

The Micro-Politics of Vote Banks in Karnataka

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M N Srinivas coined the term “vote bank” in his 1955 essay, “The Social Structure of a Mysore Village”. Today the term – rooted in obligation and reciprocity – is used throughout India by scholars, media personnel and political parties to refer to the exchange of benefits and favours to citizens in return for their political support. Vote banks in Karnataka are reviewed for similarities and differences between the 1955 definition and modern operations in Indian electoral politics. While the structure of vote banks remains largely unaltered, three changes in Indian politics have shaped the meaning of obligation and reciprocity in modern vote banks: the rise of party competition, changes in identity politics, and economic growth and reform.

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The coming of elections gives fresh opportunities for the crystallisation of parties around patrons. Each patron may be said to have a ‘vote bank’ which he can place at the disposal of a provincial or national party for a consideration which is not mentioned but implied. The secret ballot helps to preserve the marginal affiliation of the marginal clients (Srinivas 1955).

The term vote bank – as first defined by M N Srinivas in 1955 – continues to resonate with the kinds of citizen-party linkages we observe in Indian politics today. What do we know about vote banks and how have they changed over 60 years? Below I review Srinivas’ definition and argue that the structure of vote banks – encompassing obligation and reciprocity – remains fundamentally unchanged since 1955. Changes in Indian politics, however, have shaped the meaning of obligation and reciprocity in modern vote banks. In 1955, vote banks provided one form of social protection to party constituencies. Vote banks were once used as a way of disseminating information about parties and elections to citizens, stabilising democratic elections, and redistributing income from elites to citizens. In the modern context, however, vote banks no longer serve these functions to the extent they once did. Rather, the defining terms of obligation and reciprocity in modern vote banks have evolved as India’s political and economic institutions have. Notably the rise of party competition, changes in identity politics, and economic growth have influenced the meaning of vote bank exchanges. Vote banks, once forms of social protection, are now symbolic forms of conspicuous consumption on the part of political parties to flaunt their prowess in electoral canvassing. Today vote banks continue, engrained in historic patron-client relations and sustained by party competition. The rules of the game underlying their social significance, however, have evolved with the evolution of India’s political system. Below I apply field research on electoral institutions in Karnataka (2005-09) to review how vote banks are different today than they were as defined by Srinivas in 1955. I question the motivations of parties to engage in vote banks and further question how national policies might be derived to curtail vote bank activities.

Why Vote Banks?

In 1955, Srinivas outlined a vote bank that constituted a configuration of three individuals or groups of individuals: The vote bank actors were (1) a village middle man, (2) a political party (namely, the Congress Party in Karnataka), and (3) local constituents. These different actors were connected by two overlapping patron-client ties. The first of the ties was the relationship between the political party and the local middle man. The middle man was usually a landowner of a higher caste who both worked for the

party and belonged to it. He could be the local village *jajman* (village headman) or simply a landowner with agency over groups of constituents. In 1955 Karnataka, Srinivas' setting, the Congress Party was the dominant party post-Independence and faced little-to-no opposition. One activity in which the party engaged to maintain power and political support was to align itself with local village leaders who would then assist the party to ensure it received votes of citizens under the local middleman's obligation.

The second patron-client relationship, concentric with the first, was that between the village middleman and local constituents. Local village leaders – often having other patron-client ties to the Congress Party's constituents in a village – would supply different kinds of benefits to citizens in exchange for their electoral loyalty. This was usually accomplished with different kinds of promises, favours and provision of different benefits such as grain or liquor (Wilkinson 2007). Parties could have been trying to maintain their constituent's loyalty to vote for them or to mobilise citizens to turnout and vote in the first place. The party developed vote banks through strategic networks with middlemen by supplying different kinds of material items and public services that were then delivered through the middleman to constituents. This activity equally acted to disseminate information about elections to a largely illiterate population.

In the reading of "The Social Structure of a Mysore Village", one must first ask what were the Congress Party's motivations for facilitating vote banks? Why did the party engage in the exchange of different benefits to citizens for political support in 1955 if they faced no opposition in the state? Second, are party motivations for vote banks different today? Are the kinds of obligation and reciprocity defined between parties and citizens different?

