

Understanding Vote-Bank Politics - The Positive Side

What is the issue?

Despite the negative connotations, vote banks are favourable in terms of raising the bargaining power of individuals and groups.

What does 'vote-bank' mean?

- The term 'vote-bank politics' was first used in a research paper in 1955 by noted sociologist MN Srinivas.
- He used it in a very specific context to showcase the political influence exerted by a patron over a client.
- Today, the term denotes voting on the basis of, among other things, caste, sect, language and religion.

What is the present understanding?

- Almost all commentators, journalists, political parties, and columnists use the term 'vote bank' to showcase a type of politics.
- It generally connotes a politics of appeasement and the term is usually used negatively.
- Just as a market treats a person as a consumer, a political party or leader sees the masses merely as voters.
- The discourse on the subject reduces the identity of a citizen to a vote-bank and thereby it has come to assume a negative connotation.

What are the favourable aspects?

- A positive aspect is that vote bank politics increases the individual and collective bargaining power of the people vis-a-vis those in power.
- In vote-bank politics, a particular group is aligned on the basis of caste, sect, religion, or language.
- Significantly, this is recognised by the political parties.
- In effect, the chances of demands and aspirations getting fulfilled are much higher for a group that is recognised as a vote bank.
- For instance, persons with disabilities are not considered as a vote bank despite being 40-60 million in number.
- So, mere numerical strength does not matter as much as the recognition of the group as a vote bank by political parties.

- Similarly, women, despite accounting for almost half of the total population, are not considered as a separate vote bank.
- This is because, over the years, political parties have realised that women do not vote as a group or community for one single party.
- During elections, their identity as women takes a back seat while their identities of caste, religion and sect gain prominence.

Should vote banks be promoted then?

- It is argued that political parties often try and 'cultivate' vote banks in order to secure more votes. However, this is not always the case.
- Once a group or community starts feeling that it can be recognised as a vote bank, their collective strength increases manifold.
- Consequently, all political parties keep appeasing these groups to gain support and votes.
- In this way, vote banks serve the purpose of both the voters as well as political parties.
- Nevertheless, vote-bank politics is criticisable when it is misused to manipulate the demands of one group/s to polarise the society.
- Given its potential for misuse, vote-bank politics should be seen as an instrument to be deployed by citizens, and not by the political class for dissecting the society.

Source: BusinessLine