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**Mudasir Bashir Bhat**  
Research Scholar (Ph.D.),  
Department of Political  
Science, MANUU, Hyderabad,  
Telangana, India

## Dynastic politics and the democratic deficit in India

**Mudasir Bashir Bhat**

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### Abstract

Dynastic politics prevails across the countries of the world. Post world II, the world witnessed the emergence of new nation-states. Most of these countries opted for a democratic form of government as against the experience of monarchical/autocratic rule. Despite such precedence, the countries have witnessed a surge of elite classes like dynastic politicians. Their familial inheritance of political capital, like name recognition, political connections, financial resources, etc., yields them an electoral advantage over non-dynasts. The trend questions the ideals of democracy, like political equality. It also raises concerns about the popular representation in democracies because of the privileged treatment given to a particular class of people for their familial background. In an urge to win elections, political parties prefer and nominate them over others for contesting elections. India is among the largest democracies in the world and manifests a dynastic character. The Political parties across the Indian state have dynastic lineages, whether at the national or regional, or local levels. The paper will highlight the persistence and dominance of such dynastic families across India's political parties, questioning its representational aspect. It would also highlight the deficit caused by the practice of dynastic politics.

**Keywords:** Dynastic politics, political capital, elitism, popular representation, and democratic deficit

### Introduction

Politics is an all-encompassing phenomenon that continues to affect people's lives. Pericles (Greek statesman) rightly put it, "Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you" (Pericles Quotes (Author of Plutarch's Lives, Volume 1), N.D.). Politics is an inevitable reality that touches upon the lives of every human being. It is a public affair that encircles everyone within its ambit. Human history has, however, witnessed that there has been the monopoly of few in this public affair. Earlier, it was the privilege of a few people, usually monarchs, who wielded the power of politics. They were the supreme authority deciding the fate of the people. But with the advancement and enlightenment in the world, human lives got revolutionised. Every sphere of humans got modified, including the political one. The earlier monolithic centres of power were challenged and rendered insignificant by democratic forms of government. Democratic governments ensure openness, allowing everyone sharing public life to be at the helm of affairs. However, when we look into democratic regimes worldwide, we find that different elite groups have hijacked the scene of power. Democracy, believed to be a public affair, has been captivated or revolves around a few influential individuals. It has hatched its centres of power in the shape of elite classes that continue to occupy the power seat. Dynastic politicians happen to be one such elite class. They could be seen prevailing across the democracies of the world. Their prevalence goes against the ideals of democratic equality. Because of their birth into a particular family, they have an electoral advantage over the common people.

Political parties, like dynastic politicians, have been instrumental in the growth and sustenance of these elite classes. They have been key agencies for dynasties to enter into politics. During the time of elections, political parties nominate candidates to contest on the party's behalf. In allocating tickets, they prefer candidates likely to emerge victorious. Dynastic candidates with political capital like name recognition, finance, political network, etc., will likely influence voters' choices. Keeping this in view, most parties select and nominate dynasts to contest elections. The practice leads to the proliferation of dynasts and certainly questions the democratic practices followed by the political parties.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Mudasir Bashir Bhat**  
Research Scholar (Ph.D.),  
Department of Political  
Science, MANUU, Hyderabad,  
Telangana, India

Be that as it may, Indian politics has witnessed many non-democratic regimes which ruled the state since time immemorial. After it gained independence from British rule in 1947, it adopted a democratic form of government. India's founders aspired for a democratic state against the previous experience of surviving under dynastic regimes. They adhered to the democratic ideal of political equality. Despite the such commitment, we could find that the politics of the Indian state has remained tolerant of many dynastic families. They remain at the helm of affairs even under the democratic setup. Such a tradition of dynastic politics put a question mark on the democratic ideal of political equality. This practice of dynastic politics is prevalent across the political parties in India, whether at the national, regional, or local level. In some, the number may be less, while in others, it may be huge. However, dynastic politics could be seen prevailing across political parties in India. The present study will highlight the persistence of these dynasties. It raises speculations over the representational aspect of democracy and questions the role of political parties that not only led to the proliferation of such dynasts but is also responsible for the democratic deficit.

**Dynastic Politics and political parties in India**

India is a multiparty democracy where numerous political parties contest elections. In the initial period of democratic consolidation in India, a single political party was dominant, i.e., congress, which Rajni Kothari has termed the "Congress system" (Kothari, 2012). The party's dominance started to erode as numerous other parties were evolving and growing their influence by challenging the hegemony of the congress party, particularly after 1967. These parties serve as gatekeepers who provide the electorate with a list of candidates among whom they could vote anybody to power. The parties have a key role so far as the selection and nomination of candidates for elections are concerned. While selecting and nominating candidates to contest elections, political parties extend their support to dynastic candidates by paving the way for their nomination. If we analyse the composition of the parties, we would observe the presence of dynastic politicians. The tradition of dynastic politics in Indian political parties started with the Congress party, but most political parties exhibit dynastic character as of now. The table below shows that 30% of current MPs in parliament are dynastic and come from different national and state parties. It also highlights that national parties in India have more dynastic candidates when compared to State parties.