While Srinivas (1955) defines the vote bank, he gives little explanation for the Congress Party's motivations. Two explanations that arise from his essay are a sociological one and a materialist explanation. The first explanation, which Srinivas outlines by grouping the vote bank into his broader discussion of patron-client relations, is a distinctly sociological argument that Congress was seeking to fit into the existing structure of the social system, which was built largely on patron-client ties that leaders, like *jajmans*, engaged in with their villagers. This is a kind of "moral economy" explanation (Scott 1976). Srinivas says:

Every relationship between two human beings or groups is productive of 'obligation' and gives each of them a claim, however vague, on the other. If A once refused to do what B wants him to do, then B may sometime refuse to do what A wants him to do. A poor man can put others under his obligation only by giving his personal labour and skill. But a rich man has many devices: he can oblige others by lending them money, by letting them land, by speaking to an official on their behalf, or by performing acts of generosity. Thus a rich man is able to put many persons under his obligation. Every rich man tries to 'invest in people' so that he can, on occasion, turn his following to political or economic advantage (Srinivas 1955: 69).

In the moral economy of exchange between the patron and client there is an inherent inequality. Vote banks provide an avenue for the dissemination of a benefit through pre-existing inequalities such as those between landlord and tenant, master and servant, as well as creditor and debtor. The party's motivation for engaging in vote banks according to this argument was to gain

support by fitting into the existing social structure – utilising a pre-existing set of patron-client relations. Previous research suggests that Congress was doing this in Karnataka and other states well before independence (Manor 2007).

A second explanation which Srinivas highlights in outlining inequalities associated with vote banks is a distinctly rational and materialist one. The Congress Party engaged in vote banks to maintain agency and prevent any potential party opposition from arising in electoral politics. Srinivas was writing in the period immediately following India's Independence. There was an already strong and developed sense of national identity (Chatterjee 2004). No longer were lower caste groups, particularly dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), entirely bound in their sense of place in the vertical hierarchy of the caste system or in their material environments. In Karnataka many lower caste groups had discovered new freedoms associated with democracy, particularly to mobilise and to engage in making demands on the state. While this was happening earlier in Karnataka with lower caste groups in the 1920s and 1930s, the post-Independence period strengthened lower caste movements and agency within the state. Hence, the same time Srinivas defined vote bank terminology there were many changes underway in the existing structure of the social system in Mysore villages. Namely, the vertical caste hierarchy was shifting. The strengthening of different groups also meant the potential for different kinds of opposition to the Congress Party. By engaging in vote banks, Congress could eliminate such forms of opposition. Congress in 1955 likely engaged in vote banks to both fit into the existing social structure in securing votes and other expressions of political support and to maintain its political party dominance – some mix of buying votes and citizen turnout at polls and retaining political support of already loyal party members.

Vote Banks in 1955 and in 2009

Today vote banks remain an ever-present part of political party activities in Karnataka politics – especially in campaigning. However, are the vote banks the same as they were as defined by Srinivas in 1955? Are the kinds of actors the same, and how have motivations of political parties changed from Srinivas' definition 60 years ago?

In conducting field research, I have interviewed 50 political party leaders and elected officials to discuss the phenomenon of vote banks, and in 2007 I conducted a survey of 1,700 households in Bangalore rural and Bangalore urban districts to further explore the topic – to better understand, what kinds of benefits citizens receive and what influence these benefits have on a variety of different democratic outcomes: how citizens vote, how leaders represent citizens, and how vote banks more broadly effect the functioning of democratic institutions.¹ In what follows I outline different changes that have occurred in how vote banks operate based on outcomes of these research activities.

Similarities and Differences

Some similarities in vote banks persist between past and present. For instance, vote banks in Karnataka politics remain exchanges between elites and citizens and they still largely target poor

voters. Parties still select party middlemen. Outcomes of qualitative interviews suggest that Congress Party middlemen have much more agency over the vote bank activities in their localities than that of other parties, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As an Indian Administrative Service officer and senior organiser in the Congress Party said to me in an interview:

In general, our vote banks are not so systematically organised. Local members of the party rise and work for us in different localities. We are not so hierarchal in our organisation though we frequently work with wealthy business leaders and community organisers who show community leadership. There is a lot of criss-crossing relative to other parties. We advise local leaders on how to campaign on our behalf, but really, we cannot control how they campaign or what kind of benefits they choose to distribute (Interview, 25 February 2009).

This interview reflects sentiments shared by many leaders with whom I spoke, from the All India Congress Committee office in Delhi to the Queens Road Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee office in Bangalore. Dominant strategies of the Congress Party are to provide significant power to local party middlemen in organising communities to vote for Congress.

