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978-1-107-12344-1 - Democratic Dynasties: State, Party, and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics

Edited by Kanchan Chandra

Excerpt

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Prologue

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The term “democratic dynasties” in India usually brings to mind the Nehru-Gandhi family, whose members have occupied the Prime Ministership and led the Congress party for most of India’s independent history. But this book is about a different sort of political dynasty, less famous than the Nehru-Gandhis, but more important for understanding contemporary democratic politics in India.

One such dynasty is the Chavan family. Ashok Shankarrao Chavan was elected to India’s 2014 parliament from Nanded in the state of Maharashtra. He is the son of Shankarrao Bhavrao Chavan, who, in a political career that spanned almost five decades, was an MP (Member of Parliament), an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) from Maharashtra, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, and a cabinet minister in the national government.

The elder Chavan, initially trained as an advocate, won his first election, as an MLA, in 1957, a decade after India became democratic. When the younger Chavan came of age, his father, by then an MP, resigned his seat, to which his son succeeded in a by-election. The father did not exit politics when his son entered. He relocated to the indirectly elected upper house of the Indian parliament, and continued to hold ministerial positions in the national cabinet. His son followed in his footsteps in the meantime, eventually also becoming Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Shankarrao Bhavrao Chavan died in 2004. But other Chavan family members now active in electoral politics. Ashok Chavan’s wife, Ameeta Chavan, was elected to the legislative assembly in 2014. His now estranged brother-in-law Bhaskar Rao Patil has been a multiple-term MP from the family seat of Nanded.

The Chavans of Nanded and other families like them, such as the Reddys of Kadapa, the Naiks of Thane, the Yadavs of Saifai, the Abdullahs of Ganderbal, the Gogois of Kaliabor, the Dhumals of Hamirpur, or the Sinhas of Hazaribagh, are the type of dynasty that this book is about. These dynasties are found in virtually all parties, regions, and social groups. Their founders belong not to an old pre-democratic ruling class, but a new elite created through the democratic process. Their members occupy not just the top offices in legislatures and parties but also secondary and tertiary positions burrowed deep

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within. These families often have several members simultaneously active in politics, sprawling across representative institutions at multiple levels. And while they do not have the national and international visibility of the Nehru-Gandhis, many have strong local roots in their home constituencies. Some have acquired considerable influence in regional politics as well.

This book theorizes about the causes and consequences of these lesser but more important “democratic dynasties,” using original data on the composition of the lower, directly elected, house of the Indian parliament – the Lok Sabha or House of the People – between 2004 and 2014 (Chandra, Bohlken, and Chauchard 2014). The twenty-first century Lok Sabha has a substantial proportion of MPs with dynastic backgrounds (20% in 2004, 30% in 2009, and 22% in 2014), leading one observer to rechristen it the “Chamber of Princes” (Singh, 2013). What, we ask, are the characteristics of dynastic MPs in India and the families to which they belong? Why have these new dynasties taken such systemic root in India’s democracy? How does dynasticism vary across party, region, and social group and what explains this variation? And what does it mean for the norms and practice of democracy?

Our approach departs from history and biography, which have been for a long time the principal approaches to the study of political dynasties (see, e.g. Malhotra 2004), and statistics, which a handful of recent scholarly papers have used to test hypotheses about the causes or effects of dynastic politics (Dal Bo, Dal Bo, and Snyder 2009, Rossi 2009, Feinstein 2010, Querubin 2010, Querubin 2011, Chhibber 2011, Mendoza et al. 2012, Smith 2012, Van Coppenolle 2013, Asako et al. 2015). We try instead to establish basic facts about dynastic politics in India using simple descriptive tools (maps, charts, cross-tabulations) and then to interpret and theorize about these facts. Nothing we say here represents a conclusive test of a causal argument. Rather, ours is the prior task of identifying plausible relationships between dynastic and democratic politics, based on a contextual reading of the data. These relationships can then be tested in subsequent work, which, in the normal process of the cumulative research, may confirm some while disproving others.¹ Some of these relationships, as we will see, are complex and unexpected, or at least unnoticed, and will, we hope, stimulate new thinking about the relationship between dynasty and democracy.

