

Lok Sabha elections 2024: How political families dominate India's discourse

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In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's principal poll metaphor, 'Mai Bhi Chowkidar' (I, too, am a watchman), paid rich dividends.



Rahul Gandhi, Tamil Nadu chief minister MK Satalin and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav.

In Lok Sabha elections, 2024, this allegory has changed to "[Mera Bharat, Mera Parivar](#)" (My India, My family).

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In early March, hitting out at the opposition INDIA alliance, after RJD's Lalu Prasad [mocked him](#) as a person who did not have a family, Modi rhetorically declared that the country's "140 crore people" were his family.

The sense of irony could not be more acute. In no other country do political families dominate the country's life stream, as they do in India.

"We are in the 75th anniversary of the nation and such politics is normal here. In India 'vatsalya' or family love is too strong. It exists in other parts of the world, but not as powerful as it is here. The only point to note is whether such selection precludes other good candidates or not," says MP Jawhar Sircar.

That's a good question to ask. The distribution of 2024 Lok Sabha party tickets, as the polls got underway on April 19, may prove merit in what Sircar says.

UP: 5 members of Akhilesh's family in poll fray

In UP, the crucible of Indian politics, five members of the [Akhilesh Yadav clan](#) have been given

Samajwadi Party (SP) tickets. From Firozabad, Akhilesh's cousin Akshay Yadav is a candidate, while Mainpuri goes to his wife Dimple Yadav. While uncle Shivpal Singh Yadav is fighting from Badaun, Azamgarh has another Akhilesh cousin, Dharmendra Yadav as the SP candidate.

Now comes news that Akhilesh Yadav, instead of his nephew, Tej Pratap Yadav, will contest from [Kannauj](#), after Tej's name had been announced on April 22. Tej Pratap is the grand nephew of SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav, and son-in-law of RJD leader, Lalu Prasad Yadav.

Filial associations and rivalries have reached such a pass that in one freak case, Thakur Nand Kishor Pundir, the Muzaffarnagar candidate from the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), his wife Kavita and his nephew Abhishek Pundir are contesting against each other, the latter two as independent candidates. The affidavits filed by the three bear the same address, house number and locality in Muzaffarnagar.

In Bihar, the [Rashtriya Janata Dal \(RJD\) has given tickets](#) to party president Lalu Prasad's daughters - Rohini Acharya and Misa Bharti. While Misa is contesting from Patliputra, Rohini is trying her luck from the Saran Lok Sabha constituency. This is in addition to Lalu's sons, Tejashwi and Tej Pratap, both of whom are MLAs.

While the Congress may have set the ball rolling with the Gandhi-Nehru clan ruling for several decades in Indian politics, far from opposing it, most political clans have welcomed the template with open arms, never mind the fiery eloquence.

Of course, when it comes to family matters, Tamil Nadu is in a league of its own. On April 19, the first phase of polling in the state, as many as 16 people from well-established political families contested the elections.

Topping the list is the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which has given tickets to six 'dynasts', including Kanimozhi Karunanidhi and Dayanidhi Maran, followed by the AIADMK and Congress who have nominated three such candidates each. BJP, MDMK, DMDK and PMK have fielded one candidate with known family backgrounds.

In neighbouring Karnataka, it's more of the same. All the three big parties, JD (S), Congress and the BJP, have nominated close to two dozen candidates with familial ties, despite elaborate claims about 'promoting youth and inclusivity'. The state's political landscape remains deeply rooted in family legacies, influencing candidate selections and voter support.

Typically, as in the rest of the country, politically entitled candidates in the state have cultivated a network of engagement with the public, leveraging educational institutions, healthcare facilities and cooperative societies to embed themselves within the community.

Staking its electoral fortunes on the bedrock of family legacies, the Congress in Karnataka has nominated a significant number of candidates from influential political lineages.

From the helm of AICC to several state ministers and MLAs, the party has tactically positioned kins of seasoned politicians to contest parliamentary seats. They include the offspring of six incumbent ministers and a former minister.

Karnataka Congress president, DK Shivakumar, defended his choice. "In my 40 years in politics, this is the first time that we have given tickets to the young, educated and women candidates," he told reporters.

‘Tickets to kin of ministers not dynastic politics’: Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah

Chief minister Siddaramaiah too rejected claims of dynastic politics, when he flatly told a press conference that "giving tickets to kin of ministers does not amount to dynastic politics." That's a

totally new spin.

Neighbouring Andhra Pradesh and Telangana present a clash of formidable political dynasties. Family members of two former chief ministers – late NT Rama Rao (NTR) and late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR) – are leading the four major political formations in the high-stakes battle.

The Telugu Desam (TD) founded by legendary actor-turned-politician NTR, has seen his family remain at the forefront of AP politics for four decades. Three generations of the family led the TD; one of them, Daggubati Purandeswari, daughter of NTR, now heads the BJP in the state. She is contesting from the Rajamahendravaram Lok Sabha constituency.