Comparatively, members of the BJP also have party middlemen. In interviews, however, they talked about their party leadership encompassing systems of organisation that are internally much more hierarchal, giving less agency to the role of party middleman, and greater agency to local political party offices. During interviews around the 2009 Lok Sabha elections with political party members in the BJP I found that there is vertical chain of decision-making in BJP vote banks. When I inquired about how decisions for the distribution of vote bank benefits are made internally within the BJP, one state leader and strategist for the BJP in Karnataka simply said to me,

Our party workers check in with me. We access data on our different constituencies and make choices from this data. With information we derive from a number of sources, we send our workers out to localities to tap vote banks. While we work with local community members, our campaigning strategy is party-to-household. Our workers go door-to-door (BJP party volunteer in Malleswaram, Interview, 22 April 2009).

Throughout interviews with different party members, it became inherently clear that the system of internal organisation across parties differs substantially – that the Congress Party organises itself in such a manner that gives more agency to local middlemen in organising party vote banks relative to the BJP, which relies much more on party workers and organises vertical systems of information in its vote bank strategies. While both parties engage in exchanges with middlemen, the importance of their organisational role differs.

Equally similar to the 1955 vote bank, the current exchange of benefits between parties and citizens continues to be denoted by inequalities. Rich parties supply to poor voters. In the 2007 survey I conducted of Bangalore citizens, 49% of 1,446 respondents report receiving some kind of a private vote bank benefit – a material gift from a political party to the citizen.² Respondents with less monthly income reported receiving vote bank benefits more than those with higher incomes (refer to Table 1).

For instance, among respondents who report earning less than Rs 1,000 per month, 22.95% report receiving vote bank benefits relative to only 2.68% who report not receiving these benefits

Table 1: Vote Bank Benefits Reported by Respondent's Monthly Household Income

	Below Rs 1,000	Rs 1,001- 5,000	Rs 5,001- 10,000	Rs 10,001- 15,000	Rs 15,001- 20,000	Above Rs 20,000	Total
Reported	165	335	156	31	21	11	719
%	(22.95)	(46.59)	(21.70)	(4.30)	(2.92)	(1.53)	(100)
Not Reported	20	299	236	104	47	41	747
%	(2.68)	(40.03)	(31.59)	(13.92)	(6.29)	(5.49)	(100)
Total	185	634	392	135	68	52	1446
	(12.62)	(43.25)	(26.74)	(9.21)	(4.64)	(3.55)	(100)

Pearson chi2= 198.2798, Pr = 0.000.

($p < 0.001$). These benefits include items such as private household consumer items (e.g., cycles, sewing machines, sarees, stainless steel *dabbas*), ration cards without qualifying for them, and other private benefits such as money for school fees. Regardless of which party's vote bank supplies the benefit, citizens with less monthly household income report receiving vote bank benefits at higher rates.

While there are many similarities between modern vote banks and the vote banks of 1955, there are many notable differences as well. Differences are fundamentally about how obligation and reciprocity are defined. Institutional and structural changes in electoral politics have resulted in changes in the cultural context for exchanges between parties and citizens since 1955. The rise of party competition in Karnataka, along with economic growth and the emergence of a westernised consumer driven society over the last 60 years have arguably shifted the way political parties relate to their constituencies. The kinds of obligations and loyalties citizens expect from parties have changed. The obligations bestowed upon party middlemen in their relationship to constituents are no longer about social protection, providing information about elections or poverty alleviation. The reciprocal ties expected of citizens for continued support of specific political parties are no longer enforced to the same degree they were when the Congress Party was the only party dominating state politics. Rather, the obligation of parties to citizens in today's vote banks is a symbolic one and not a literal one, an often glitzy form of conspicuous consumption on the part of political parties to flaunt their political clout in different localities in exchange for the support of their constituencies. The Election Commission has reinforced secret ballot voting over the years, so that citizens can receive vote bank benefits without necessarily voting for the party delivering the benefit. Parties supply benefits as gestures, often to their already loyal supporters. Vote bank benefits may assist in past objectives – sharing information with voters about upcoming elections and poverty alleviation – but the benefits themselves are no longer about social protection. They instead act as symbolic gestures, a way of communicating to low income citizens that the party cares about them and has their best interest in mind. These gestures are but one aspect of a larger spectacle that has evolved from the festival of Indian elections. Indian elections themselves, with their colourful campaign advertisements and canvassing, have evolved as a celebration of democracy and vote bank benefits are the party favours. With the secret ballot, citizens can accept vote bank benefits from any party and still vote their preferred choice. The expectation for reciprocation upon receiving a benefit is just as symbolic as the gesture of the vote bank benefit itself.