The causes of dynastic politics in the Indian parliament lie, we argue, in the structure of two of India’s contemporary democratic institutions – the state and political parties. Two features of these institutions encourage the emergence of

¹ In separate work, we ourselves conduct tests of the arguments made here. Bohlken and Chandra (2014) design a statistical test of arguments linking parties to dynasticism in parliament, and Simon Chauchard has begun to use vignette-experiments to test arguments for why voters support dynastic candidates.

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dynastic politics in India – the large returns associated with state office and the organizational weakness of political parties. The returns associated with state office ensure that the families of politicians will want to enter politics. The organizational weakness of political parties ensures that they are likely to get tickets (party nominations) when they do. Once dynastic candidates obtain a party's endorsement, voters must determine whether or not to support them. But the choices that voters make, and therefore the role they play in producing electoral dynasticism, are circumscribed by the structures of state and party.

Building on this argument, we propose a rethinking of the simplistic view that dynastic politics is a violation of democracy. The primary objection to dynastic politics in a modern democracy is that it introduces a form of birth-based exclusion among elected representatives that is antithetical to democracy. There is no doubt that dynastic politics in India is indeed associated with this illegitimate form of exclusion: dynastic MPs in India, when assessed according to some standard indicators, are not better qualified for politics than their non-dynastic counterparts, but parties give them a leg up anyway simply on the strength of their family ties. Further, those who benefit most from this preference among parties for birth-based attributes are Hindu "Forward Caste" males. In this sense, dynastic politics in India is associated with a double form of exclusion; first by creating a birth-based ruling class, and second by amplifying the representation of dominant groups within this ruling class.

But paradoxically, dynastic politics has also had an inclusive effect. It has provided a channel for representation for members of social categories – women, Backward Castes, Muslims, and youth – which do not find, or have not found, a space in politics through normal channels. In this sense, dynastic ties in India have performed the same function as quotas for members of underrepresented social groups. It is significant that the two subaltern groups among which dynasticism among Indian MPs is highest – women and Muslims – do not have the benefit of quotas. Those subaltern groups – Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes – who have mandated representation through quotas are less dynastic. This does not mean that dynastic politics is a normatively desirable channel to bring about political inclusion. But in an unequal polity in which there are already high barriers to the entry of new groups into politics, dynastic politics has become an informal, second-best, means of overcoming some of them. Indeed, in such a society, not having dynastic ties can itself serve as a form of inequality (see Chapter 6, by Chauchard, in this volume).

India is by no means unique or even extreme among modern democracies in the fact or degree of dynastic politics in its national legislature. Some democracies have an institutionalized space for dynasties, in the form of a constitutional monarchy (e.g. in the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan, Bhutan, Thailand, Lesotho, or Morocco) or sub-national kingdoms (such as the Buganda in Uganda or Ashanti in Ghana) or a reserved space for aristocrats

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in the legislature (such as the House of Lords in the UK or the House of Chiefs in Zambia). In others, dynastic politicians have made their way into positions of power through the electoral process, even when no space is formally set aside for them.

India lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of democracies for which comparable data on dynasticism in the *legislature* are available. (We are not concerned in this book with dynasticism in the *executive*, which has not so far been studied in a comparative framework and may be associated with different patterns). This spectrum is bounded at one extreme by the Philippines, in which fully half of all Congresspersons in 2007 followed a relative into elected office (Querubin 2010, Mendoza 2012), and at the other by Canada, in which 3% of the House of Commons in 2011 was dynastic (Smith 2012). Japan, Iceland, and Ireland, in which between a third and a fourth of elected legislators in 2009 were dynastic, occupy the upper half of the spectrum along with India. Belgium, Israel, the United States, and Norway, in which the proportion of dynastic legislators ranged between 6% and 11% in a comparable time period, occupy the lower half (Dal Bo, Dal Bo, and Snyder 2009, Smith 2012).

