

THE WEEK

Upper-caste Indians are demanding affirmative action for themselves. Would white Americans ever do the same?

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Imagine a day in America when privileged whites mount a movement to fight for affirmative action and racial quotas — for themselves.

That might seem farfetched, but without a major rethinking of these programs, such a scenario might simply be a bad economy and an opportunistic demagogue away.

For proof, consider India, where the affirmative action war (they call them "quotas" and "reservation" in India) has entered a new phase. No longer are upper-caste Hindus aggressively fighting to end India's 60-year-old quota regime in university admissions and government jobs. Instead, led by a 22-year-old upper-caste firebrand, Hardik Patel, they are now marching in the streets demanding a piece of the quota pie for themselves.

Reservation was enshrined in India's constitution to undo centuries of caste-based discrimination by giving India's lowest castes and disenfranchised tribes a leg up. It was supposed to sunset in 10 years. Instead, the whole system has taken on a complex life of its own.

In 1952, India's constitution set aside only 22.5 percent of seats and jobs for dalits or untouchables — who were at the absolute bottom of the caste ladder — and some very poor and "backward" tribes. But over time, vote-grubbing politicians expanded the size of these quotas, to 50-plus percent, and their scope, to encompass not only dalits but OBCs — "other backward castes" — a catchall category that includes anyone politicians say it does. Even super-elite engineering and medical schools that were once regarded as pure meritocracies and therefore off limits to quotas are now required to set aside about a quarter of their seats.

Reservation has always been a thorn in the side of upper-caste Hindus who resent that less qualified lower-caste candidates get substantial preferences in admissions. But when quotas were expanded to OBCs in the mid-1990s, some upper-caste students went so far as to publicly immolate themselves to protest the unfairness of the system and demand its end.

That, however, is not Hardik Patel's agenda. He wants the government to classify the Patels as a "backward" caste so that they too can benefit from quotas. Never mind that the Patels, famous in America for dominating the motel business, are neither "backward" nor poor — or, for that matter, underrepresented in high office. In India, they have historically been major landowners

and merchants who have had the market cornered in the diamond polishing business. Not all are rich, but very few live below the poverty line. And in Gujarat, Hardik's home state where 15 million of India's 270 million (Gujjar) Patels live, several chief ministers, including the current one, have been Patels.

Still, for the past two weeks, Hardik has brought Gujarat to a standstill with his protests. He himself was a mediocre student who barely scraped through college, he admits. But he says he's fighting on behalf of students like his sister, who was rejected from a medical school where her OBC friend was accepted despite lower scores. Indeed, stories about top-tier upper-caste candidates losing out to barely qualified lower-caste ones are an outrage staple in every upper-caste Indian household. Hence, Hardik's militant speeches urging upper-caste solidarity — and ostracism of caste traitors — have attracted millions of "respectable" people, prompting alarmed state authorities to impose curfews and (stupidly) detain him. That, of course, only added to his allure. He is now planning to take his crusade national and make common cause with other similarly disaffected upper castes in other states by marching across the country on the same path that Mahatma Gandhi walked to oust the British.

No doubt Gandhi, who fought for the rights of dalits even harder than he fought the British, would be spinning in his grave. But Hardik and his supporters are convinced that playing the victim and fighting for caste spoils over a merit-based system is the right thing to do.

So here's the question: Will America's anti-affirmative action movement (that has so far restricted itself to the laudable goal of pushing ballot initiatives to end race-based admissions) make a similar U-turn?

At first blush, it appears unlikely. For starters, there is far more white guilt in America about slavery than there is among India's upper castes about caste oppression. What's more, preferences in America have never quite reached the highs (or lows!) they have in India. Under-represented minorities might get a leg up in elite American universities, but they are required to meet minimum qualifications that very often lower-caste candidates in India don't. Most importantly, however, unlike India's constitution, America's legal traditions generally hew to the ideal of color-blindness offering those who oppose preferences legal redress that quota opponents in India don't have.

But what's ultimately fueling Hardik's movement is economic frustration. The upper castes in India were willing to tolerate quotas when the economic pie was growing fast enough that they didn't care about losing some opportunities due to a policy, even an unfair one, in the name of greater social justice. (Unfairness is a luxury good!)

But India's brief flirtation with economic liberalization in 1992 produced a revolution of rising expectations without private jobs and opportunities to fulfill them. Today India has a quota system that leaves many in the upper castes totally high and dry, and that seems utterly intolerable. (The irony here is that India's upper castes are doubling down on this system even as dalits, who experienced a significant economic and social improvement for the first time in India's history after liberalization, are recognizing that markets are more reliable means for progress than quotas, as noted by Cato Institute's Swaminathan Aiyar.)

America's privileged classes might be more benevolent and better off than India's. But the white working class in America is hardly immune to cracking under the competitive pressures of a globalized economy that constantly threatens its economic security and mobility. It is precisely such anxieties that Donald Trump has exploited to scapegoat immigrants and catapult himself to the top of the GOP's 2016 ranks. Is it so inconceivable then that Trump — or someone like him — could one day pull a Hardik and channel white economic anxieties and resentment over "reverse discrimination" into a demand for preferences for whites?

Quotas and racial preferences stem from a noble impulse to redress past oppression, no doubt. But they ultimately depend on majority buy-in, and are too vulnerable to being co-opted by powerful interests.

India shows that relying on neutral standards that apply equally to all to distribute opportunities might be a safer — and cleaner — way to promote social justice.