Benefits Received from Vote Banks

What kinds of benefits are we talking about when we talk about vote banks in Karnataka today? In this research vote bank benefits are grouped in two categories – programmatic and particularistic benefits. Programmatic benefits are defined here as benefits distributed by politicians and political parties through the use of government services or programmes – as opposed to directly providing goods or services from their own pockets – to gain political support.

Particularistic benefits are cash-transfers or in-kind gifts – outside of pre-existing government policies – to individuals or households with the intention of gaining their political support. These benefits take the form of direct exchange of tangible material gifts given by political leaders to households (Shaffer 2006). Examples include schemes supplying cycles, sewing machines, and illegally providing below poverty line (BPL) cards to citizens who do not qualify for them. These activities are sometimes classified as patronage politics and are one outcome of the vote bank (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980; Kitschelt 2000). It should be noted, however, that this is merely a method for categorising benefits. Parties can still deliver programmatic benefits in clientelistic patron-client ways.

Table 2: Particularistic and Programmatic Vote Bank Benefits (%)

	Mean
Particularistic benefits	
School supplies: study materials and/or money for school fees	45
Illegal provision or ration cards and BPL cards	33
Specialty items: sewing machines or cycles	36
Paid bribes	21
Special privileges	14
Programmatic benefits	
Programme and scholarships for children in government school	41
School repairs in government school	46
Legal provision of ration cards or BPL cards	41
Programmes and schemes to help reduce poverty	20
Assisted with special government schemes to minorities	45
Public toilets, taps, or water supply	39

N = 1662.

In total, 69.8% of respondents to the 2007 survey report having benefited from some kind of programmatic benefit and 53.31% report having benefited from particularistic inducements. Programmatic benefits in this context do not have the properties of public goods (being non-rivalrous and non-excludable). Rather, the benefits outlined in Table 2 range from publicly provided benefits such as public toilets in communities to more constituency service-related items such as assistance in the receipt of a BPL card or programmes and schemes to reduce poverty in one's community. These benefits, sometimes very small gestures, stand to play in important role in bridging citizens to local political parties. Findings from my research, however, suggest that the actual influence these kinds of benefits have on citizens' electoral choices has weakened as political institutions have evolved, notably as concepts of obligation and reciprocity have been redefined.

Explaining Modern Vote Banks

I outline three important reasons why concepts of obligation and reciprocity have changed in the context of today's vote

banks: (1) vote banks have become more competitive with the rise of party competition; (2) the targets of vote banks have changed as caste and identity politics have changed; and (3) vote banks have become much more materialistic with changes in Karnataka's economic structure.

One, the rise of party competition in Karnataka has given rise to an entirely new era of vote bank politics. No longer is the Congress Party the single player in vote bank activities and this has been the case since 1969. Since the first divisions of Congress, the party has been faced with competition from other parties, especially rise of the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] and BJP over the previous 15 years. As newer parties have challenged the Congress Party, they have also developed their own vote banks for appealing to constituents. Naturally, competition between parties, has led to competition between different party vote banks.³ In one interview with a BJP party worker in Bangalore, this issue was stated simply:

Of course we don't want to do it, but what to do? If Congress is giving sarees to citizens in Bangalore South, what do we do? Do we not give any benefit to offset theirs, or do we provide better benefits? (BJP worker, Interview, 20 April 2009).

Further data from the 2007 household survey suggests different parties now engage in different mixes of strategies and different kinds of vote bank activities. The dominant strategies between the BJP and Congress are different. Congress more often provides programmatic vote bank benefits that target communities, while the BJP engages in the delivery of particularistic vote bank benefits that target households. For instance, in looking at different kinds of activities, there are systematic differences between the kinds of vote bank benefits citizens in wards and villages report depending on whether they reside in wards dominated by the BJP or Congress. Households in BJP wards and villages report receiving more vote bank benefits overall than citizens in Congress and JD(S) localities. Households in BJP wards report receiving private benefits such as cash bribes and in-kind gifts. Households in Congress wards report receiving benefits far less than those in BJP districts, but among those who report vote