Yet there is no basis in democratic theory for understanding the role of dynastic politics, or heredity more generally. The classic notion of democracy is that it is a political system in which both voters and representatives are conceptualized as *individuals*. A revisionist literature in political philosophy and political science has struggled to replace or at least augment this individualist notion with some role for collectivities, conceptualized as “groups” or “associations” or “factions” or “parties.” (Cohen and Wright 1995). This literature, initially concerned with “voluntary” collectivities based on shared views or interests, has expanded over time to address also the question of whether and how democracy can accommodate descent-based groups constituted on the basis of ethnicity (Lijphart 1977, Horowitz 1985, Kymlicka 1989, Taylor 1992, Kymlicka 1995). The *family*, however, is a quintessential descent-based group for which there has so far been no room in democratic theory. Remarkably, this is true even in anthropology, which is the principal discipline to theorize about kinship structures. Although there has been a burgeoning literature in recent years on the “anthropology of democracy,” hardly any work in this tradition links the family (as distinct from larger collectivities such as clan and tribe) to modern democracy.

But, while the family shares an affinity with other descent-based identities such as ethnic identities, it is distinct in several key respects. While ethnic identities can be constituted by a wide array of descent-based attributes (Chandra 2012), families are constituted by a single one: the existence of a proximate common ancestor. While ethnic identities are large-scale, impersonal, “imagined communities,” families are usually small-scale identities in

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which members are personally connected to each other. While membership in ethnic categories requires only the perception that an individual possesses the requisite descent-based attributes, membership in a family requires objective, biological ties. And while dynasties in India tend to be mono-ethnic, they can in principle also be cross-ethnic, especially in countries in which marriages across political families from different ethnic groups are common.² This means that the relationship of dynastic politics to democracy – and in particular the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion associated with it – may be distinct from that of ethnic or other descent-based identities and deserves to be theorized about independently. Indeed, we show here that dynastic and ethnic representation do not go together naturally: the extent to which they reinforce or undermine each other depends on the internal factional structure of political parties representing distinct ethnic groups. The ethnic groups that dominate the internal organizations of their parties are likely to be over-represented in the dynastic class relative to their representation in the legislature, while those ethnic groups that are weakly represented in internal party organizations are likely to be under-represented.

This book is a first cut at theorizing the relationship between dynastic and democratic politics. We propose an institutionalist theory of this relationship, showing that, and how, dynastic politics is a systematic *product* of modern democratic institutions: state and party. The variation in degree and effect of dynasticism in other countries may similarly be related to variation in the structures of their states and political parties. Dynastic politics may well not arise to the same degree in democracies in which, other things equal, state office offers smaller returns, or in which parties have stronger organizations. If it does, it may have a different effect on democratic politics.

The arguments we make in this book run counter to the suggestion, heard frequently in the media and occasionally in the social sciences, that dynasticism in India reflects some cultural value unique to Indian society, such as the acceptance of an association between birth and occupation, or of hierarchy, as natural. This essentialist argument is reflected, for example, in former BBC journalist Mark Tully's approving view that India's family values distinguish it from "the West." In his words, "It is India's strong family traditions, so different to the nuclear families in the West, that justify dynasts in the eyes

² There are some examples of inter-ethnic marriages across political dynasties in India. For example, the families of the late Backward Caste leader Gopinath Munde and the late upper caste leader Pramod Mahajan are related by marriage. Sachin Pilot, a Congress leader from a Hindu Gurjar political family (his father is the late Congress leader Rajesh Pilot), is married to Sara Abdullah, descended from a Kashmiri Muslim political dynasty (her father is the National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah). But these inter-ethnic political dynasties are exceptions for the most part in the Indian case.

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of voters. In India, it's widely thought to be natural and acceptable for a father or a mother who has any form of power to want to hand it over to a son or a daughter (Tully 2012)." Recent work in cultural anthropology, which has suggested that in India, "hierarchy may form the basis for democratic governance," also supports a cultural essentialist interpretation of dynastic politics in India (Piliavsky 2014).