NTR's son Nandamuri Balakrishna, a popular actor, is seeking re-election from Hindupur on a TD ticket, a party led by NTR's son-in-law Nara Chandrababu Naidu, who in turn is grooming his son, Nara Lokesh, as his political successor, marking the third generation of the NTR family in the electoral fray. Lokesh is contesting from the Mangalagiri assembly seat. Another member of the NTR clan, Balakrishna's son-in-law M Sribharat, is the TD candidate from Visakhapatnam parliamentary constituency.

On the other side of the political spectrum is the family of late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, whose son YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, was sidelined by the Congress high command. Floating his YSR Congress (YSRC) party in 2010, Jagan swept to power in 2019.

However, as it occasionally happens, there was a fallout within the YSR family, with sister Sharmila floating the YSR Telangana party in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, which failed to make a mark. No problem. She recently joined the Congress and has been made the Andhra state party president. Claiming to be the real successor of YSR's vision, she is contesting the Kadapa Lok Sabha seat.

Faction-ridden Maharashtra is a bit more complicated, but nevertheless family-driven. Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) has declared the candidature of [Sunetra Pawar](#), wife of Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar, from the Baramati Lok Sabha seat, pitting her against sister-in-law and Sharad Pawar's daughter, Supriya Sule, from the Pawars' home turf.

[ALSO READ: 'Sunetra Pawar is like my mother': Supriya Sule slams BJP over Baramati battle](#)

In Kolhapur, the Congress has nominated 76-year-old Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj as the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) candidate against BJP's Chhatrapati Udayanraje Bhosale to contest from Satara. Both are descendants of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. So, even the great 15th century Maratha warrior king is not spared 21st century family dramas.

The tale of political dynasts acquires a different hue in Jammu and Kashmir, which they have traditionally dominated in the last seven decades. After more than five years of electoral wilderness in the erstwhile state, Jammu and Kashmir lit up with the elections for the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) at Kargil.

[ALSO READ: BJP not averse to dynastic politics, has problems with those who oppose it: Omar](#)

At that glittering event, Rahul Gandhi came to the desert on a bike tour; Omar Abdullah organised large gatherings, and the BJP made its efforts to sell its post-Article 370 interventions.

What set the grapevine going were pictures of Omar Abdullah flanked by his two sons on the political stage for the first time, an indicator that his law graduate sons, Zamir and Zahir, will eventually succeed their father, a tradition that Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) founder, Sheikh Abdullah set earlier in the 1980s.

Kashmir's political heavyweights have long been criticised for undermining 'democracy' through dynastic politics. Modi and the BJP have consistently accused the two families in Srinagar - Abdullah and Mufti - and the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty in Delhi of messing up Kashmir.

Points out Sircar, "It exists across political parties. Morarji Desai and Jyoti Basu were honest, but their sons were seen as being beneficiaries of their fathers' high offices."

The unsaid thumb rule is that the kind of monies and unaccountable hoarded wealth that politicians generate, it is not possible to involve outsiders. To provide for its safe keep, keeping it within the family is the surest option, with no questions asked.

45 BJP MPs have dynastic links

And what about the BJP, the prime motivator against dynastic politics? The party currently has 303 members in the Lok Sabha and 85 in the Rajya Sabha. According to one recent calculation, of these 388 - 45 MPs or around 11 percent - have dynastic linkages.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, plenty of BJP dynasts made their mark in the elections. They included Anurag Thakur, son of former Himachal Pradesh CM Prem Kumar Dhumal; Dushyant Singh, son of former Rajasthan CM Vasundhara Raje; B.Y. Raghavendra, son of four-time Karnataka CM B.S. Yediyurappa; Rajbir Singh, son of ex-UP CM Kalyan Singh; Pravesh Verma, son of former Delhi CM Sahib Singh Verma; Sanghamitra Maurya, daughter of UP cabinet minister Swami Prasad Maurya; Poonam Mahajan, daughter of late Union Minister Pramod Mahajan; Pritam Munde, daughter of late Union minister Gopinath Munde; Jayant Sinha, son of former Union minister Yashwant Sinha; and Varun Gandhi, son of BJP MP, Maneka Gandhi.

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, political theorist, and well-known Dalit rights activist, says, "Dynastic politics is part and parcel of RSS culture. When a sarsanghchalak (head) is appointed in the RSS, it is for life. The BJP and RSS traditionally backed principalities when India Gandhi abolished privy purses in the early 1970s. Today, they openly support candidates from former fiefdoms, mainly in Rajasthan and the MP."

"While it is true that dynastic politics was started by the Congress, they have undergone vast changes. They have been replaced by the BJP which has communalised capital, and the electoral bonds are the best example of this unholy politics-capital collaboration," he told this reporter.

Ilaiah reasons that regional parties in India are basically family parties and the tradition of dynasties will continue until India becomes a two or three-party nation like the USA and UK.

With six national parties and 57 state parties registered with the Election Commission as of March 2024 – not to mention 2,764 unrecognised political parties - that day seems a bridge too far.

Jawahar Sircar is quick to point out that politics is by no means the last refuge for nepotism. "It applies to other fields as well. Cinema and the arts, for instance," he says.

For the 950 million-plus voters who are electing a new government in the next few weeks, such truisms could be no more than cold comfort.