

Caste and politics in contemporary India -2

The ideology of varna system has its roots in hindudharmic scripture like the Rigveda, Manusmriti, and eventually Puranic and Dharmashastra literature. Those early times, varna was closely associated with function and ethical order and was primarily a recited standard rather than a day-to-day societal practice. Gradually, the intricately detailed and numerous jâti system had gone beyond the former and had become the main theme of the social division. During British rule, administrative practices like caste-based enumeration in censuses reified caste identities. This process often simplified and institutionalized diversity. Consequently, jâti distinctions hardened into more rigid, politically and socially salient categories. With independence, the Indian Constitution (1950) banned caste discrimination and introduced reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in legislatures, educational institutions, and government service. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, argued that without political representation, social emancipation would remain elusive. These institutional measures initially aimed to dismantle historic inequities and foster inclusive governance.

The term “vote bank” refers to a loyal, identity-based bloc—often caste-based—that reliably supports certain parties or candidates, typically in expectation of patronage or policy concessions. Sociologist M.N. Srinivas coined the term in the 1950s, noting how caste leaders could function as patrons over their communities. Over time, political parties institutionalized this strategy, using caste-based social calculations as tools for electoral gain.

It however, does not mean that politics is just a proxy or a blueprint of societal forces. It sets goal and priorities. It has a vision for change, a better social order than the existing for the larger good. Politics introduces new values such as equality and freedom; institutions such as political parties and trade unions; like abolition of system or untouchability undermines the traditional social order and value system. It shifts location of power in society from one group to another. Moreover competitive

politics like elections encourage several individuals from a group to aspire for political positions. They compete among themselves so the caste liberals also get divided. In the process caste cohesiveness gets weakened; and new formation takes place. Thus, not only caste influences politics but the political system also influences caste and induces in it. There is no one way traffic. Both influence each other. It is to be seen: to what extent and in which way politics attain its objective of social justice and to what extent it is influenced by prevailing social forces, particularly caste.