These views are not supported by the data. As we have seen, dynastic politics is alive and well in many modern democracies, including several in the so-called "West," each presumably distinct in their cultural features. And not all citizens in India, regardless of their attitudes towards family or hierarchy, support dynastic politics. If we take at face value the recent survey finding that 46% of voters prefer to vote for a candidate from a political family, we are still left with 54% who do not believe dynastic representation is necessarily natural or preferable (Vaishnav, Kapur, and Sircar 2014). These differences in attitudes are evident also when voters are interviewed individually. Commenting on the politically dominant Badal family at an election rally in Punjab during the 2014 elections, for example, one young man seemed to treat a connection between family and occupation in India as natural: "I come from a family of shopkeepers," he said, "Their career is politics. It's a one-family rule, yes, but that's how politics works in India (Mandhana 2014)." But several hundred kilometres away, in Rahul Gandhi's constituency of Amethi, another voter in the same election had a different view. He told a reporter from the *New York Times*: "I won't vote for someone simply because he has that surname." (Barry 2014)

When dynastic candidates now campaign in elections, furthermore, they are careful *not* to use hierarchy as a legitimizing principle (see Chapters 1 and 2 in this volume). Those who have resorted to hierarchical appeals in the past – what the Rudolphs term "vertical mobilization" – have found themselves on the losing side in elections (see Rudolph and Rudolph [Chapter 2], in this volume, and Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). Essentialist arguments also do not explain why dynastic representation in India has increased over time (Velasco 2014), or why the same parliamentary constituencies in India switch, as they so often do, between dynastic and non-dynastic MPs.

This is not to say that cultural norms and practices do not matter in some way to understanding the nature of dynastic politics in India. But the relationship between culture and dynastic politics may be a more complex one than the essentialist view suggests. Variation in cultural norms and practices may well help explain variation in the *shape* of dynastic politics when it arises, illuminating questions such as variation in the preponderance of male rather than female family members in politics, or in the role played by extended rather than nuclear family structures. Dynastic politics, in turn, may well also produce changes in these cultural norms and practices. For example, the role of

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dynastic ties in giving political representation to women may well in turn produce changes in the norms and structures of gender inequality within the family. Similarly, the benefits of having multiple family members concurrently in power may revive or reinforce a preference for extended over nuclear family structures, if it gives core family members reason to claim distant relatives as kin, or gives those distant relatives reason to stake a claim to kinship. Finally, dynastic politics can itself generate cultures of acceptance around it, normalizing by its very pervasiveness the idea that it is an acceptable form of politics in India.

At the broadest level, then, this book suggests a conceptualization of the relationship between democratic and dynastic politics, and the cultural norms and practices that support this relationship, as an interactive one. The degree and nature of these interactions may vary across democracies as the structure of their institutions vary. But getting away from simple dichotomies such as “democratic” and “dynastic” politics and thinking about the complex interactions between them is the first step in understanding the pervasive role that dynastic politics has come to play in modern day democracies.

In Chapter 1, the introduction to this volume, Kanchan Chandra proposes a conceptualization of dynastic politics as a modern and institutional phenomenon, describes the pervasiveness of dynastic MPs in the 2004–14 parliaments in India across party, region, gender, and ethnic groups, and lays out the arguments locating dynasticism in the structures of state and party, and linking it with both the reinforcement and violation of democratic norms and practices.

In Chapter 2, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph describe the encounter between the “old regime” dynasties – the princely rulers and *jagirdars* of pre-democratic India – and voters in India’s first democratic elections in 1952, showing how their adaptation to modern party structures, or lack of it, was important in explaining their subsequent electoral fortunes. Old regime dynasties, they argue, were “less prepared for the politics of the future” as a consequence of their indifference to party structures, and relatedly, the difficulty of adapting to the norms of participatory politics. But among the old order’s candidates, former courtiers who had learned to broker the demands of competing interests were more likely to succeed in the politics of the future than those who had not.

In Chapter 3, Francesca R. Jensenius relates dynastic representation to constituency-level characteristics. The chapter highlights two clear patterns. First, there is no overall systematic difference between constituencies that elect dynastic and non-dynastic politicians. This supports the argument advanced in this volume that dynastic politics in India is, in fact, a modern phenomenon, not particular to socio-economically backward constituencies. Second, there is indeed a systematic difference between constituencies that elect dynastic

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politicians with a *royal background* and dynastic politicians from non-royal families. MPs from royal families are much more likely to be elected from constituencies that are more rural, poorer, and with fewer literate voters. But, read in light of the previous chapter, even these “traditional” dynasties likely succeed where they do by appealing to voters in “modern” terms. And the small numbers of such MPs suggests that as India modernizes, the space for “traditional” dynasties has been shrinking, making way for their “modern” counterparts.

