

India's Politicians Keep it in the Family
Asia Sentinel
February 7, 2012
By Neeta Lal

Dynastic politics rule the day – across South Asia as well

Mayawati, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state with 200 million people, has often ridiculed Congress general secretary Rahul Gandhi, calling him yuvaraj, Hindi for 'prince'. The waspish reference is to the 41-year-old's bloodline -- the Nehru-Gandhi lineage that has dominated the Indian political matrix for over five generations.

That is despite the fact that the 56-year-old Mayawati, who publicly professes anathema for dynastic politics, has herself fielded more kin and friends of her party -- the Bahujan Samaj Party or BSP -- than Congress itself. Many of her favored ministers' relatives occupy high positions within the state

As the electoral battle in Uttar Pradesh, which goes to the polls in a series of staggered elections starting tomorrow -- gets increasingly clamorous, Rahul, son of the ruling UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, and the Congress party's future prime ministerial candidate, will be facing more such barbs spotlighting the politics of inheritance in the world's largest democracy.

But the lottery of birth has become a serious determinant of political fortunes in India to the point where the country is often referred to as "a democracy of dynasties, for dynasties and by dynasties". The Gandhi family should know. It is probably the world's oldest democratic dynasty, producing a team of grandfather-daughter-grandson prime ministers that has ruled India for 37 of its 65 years as an independent state.

However, to be fair to the Gandhis and Mayawati, nepotism is well entrenched in the other Indian political parties as well, both at the state and national level. This fact has become more evident as five Indian states -- UP, Goa, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Manipur -- head for assembly polls this month.

The culture of dynastic politics permeates other political parties as well. Ramji Suman, Samajwadi Party (SP) general secretary for instance, has procured a ticket for his son Ranjeet Singh from Jalesar in Etah while jailed former minister Amarmani Tripathi's son Amanmani is the SP candidate from Nautanwa in Maharajganj district.

The culture of nepotism is prevalent within the country's largest opposition party, the Hindu fundamentalist Bhartiya Janata Party, as well. Here, Lalji Tandon, party MP from Lucknow, one of the most significant political constituencies in the country, has secured a party ticket for his son Ashutosh Tandon from Lucknow North. Raj Kishore Verma, son-in-law of BJP spokesperson Ramnath Kovid, is a party candidate from Balamau in Hardoi. BJP MP Ramakant Yadav's wife Ranjana Yadav is contesting from Nizamabad and his son Arun Yadav from Jalalpur

In India's richest state of Punjab, dominated by the feudal Jat culture, politics has been a family affair since independence in 1947. Here, six powerful clans have presided over the state's political fortunes. These include wealthy, landed Jat families like the Patiala

Royals, Badals of Muktsar, Majithias of Amritsar, Kairons of Tarn Taran, Brars of Sarai Naga and Manns of Sangrur.

"Elections are merely a process of temporarily shifting the balance of power from one clan to the other. Inter-clan marriages have spawned political havens that ensure that no family is ever completely out of power," wrote Asit Jolly in India Today magazine.

Analysts say fielding the kin of party veterans gained momentum during 2009 Lok Sabha (lower house) elections when relatives of several leaders from across the political spectrum jumped into the fray.

"The dynastic equation serves everybody well," said sociologist Dr. Ashit Basu of Kolkata University. "The political party can cash in on a brand name while capitalizing on the political capital invested by the family in the state's administrative/PR machinery. The electorate also seems to be more at ease with a candidate whose ancestors have been familiar faces in the political arena."

It should be pointed out that India is far from alone. American scholar Stephen Hess, who wrote America's Political Dynasties, talked of American political dynasties coming "in all sizes and flavors." Access to the political system in most countries is costly in terms of money and only those who can afford the time, money, resources and have the requisite connections find an entry into what is often "an exclusive, if not closed club". "Political lineage buttressed by money helps facilitate that entry," Hess wrote.

Democratic purists would do well to remember that such blatant partisanship exists all over the world. South Asia has been perhaps the most famous for such dynasties. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal all have well-entrenched traditions. In Nepal, after the massacre of the entire royal family at the turn of the century, the king's brother took over. Prime Minister G.P. Koirala's two other brothers were prime ministers as well — the only instance of three brothers serving in such high elective office.

In Sri Lanka, Prime Minister Solomon Bandranaike's widow, Sirimavo Bandranaike, became prime minister followed by her daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga as president. Bangladesh too, has seen two redoubtable women rule -- Sheikh Hasina, daughter of erstwhile President Mujibur Rahman, and Khaleda Zia, widow of President Ziaur Rahman.

In Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was prime minister during 1971- 1977 while his daughter Benazir was elected for two stints during the 1990s, the first woman from a Muslim state to head a government. In the Philippines, families have dominated politics for decades. Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, Peron of Argentina, Hafez al Assad in Syria, Kim Il-Sung are some other examples from this near-monarchical tradition.

The election of George W. Bush as president eight years after his father left the White House, and Makiko Tanaka's induction as Japan's foreign minister some 25 years after her father was premier, prove that the First World isn't immune. Although the Kennedys were the most famous Western political dynasty, the Bush election was the second instance in American history of a father-son presidency.

In fact dynastic participation in the world's oldest democracy is quite common in

American state and local politics. Former U.S. vice president Al Gore's father was a senator while Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's son was a Cabinet official under Clinton and campaign manager for Gore.

As far as India is concerned, experts are hopeful that as Indians get increasingly enlightened about their democratic rights, they will hold their government accountable over corruption, economic performance, social benefits etc. "In such a scenario, bloodlines will matter less and will eventually pave way for something more openly contested and democratic," predicts Basu.

Till then, however, Indian political candidates will continue to flex their dynastic muscle.

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