**Table 1:** Percentage of dynastic MPs in 2019 Indian parliament.

			The Dynast MPs			
			State	No. Dynasts	No. MPs	% Dynasts
<b>National Parties field more dynasts: 27%</b> (227 dynasts among 856 candidates) National Parties  <b>12%</b> (162 dynasts among 1333 candidates) State parties			Andaman & Nicobar	1	1	100%
			Andhra Pradesh	9	25	36%
			Arunachal Pradesh	1	2	50%
			Assam	3	14	21%
			Bihar	17	40	43%
			Chandigarh	0	1	0%
			Chhattisgarh	2	11	18%
			Dadra Nagar & Haveli	0	1	0%
			Daman & Diu	0	0	0%
			Delhi	2	7	29%
			Goa	0	2	0%
			Gujarat	4	26	15%
			Haryana	3	10	30%
			Himachal Pradesh	1	4	25%
<b>State by State</b>			Jammu & Kashmir	1	6	17%
State	National parties	State-based parties	Jharkhand	4	14	29%
Andhra	16%	28%	Karnataka	11	28	39%
Assam	25%	0%	Kerala	3	20	15%
Bihar	58%	14%	Lakshadweep	0	1	0%
Chhattisgarh	27%	0%	Madhya Pradesh	6	29	21%
Delhi	29%	0%	Maharashtra	20	48	42%
Gujarat	13%	0%	Manipur	0	2	0%
Haryana	50%	5%	Meghalaya	1	2	50%
Himachal	25%	0%	Mizoram	0	1	0%
J&K	27%	8%	Nagaland	0	1	0%
Jharkhand	25%	14%	Odisha	7	21	33%
Karnataka	35%	13%	Pondicherry	0	1	0%
Kerala	13%	8%	Punjab	8	13	62%
MP	24%	2%	Rajasthan	8	25	32%
Maharashtra	35%	19%	Sikkim	0	1	0%
Meghalaya	25%	100%	Tamil Nadu	14	38	37%
Odisha	33%	15%	Telangana	6	17	35%
Punjab	44%	22%	Tripura	0	2	0%
Rajasthan	33%	9%	Uttar Pradesh	22	80	28%
Tamil Nadu	36%	15%	Uttarakhand	1	5	20%
Telangana	32%	22%	West Bengal	7	42	17%
Uttar Pradesh	28%	18%	Total	162	542	30%
Uttarakhand	30%	0%				
West Bengal	10%	5%				

Source: (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2019)

Among the national parties, Congress remains the most dynastic, with 31% of its candidates belonging to the political family. Nevertheless, the BJP is also catching up with 22% of dynast candidates (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2019). The only parties which do not indulge in dynastic politics are the CPI and the CPI (M), where less than 5% of the candidates belonged to political families (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2019). Besides these national parties, when we observe and evaluate the state parties of India, we find that not only political families prevail across them but also occupy dominant positions in the party. Almost every state has dynastic politicians and dynastic parties. The table below shows the main political families across different parties in Indian states.

**Table 2:** Prominent political families across the states of India

Sr. No.	Name of the State/U.T	Notable Political families across different states in India
1	Jammu and Kashmir	Abdullah's and Muftis
2	Punjab	Badals
3	Haryana	Chautalas, Hoodas, Jindal's & Bishnois
4	Himachal Pradesh	Virbhadra Singh's family.
5	Delhi	Dikshits
6	Jharkhand	Soren's
7	Rajasthan	Scandia's and pilot family
8	Uttar Pradesh	Yadavs
9	Bihar	Yadavs
10	Uttarakhand	Bahugunas
11	Maharashtra	Thackeray's, Pawars
12	Northeast	Sangmas
13	Karnataka	Gowdas
14	Andhra Pradesh	NTR & YSR families
15	Tamil Nadu	Karunanidhis
16	Telangana	KCR
17	Assam	Ajmals and Gogois
18	Chhattisgarh	Jogis, Shukulas and Raman Singh's family
19	Madhya Pradesh	Scindias

When we discuss dynastic politics in India, the first family that comes to the limelight is the Nehru-Gandhi family of Congress. However, if we objectively analyse, as stated above in the table, almost all political parties, whether national or state, have the presence of political families. Even a party like the BJP, whose leadership has opposed the practice of dynastic politics, is home to many dynastic politicians ("BJP Says It Doesn't Believe in Dynastic Politics but Its List of Dynast Leaders Is Ever Growing," n.d.). The prevalence of dynastic politics casts a shadow over the representational aspect of democracy. Because of their name or birth in a particular family, the privileged few are in an advantageous position to get elected for political office.