In Chapter 4, Adam Ziegfeld asks why some parties are more dynastic than others. Building on the suggestion that dynasticism in parliament is related in part to the organizational weakness of political parties, he explains the variation in dynasticism across parties by linking it to the absence of an impersonal procedure for ticket allocation in conjunction with the age of a party and its type of leadership. He argues that older parties, parties in which a single-leader wields autocratic control over a weak organization, and parties whose leaders are either dynasts or actively paving the way for family members to succeed them should exhibit higher levels of dynasticism than younger parties, parties in which more power is vested in the party organization, and parties whose leaders are neither dynasts nor laying the groundwork for their own dynastic succession.

In Chapter 5, Amrita Basu explains the paradox of low representation and high dynasticism among women MPs as a consequence in part of the under-representation of women in political parties. The under-representation of women in the internal organizational structures of political parties, she argues, biases parties against women in the candidate selection process. Dynastic ties can serve to counteract this bias. Within the context of structural barriers to the representation of women in the Indian parliament, then, Basu argues that dynastic ties have served to increase the power of a historically under-represented group.

In Chapter 6, Simon Chauchard similarly explains the low level of dynasticism among the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) as a consequence of their less dominant role in the executive of the main parties that return MPs from these categories to Delhi. The delayed accession of SC/ST politicians to top jobs, in turn, may have something to do with reservation policies. This argument suggests the uneasy conclusion that reservations may have curbed the emergence of strong leaders among members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that in turn prevents them from founding political dynasties. And in a political system whose features make the creation of political dynasties predictable, he argues, the relative dearth of SC/ST dynasties signals a form of persistent political inequity.

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In Chapter 7, Kanchan Chandra documents and explains a “Forward Caste” advantage in dynastic representation as a consequence of the intra-party politics that drive the ticket allocation process. “Forward Caste” led parties, such as the INC or BJP, naturally enough, favor co-ethnic (“Forward Caste”) dynasties in the allocation of tickets. But, paradoxically, subaltern-led parties such as the BSP or the SP or the DMK also favor “Forward Caste,” or ethnic outsider, dynasties because their leadership is more threatened by co-ethnic subaltern-caste dynasties. This means that the rate at which the inclusion of subaltern ethnic groups in parliament translates into inclusion in the dynastic class is mediated by the internal factional structure of India’s political parties. But, even though dynastic politics has benefited subaltern groups less than it has the “Forward Castes,” it may well have increased the degree of representation of subaltern groups beyond the level at which they would have been represented otherwise. Put in more general terms, this chapter suggests that the extent to which dynastic politics is accompanied by or reinforces patterns of ethnic inclusion depends on intra-party politics. This is a new contribution both to the literature on ethnic inclusion, which has focused largely on inter-party competition rather than intra-party politics, and to the literature on dynastic politics, which has not so far addressed the role either of ethnicity or intra-party politics in explaining dynasticism in modern democracies.

In Chapter 8, Anjali Bohlken shows that, if we take qualifications to mean political experience, dynastic MPs are not better qualified for politics than their non-dynastic counterparts – quite the opposite. Dynastic MPs are less likely to have acquired political experience at lower levels of government than non-dynastic MPs. But all dynasties are not equal. This “dynastic advantage” (i.e. the ability of dynastic ties to serve as a substitute for political experience at lower levels of government) belongs mainly to Hindu “Forward Caste” male MPs. It does not exist amongst Muslim and SC or ST MPs and exists only sometimes for women. Bohlken’s findings suggest that normative concerns about the degree to which dynasticism has produced a birth-based exclusion should be confined mainly to dynastic MPs from dominant groups and less to dynastic MPs from subaltern groups, more of whom have had, on average, to supplement the accident of birth with acquired political experience.

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