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bank benefits, they report receiving benefits that are publicly-provided to the community. In Congress districts 64.61% of citizens report receiving programmatic benefits relative to 35.39%

Table 3: Party Districts by Receipt of Vote Bank Benefits

	Particularistic Benefit Reported
Resides in ward/village where BJP is winning party	90.88
Resides in ward/village where Congress is winning party	44.17
Resides in ward/village where JD(S) is winning party	46.88
Total	53.31
	Programmatic Benefit Reported
Resides in ward/village where BJP is winning party	90.74
Resides in ward/village where Congress is winning party	64.61
Resides in ward/village where JD(S) is winning party	60.94
Total	69.83

of citizens in Congress districts who do not. This is higher than the percentage of households in Congress districts who report receiving particularistic benefits (44.17%).

There are notable systematic differences across the villages and wards dominated by different political parties. Citizens in Congress and JD(S) wards and villages report similar statistics with respect to the distribution of benefits. Citizens in districts in which the BJP was the winning party, however, report the highest receipt of both programmatic and particularistic benefits. Nearly 90% of respondents in wards and villages won by the BJP report programmatic and particularistic benefits relative to approximately 45% of respondents in Congress and JD(S) areas who report particularistic benefits and 60% in INC and JD(S) districts who report programmatic benefits.

Interviews I conducted with different party officials further suggest that the BJP is more involved in the direct distribution of benefits to households, especially to party loyalists. This finding differs substantially from the commonly held view that the Congress Party is the master of vote bank activities. Findings from substantive interviews as well as the 2007 household survey indicate that the BJP has mastered the art of vote bank politics. BJP workers and officials not only reported engaging in vote banks to obtain votes in Bangalore, but in many instances, the leaders with whom I interviewed shared stories in which they also discussed different kinds of benefits they provide – benefits not necessarily captured in standard surveys. For instance, during an interview with a party official of the BJP at his home in Jayanagar, a ward in Bangalore Urban, I was introduced to a friend of his who entered the room. The party official excitedly explained to me that his friend had come on official party business. She was working part-time with the party to help arrange marriages for BJP members in their locality. This is one example. I repeatedly encountered the same story line in interviews with both Congress and BJP officials. The BJP emphasised its household-to-household, door-to-door approach, while Congress emphasised that its vote bank is community based.

Two, another important change in vote banks between Srinivas' period and today has to do with further changes in the structure of caste and identity politics. Caste politics have changed substantially from the 1955 period in which caste associations dominated exchanges with the Congress Party. While caste

remains a dominant marker of identity in many of the same ways Srinivas defined (e.g., endogamy), the role of caste has changed from Srinivas' day. There have been increases in inter-caste marriage – forming new jatis and changing the existing caste structures (Ban and Rao 2007). Also the relationship between caste and occupation is far removed from that of Srinivas' day. Caste reservations and quotas have ensured that minorities, OBCs and dalits have more access to mobility in the social system – leading to more education, better jobs, economic prospects and social opportunity. In addition, the mobilisation of lower caste groups through a variety of different activities, from social movements to self-help groups of rural farming women in Karnataka, has led to increased agency for lower castes and changes in the role caste plays in day-to-day activities. This is further enhanced by the panchayat system, which has changed the structure of political life in rural areas and the role of caste and minority groups.

These changes have resulted in electoral changes among Karnataka's major caste groups. Some groups continue to systematically vote party lines, while other caste groups have changed. For instance, Vokkaligas are still more inclined to vote for Congress, while Lingayats increasingly go more for the BJP. This has led to shift in the caste hierarchy, and changes in how parties factor caste into their vote bank activities. As a senior party official in the BJP in Karnataka said to me:

The BJP has only one vote bank. The Congress party has three: one that caters to minorities, one that caters to SC/ST and then one that caters to the majority. In BJP we only cater to the majority. We do not waste our time. In Bangalore especially, minority votes always go to Congress. They can expect 20-25% of votes every election. We compete for the rest (Interview, 28 February 2009).

Interviews such as this one suggest that Congress maintains activities targeting minorities and lower caste groups. The BJP builds its vote banks around caste configurations of each village.⁴ Dynamic changes in identity politics have shaped the formation and importance of vote banks.

