

By AMITA KANEKAR



The other day, I overheard a Goan parent complaining about how caste-based reservations were responsible for her offspring not getting admission into the MBBS degree course. 'All vote-bank politics,' she declared. 'These politicians need *their* votes, so merit has no place even in professional courses!'

Now, there is much ignorance reflected in this statement – from the inability to accept that one's child has performed badly, to the deeper misunderstanding that marks mean merit, when the truth is that marks in a caste-based society actually represent all the caste-based privilege one has accumulated over generations. That is the reason why 'general category' positions, as well as good jobs in the private sector, are monopolised by the dominant castes, who are less than 20% of the population – not because they are smarter, not even because they have higher marks, but because they come from a background of better education, housing, wealth, etc, along with the 'right' social networks.

But let's come to 'vote-bank politics', a term often used to criticise today's politics, and to explain the mess that Goa (and India) is. Why does Goa have slums? Vote-bank politics. Why is petty crime on the rise? Vote-bank politics. The BJP has used the term to brand the Congress a 'Muslim party', with Muslims as its vote-bank. After millions of people with Muslim names were recently removed from the Assam voters' list, Amit Shah declared that the BJP will throw out all 'Bangladeshis', unlike the Congress vote-bank politics.

So what is vote-bank politics? Users of the term explain it as politicians protecting wrongdoers in return for votes. But, far from being a wrongdoing, the caste-based reservations criticised by the Goan parent are a Constitutional requirement of educational institutions. For those who hate reservations, however – i.e. all dominant caste folks – they are indeed a wrongdoing. In fact, the term 'vote-bank politics' really has nothing to do with wrongdoings; it belongs to the dominant castes and is used for any step that helps or favours bahujans. The giant political favours to the Ambanis, Vijay Mallyas or Nirav Modis are never called vote-bank politics and are rarely condemned with such venom, even after these worthies are found to have committed huge crimes. In fact, when you talk about inequality in India, the first example that many dominant castes will give is – not the obscenely wealthy and their vice-like grip over the country's resources – but reservations!

For the dominant castes, informal settlements like Margao's Moti Dongor are examples of vote-bank politics. Such settlements exist, they say, only because of politicians who will do anything for votes; what is needed, thus, is a government unbothered about the votes of slumdweller, which would just demolish the houses as per the law. Everything would be

'nice and clean', if only the law was upheld.



Vote-Bank Politics: The Saving Grace of Indian Democracy?  
But does the law mean justice? Even environmental laws, which you might think would protect nature from the rapaciousness of big money, are actually used mostly against the poor. As when the SC ruled last month that more than a million forest-dwellers, among the most deprived of Indians, should be evicted from the forests, all for the good of wildlife. With elections around the corner, the central government immediately got this judgement overturned. So here we had an example of vote-bank politics and also one of the supposedly-blind majesty of the law. The hypocrisy of the central government can be seen in the fact that it almost simultaneously diluted the Forest Act, taking power over 'development' in the forests away from the gramsabhas.

In a Brahmanical society like ours, which does not guarantee the bare essentials of life, nor paying jobs, nor even education which might lead to paying jobs, and which is prone to routine and systemic violence against the poor, a lot of people are going to be illegal in some way or the other. If one can't afford the astronomical prices of decent houses, one has to live in informal ones, and thus be at the mercy of politicians who promise security in return for votes. When people face discrimination in access to any and every facility, they must use all the meagre connections and power they have, to survive. It's one thing to break the law for the sake of profit or luxury, but it is another to break the law in order to live a half-way decent life.

And one factor that helps people manage - barely so - has been the power of the vote. Most savarnas don't give any importance to voting. Because they rarely need their political representatives for anything - for, not only is the whole system designed to work for them, they have caste and class networks to fall back on, when necessary. In fact, democracy is a problem for the dominant castes, because it eats into their age-old privileges. That's why they can't bear even the lukewarm help that politicians offer the non-privileged. E.g. caste-based reservations are notoriously unimplemented in government jobs in Goa, and under-implemented in education. Reserved-category applicants face caste humiliation so regularly that many opt to apply in the general category. But no prizes for guessing who gets blamed for not just poorly-functioning government and professions, but even for keeping caste alive today! This is what is called having your cake and eating it too.

Vote-bank politics is actually all the democracy we have. But how long will even these pathetic crumbs last? Goans who have claimed their right to a Portuguese identity are already being branded as anti-nationals. Assam's new voters' list shows the BJP's strategies to deny the vote to those who would never vote for them, while creating fascist hatred against 'outsiders'. Similar things are happening in Bombay, but differently, with

slumdweller fighting against being forcibly relocated to the unhealthy industrial locality of Manul now finding their names deleted from the voters' list too (MumbaiMirror, Dec 2018). All this is only going to grow, under one pretext or the other. Democracy, after all, has never been one of India's strong points.

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