### Dynastic politics and democratic deficit

The practice of dynastic politics could be found across democracies of the world. In some countries, its practice may be low, while in others, dynastic politics could be found at an accelerated rate. The tradition of Dynastic politics has been an old-age phenomenon. The monarchs were the centre of power. Their unchallenged authority and all-pervasive power led them to install their kin as their successor. It was natural that the off-springs of monarchs would succeed them in power. In today's world, monarchical regimes still exist, but post world war second,

most countries have preferred democratic forms of government. The newly emerged nation states following the ideals of democracy were supposed to form a government where everyone sharing the public life would have equal opportunity to be a part of the government. Nevertheless, when we come across these governments, we realize that mostly few dominating forces are at the centre of power. Dynastic politicians qualify as one such force among them. Dynastic politics in democracies ensure that a particular class of people would have an entitlement to the inheritance of power. It creates a kind of hegemony where a privileged class, because of their name and personal endowments, is given special preference in electoral nomination over common people. In doing so, political parties play a major role in the proliferation process of dynastic politics. It is they who select and nominate the candidates for elections. In this process, most of them go for the dynastic candidates for different reasons, as political capital dynasts possess in the shape of name recognition, political connections of the family, finance, etc., and dynastic candidates' winning chances in elections. The parties' nomination process is influenced by such endowments that dynastic candidates possess. Political parties, therefore, go for the dynastic candidates. Such a favour by political parties questions the credentials of democracy as the state is turned into the fiefdom of a particular family. It goes against the true spirit of democracy. Because of their family background, Dynasts have easy access to power compared to those who do not possess such endowments. Given the situation, dynasts are in a better position than non-dynasts in so far as the electoral advantages are concerned. It becomes evident that the decision of the parties making nominations for elections goes contrary to the principles of democracy, like equality of opportunity. Moreover, when candidates get elected through such a mechanism, it doubts the legitimacy of representational democracy. In a democratic country like India, dynastic politics is deeply rooted in the political parties. From the above two tables, it becomes quite evident how dynasty is embedded across the political parties in India. It highlights the lacunas in the democratic setup and questions its credibility. The trend of dynastic politics led to the perpetuation of an elite class that transcends generations. It may hamper the smooth inflow of capable meritorious candidates into politics. In a nutshell, Dynastic politics leads to factors that may prove fatal to democracy. Some of the apprehensions are as follows:

- 1. Inequality:** Dynastic politicians possess political capital like name recognition, financial resources, and political network already established by their family members, etc. While non-dynasts do not possess such advantages, thus giving dynasts an electoral advantage. It is akin to inequality.
- 2. Stillness in competition:** The practice of dynastic politics may prevent healthy electoral competition because the dynasts have easy access to power compared to common people. It discourages the entry of fresh blood into political activities.
- 3. Corruption:** When a particular class continues to be associated with the state office, which commands control over the state's resources. Corruption is possible because the prevalence of a particular class discourages the accountability of office bearers.
- 4. Elitism:** Dynastic politics leads to the perpetuation of a particular elite class. It, therefore, gives a serious blow

to the representational aspect of democracy—the prevalence and domination of a particular class over the rest.

In addition to these lacunas of dynastic politics in democracies, it has an upside. Dynastic politics could paradoxically play an ‘inclusive role’ (Chandra, 2016)<sup>[2]</sup>, by empowering a socially marginalized class like women, backward castes, etc. Women's political rights have been affected globally due to the patriarchal society we reside in. We often found no political reservation for women representatives in the parliament. Dynastic politics has mostly benefited male politicians, but in a country like India, it works as a quota system for women. It not only allows the inflow of women into politics but also assists them in rising to high ranks in politics.

Similarly, people from marginalised groups like backward castes find it hard to have political representation through normal channels. Dynastic politics make it easy and enables them to have political representation. This paradoxical inclusiveness does not normalise the practice of dynastic politics in democracies, but as Kanchan Chandra opined that “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” (Chandra, 2016)<sup>[2]</sup>. Despite the inclusive character of dynastic politics, we cannot ignore the deficit it creates in democracy. Even the women who enter the political field through dynastic channel act as pawns in the hands of male politicians. They may operate on the dictation of men who paved their way into politics. Thus it again quashes the credibility of representational democracy. Despite providing space to some marginalised groups, Dynastic politics cannot eliminate the deficiency it causes to representational democracy. It favours a particular class of people because of their inherited political endowments. People who believe in a meritocracy would oppose such privileged treatment. The tradition of dynastic politics led to a particular class's proliferation, persistence, and domination. When such is the tradition in democracies, it certainly highlights the deficit that democracies may endure.

### Conclusion

Dynastic politics is prevalent across the democracies in the world. People born into elite families exhibit advantages over those who do not. Democratic governments are ideally open to all. Everyone sharing the public has an opportunity to enter politics and contest elections. However, in reality, a particular dominant class always determines the political proceedings. Because of their endowments, these people are given privileged treatment by political parties compared to those who do not possess such ailments. They are in an advantageous position to have easy access to power compared to common people who must work hard to prove their metal. This position questions the ideals of democracy, like political equality. Such a trend also puts a question mark on the representational aspect of democracy. The tradition of dynastic politics empowers certain marginalised groups, like women, OBC's and other minorities, by ensuring their political representation. But when we look into the pros and cons of dynastic politics, it highlights the deficiency it could bring to the ideals of democracy, questioning its legitimacy. The paper has highlighted the

persistence of political families across the political parties in India. It shows that the politics of India has remained tolerant to many political families. The tradition of dynastic politics in India questions its representational aspect of democracy and highlights how it could lead to a democratic deficit.

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