Three, a final notable difference between the vote bank of Srinivas' day and today is inherently linked to economic changes. Development and economic growth, especially since 1991, have changed the social structure of villages like Rampura, and most certainly transformed cities such as Bangalore and Mysore. Economic growth has improved the living standards of citizens, and the dependency for resources between elites and citizens has changed – more dramatically in cities like Bangalore than in rural areas like Rampura. Overall levels of dependency have fallen as has the social significance of vote banks. Economic growth has resulted in increased economic resources for parties. This coupled with the rise of party competition has spawned fundamental changes in the nature of electoral competitions. Political parties continue to maintain active vote banks, but merely as symbolic gestures. One Congress Party worker describes vote banks in the following manner:

In my opinion, vote bank benefits won't change the outcome of an election. Voters will take our party's gift, the other party's gift and so on. Then they go into the polling booth and vote however they wish. Voters do have minds and are less affected by these vote bank gifts. I know that many voters find these vote bank benefits – liquor, saris, and such – to

be very insulting. They vote their minds. We encourage voters to take benefits from all parties – why not? (Interview, 8 March 2009).

Benefits may enhance voter turnout. There is a positive correlation between those who vote and those who receive benefits. However, it is not clear if people vote because they receive vote bank benefits or people receive benefits because they vote. Correlation is not causation. What is clear is that behaviours relating to vote banks have changed as parties have become wealthier. The kinds of vote bank activities in which they engage have changed from a system of benefits that was once about forms of social protection to one of symbolism. This more importantly reflects how the meaning of obligation and reciprocity that have changed.

Wilkinson (2007) proposes a kind of modernisation hypothesis that there may be a teleological progression between the formal institutionalisation of vote banks and economic development. He argues that as economies develop in India, vote bank politics will transition from more particularistic forms of exchange between parties and citizens – activities which he views as more primitive and destructive to electoral institutions – to more programmatic and institutionalised kinds of electoral activities, such as pork-barrelling projects secured by politicians via legislative budget making processes. While this is a clever hypothesis, my data suggests otherwise. Outcomes of extensive survey research and qualitative interviews indicate that the Congress and BJP – Karnataka's two dominant political parties – have distinctly different strategies and structures to their vote banks and that these vote banks are engrained social institutions that reappear with each election. Economic changes have spurred social changes and lessened the substantive meaning of vote bank benefits, but development is not in any way leading to a reduction of their occurrence. In fact, as recent findings of cash transfers related to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme suggest –

development schemes, if not controlled, further open doors for rampant vote bank activities (Niehaus and Sukhtankar 2009). This is further highlighted in the work of Dipankar Gupta who discusses the withering of the Indian village and argues that vote banks sustain a system in which parties continue to “pay lip-service” to the causes of villages, mostly to poor farmers (Gupta 2005: 751).

Conclusions

Vote banks, first defined by Srinivas in 1955, are an inherent part of India's electoral and democratic system. This paper has reflected on similarities and differences of Karnataka vote banks between Srinivas' definition of vote banks and the present vote bank. While similarities exist in the structure of vote banks, the underlying concepts that govern vote bank interactions – obligation and reciprocity between parties and citizens – have changed over time. The way obligation and reciprocity are defined in today's vote banks is different than in 1955. I argue this can largely be explained by the evolution of India's political institutions and three elements that have shaped them: (1) Increased party competition in Karnataka politics; (2) changes in the structure of caste and identity politics; and (3) economic growth. These factors have led to changes in the existing social structure of day-to-day life in Karnataka and have enhanced electoral competition as well as changes in vote bank politics.

Vote banks were once an element of social protection in a built upon system of patron-client ties. It was the obligation of parties to show they represented the interests of their citizens by providing for them and looking after their needs, and in return, there was an expected reciprocity on behalf of citizens to support the party. The Congress Party in 1955 supplied needed benefits to their constituents via middlemen who were party loyalists. These systems of patronage were more than mere material exchanges

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1857

Essays from *Economic and Political Weekly*

A compilation of essays that were first published in the EPW in a special issue in May 2007. Held together with an introduction by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the essays – that range in theme and subject from historiography and military engagements, to the dalit *viranganas* idealised in traditional songs and the “unconventional protagonists” in mutiny novels – converge on one common goal: to enrich the existing national debates on the 1857 Uprising.

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to buy the votes of citizens (Srinivas 1955: 69). Rather they formed bonds between citizens and parties and an element of trust on the behalf of citizens to party middlemen. The exchanges demonstrated to citizens that the party would look after citizens' interests. They also informed citizens that elections were coming and provided often needed resources to households. In exchange citizens felt a loyalty to the party and its workers and therefore voted on its behalf. Economic and political developments, however, have changed the meanings of obligation and reciprocity in modern vote banks.

