mandal politics—was appealing to; this is the group Hardik is appealing to. If an OBC with 85% marks can get into a top college, this ensures general category students with 95% marks get left out. Given this is taking place 68 years after Independence, and for a group like OBCs that cannot be considered either economically or socially backward unlike the SC/STs, it is hardly surprising Hardik should be able to garner the kind of support he is—while it is no one’s case the Patels are backward, several OBC groups who are entitled to reservations are quite rich as well. In any case, reservations for a group of people like the OBCs who, by all accounts, are the average Indian—in their incomes and ownership of durables—is quite bizarre and a glaring symbol of India’s vote-bank politics.

There are, of course, several determinants of income, ranging from occupation to location to the industry in which one is employed or even the prosperity of the state that one is living in, but it is education that

has, by far, the greatest impact on income levels. Indeed, with the spread of education—economic growth plays a large role also—the relative disparity in incomes across caste groups has also come down considerably. While some remains, it is not certain how much of this is caste-based and how much due to grooming—candidates who are more fluent in English, for instance, command a premium in the job market even though the degree they hold may be the same.

This column relies on two sets of data. The first, an all-India survey by NCAER for 2004-05 and the second by PRICE for 2013-14—PRICE is headed by Rajesh Shukla who, as chief statistician of NCAER, was responsible for the 2004-05 survey. Shukla's findings for 2004-05 were published in a book, *Caste in a Different Mould*, co-authored by this columnist.

Take the PRICE survey for 2013-14 first. The results of this are unambiguous, and explain why Hardik has the support he has. An SC household headed by an illiterate person earned R69,316 in 2013-14 and this rose to Rs 288,841 when the SC household was headed by a graduate (see graphic). Put another way, while an upper caste household headed by an illiterate earned more than a similarly uneducated SC household—generally seen as 'evidence' of discrimination! —it earned less than an SC household headed by someone who had studied for even a few years.

Comparing this result with the 2004-05 survey is interesting. In 2004-05, a household headed by an upper class graduate earned 1.5 times of what one headed by a graduate SC did. In 2013-14, this difference was down to 1.27 times, a substantial fall. For all categories of households, irrespective of whether they were headed by illiterates or graduates, an upper class household's income was 88% more than that of an SC one in 2004-05; by 2013-14, this difference was down to 44%.

None of this is to say other parameters don't matter. Of course they do. But by a lot less. When an SC household moves from self-employment in agriculture to a salaried job, its annual income in 2013-14 rose from Rs 155,258 to R276,748; for an upper caste, the rise was from Rs 208,561 to Rs 323,557—that is a rise of 1.6-1.8 times. When an SC household moves from a village in an under-developed rural area to a metro, its income rises from Rs 122,664 to R281,603; for an upper-caste household, Rs 153,485 to Rs 350,216—that is, by around 2.3 times. By comparison, when an SC or an upper caste moves from being illiterate to being a graduate, the hike in household income is 4.2 times. Education matters, and it matter the most compared to all other parameters.

This is precisely the sentiment that Hardik Patel is trying to capitalise on—that the youth have a chance to make good in this new India that values education above everything else, but this is a chance that

reservations are denying them. This is why, while 26.4% of all SC households had passed at least school in 2004-05, this rose to 33.3% in 2013-14; for STs, this rose from 23.8% to 27.9%, and from 38.8% for OBCs to 39.4% while it fell from 54.8% to 53.7% for upper caste households. Hardik is not being altruistic, he wants his community to also get this preferential treatment. But as more and more people challenge reservations, the higher the chances of it being scrapped.

Postscript: This column does not talk of the impact of reservations on the quality of teaching or the students the system churns out. Fixing this is critical if India is to achieve anywhere near its potential, but there is little point talking of that to a political class that seeks to reward only those who are potential voters. For those interested—Mr Modi?—India had 3 universities in the ARWU's list of Top 500 universities in the world in 2005 and this fell to just 1 in 2015. China's numbers rose from 18 to 44 in the same period.