

## Cast and politics in contemporary India - 3

### # WHAT IS CASTE

Caste is an English translation of word Jati. As Indians we all know what is Jati because we all live a tag of Jati by birth. This applies to non-Hindus also. But meaning of Jati is not the same among the Hindus and non-Hindus. Caste does not have religious sanction among the non-Hindus. It is a social stratum. Among the Hindus, it is believed that one's Jati is due to one's Karma (deeds) in previous birth. This is not so among non-Hindus.

Meaning of Jati for oneself and for others is not always uniform and consistent among all. It varies from purpose to purpose for which the tag is used. Jati has a specific social meaning identity one's place in social order in village society where one interacts everyday with other members of the local community. For instance in a village in central Gujarat its inhabitant, say Mr. X identifies himself as Kshatriya, when he interacts with another villager of neighbouring locality who calls himself a Baniya for inter-dining purpose.

Mr. X would introduce himself as Kshatriya when he attends political party meeting at taluka or district place. He would call his caste as OBC in India (Other Backward Caste) when he visits government office to get loan or subsidy for government sponsored program or to get scholarship for his son. There is one meaning of Jati for matrimonial and kinship relationship, a different meaning for economic interaction and a third meaning for political purpose. One does not necessarily have the same meaning when one exercises vote for village panchayat than Lok

sabha elections.

Thus it is difficult to give precise meaning of caste applicable in all situations. It is partly a subjective category. Social construct of caste by actors and observers varies from context to context.