Today vote banks in India's political system are inefficient. Parties feel an obligation – mostly out of competitive demands of other parties and historical practices – to supply benefits. The return reciprocity from citizens is virtually non-existent. Given the enforcement of the secret ballot, citizens can accept gifts from all parties and still vote however they desire. Vote banks are social displays of wealth on the part of political parties to attract, primarily low-income citizens. They are gestures, historical remnants of a system in which the rules governing the game have changed.

The Election Commission has made the distribution of vote bank benefits illegal. Arguably, abolishing the continued actions of vote banks would reinforce the legitimacy of both the Election Commission and the parties engaging in these acts. But what is needed to bring about changes in the occurrence of vote bank activities? How is it possible to stop parties from canvassing with illegal benefits? Given the size and scope of their continued occurrence, eliminating vote banks will take a change in the cultural mindset of elections. Indian elections are festive occasions, in which vote banks are an expected part. Parties campaign using

benefits, and altering the campaigning activities of political parties and the social acceptance of these activities is a tremendous challenge facing India as its democratic institutions further develop (Varshney 1999).

In order to change the cultural frame of elections, two policies are needed. One, a large public campaign against vote banks is required to limit their occurrence. A public realisation of the costs of vote banks is necessary, one sufficient enough to demonstrate to those funding political party activities and the leaders of parties themselves that the costs of vote bank activities are far greater than their benefits. Two, a policy must be derived such that it sparks a social acceptance on behalf of parties not to compete using vote banks. Regulating and enforcing Election Commission's stated rules – instigating fines to parties for engaging in vote banks and to citizens who accept them – is perhaps the only option. Enforcement coupled with a rise in public awareness of the costs of vote banks is necessary for reform.

In the absence of these actions, vote banks will continue. We have observed in 60 years that vote banks have not halted or deeply impacted the development of India's electoral system. Rather, as electoral institutions have evolved, vote banks have too. Their substantive meaning has decreased but the activities have not dissipated. Findings of my fieldwork indicate that the continuation of vote banks does not stand to substantially influence how parties compete in India. But it seems only logical to question the efficiency of their costly and continued occurrence. In the festival of elections, the reoccurring celebration of a consolidated and ever-maturing democracy, is it really necessary for political parties to supply party favours to constituents – reminiscent tokens of their votes and support?

NOTES

- Survey data were collected that covered households in Bangalore, India in February and March 2007. The survey covers 1,700 households in 12 urban wards and eight rural villages of Bangalore. The study was implemented under the supervision of the Indian Marketing Research Bureau (IMRB). The sampling frame consists of 12 wards and eight villages. The sampling methodology is a simple random sample. Starting points were identified from electoral rolls within each ward so that the entire ward was covered (20 starting points in each ward and five in each village). Electoral rolls provide the enumeration units. Five "full" interviews were conducted around each starting point. The households around the starting point were identified using the "right-hand thumb rule" to eliminate interviewer bias in selecting households. Two households were skipped after each full interview. Not more than two blocks were covered in a complex for apartment blocks and not more than two floors in a block.
- There are 1,664 total respondents, of whom 53% report receiving some kind of particularistic benefit. Monthly income data is only available for 1,446 respondents (reported here).
- These findings are consistent with findings of Chhibber and Nooruddin (2004: 163), illustrate that: "Political parties in a multiparty system therefore need to make appeals to 'vote banks' and particular support groups. The appeals made by these parties will be less diffuse than in the two-party analogue. In other words, parties operating in a two-party system are more likely to provide public goods than those facing multiparty

competition who focus greater attention on distributing club goods." In other words, as party competition has increased, so have demands for delivering different kinds of benefits – notably keeping different vote banks content through delivery of special benefits to special interest groups and focusing less on the delivery of public goods.

- A 2004 EPW editorial pointed out in reviving Congress' old vote banks in failed hopes to win elections in that year: "The Congress is hoping, especially if triangular contests form the norm in most constituencies, to return to power on the back of its old vote bank – Vokkaligas, Muslims, Kurubas and adivasis, concentrated in the state's rural and undeveloped areas". Congress has a continued stronghold over minority vote banks in Karnataka, which has persisted through the most recent 2009 Lok Sabha elections (EPW Editorial, 1005).

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