

Book Review: Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics edited by Kanchan Chandra

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Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics is a new edited volume from **Kanchan Chandra** which draws on original data from India to propose a rethinking of the view that dynastic politics is a violation of democracy, showing that it can also reinforce some aspects of democracy while hindering others. **Asad Abbasi** finds the book deceptively difficult and does not recommend it for casual readers. However, he writes that it does have a straightforward method of analysis which produces interesting conclusions.

This review was originally published on the [South Asia @ LSE blog](#).

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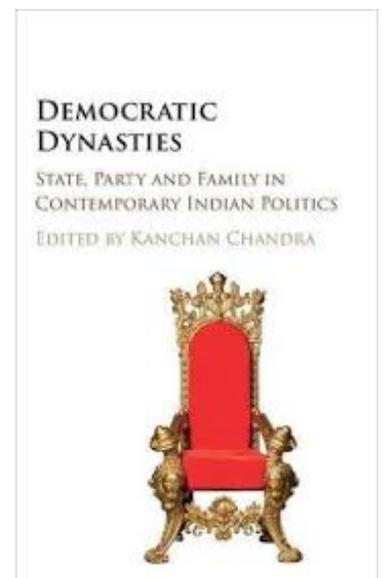
With a throne chair on the book cover and the title *Democratic Dynasties*, I expected an academic version of Game of Thrones: murder, revenge, conspiracy and blood. Instead, I got a lesson in game theory — political parties and politicians are both rational agents who are minimising risk, responding to incentives and on a constant quest for stability and maximum returns. Dynastic politics, it follows, is just a rational decision taken by politicians and political parties to get maximum returns in Indian democracy.

For politicians, politics offers a chance for increasing returns at every level (money, status, employment, perks), so those who are powerful get their families into politics too. But if politics turns out to be a bad investment, powerful families will also have members in local, national, legislative and private sectors to spread the risk. Even opposition within a family – brother vs brother or father vs son – is to diversify risk. In a zero sum game of politics, it's a win-win strategy. Every political move can be rationally analysed. It is not politics, it is political science.

Political parties are 'rational' institutions too. Parties support dynastic politics to a) to avoid 'defection' of party members to rival parties (38); b) to dissuade internal conflicts (41); and c) because in some cases (though not all), dynastic politics help strengthen local ties (262). With these party-based explanations, we find that weakly-organised political parties tend to be more dynastic than organised parties.

Alternative explanations for why parties are dynastic include party size, location and culture. These explanations are succinctly discussed, and then dismissed, by Adam Ziegfeld in Chapter Four because these alternative explanations cannot replace 'party-based accounts' (133).

Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics is deceptively difficult. There are so many parties, politicians and places. Each chapter has many characters, many tables and many maps; sometimes, data sets are not adequate enough to get complete answers. For example, it is difficult to know from aggregate data whether voters are voting for dynastic politicians or political parties (45-46). Basically, there is a lot of flicking backwards and forwards so it is not a book to read on your commute.



That said, what impressed me most is the simplicity of the argument and methodology of analysis, which is consistent in every chapter. The method of analysis is straightforward but also produces interesting conclusions.

A History of Dynasty in India

The political dynasties that exist in India are a product of democracy in India. Although many people will just think of the Nehru/Gandhi family when dynasty in India is mentioned, it is worth noting that in 2014 twenty per cent of Indian parliamentarians were dynastic (15). The first of these 'democratic dynasties' emerged sometime around the 1960s. In comparison, earlier dynasties, royal dynasts — the aristocratic Maharajas of the pre-democratic India (covered in Chapter Three) — made up only two per cent of Indian parliamentarians in 2014.



Image Credit: Mrs Indira Gandhi with the Hon'ble Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, photographed at Palam Aerodrome on 3 October 1949 ([Public.Resource.Org](https://www.publicresource.org/) CC BY 2.0)

The competition between the old aristocracy and new democrats is traced back to the 1952 Rajasthan election, which is covered in Chapter Two by Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph. A crucial insight from this chapter is how rivals learnt from each other's marketing tactics: the aristocracy learned how to make democratic appeals, while the Democrats learned how to draw on tradition and history to garner votes. These royal dynasties have continued to feed on low-income, unschooled rural communities ever since, but they face complete extinction with urbanisation.

However, the democratic dynasts are going strong, seemingly proving immune to modernisation. In India, data shows that people continue to prefer dynasts over non-dynasts. Why? Chandra admits that they don't yet have an answer to this important question.

Nor does the book give a clear picture on the pervasiveness of dynastic politics in India. Several chapters, by Amrita Basu, Simon Chauchard and Francesca R. Jensenius, suggest that dynastic politics is a big issue in Indian politics that needs due attention. But Chandra, in light of the same data, suggests that her previous work may have overestimated the prevalence of dynastic politics in India. Looking at 2004 to 2014, Chandra concludes that only five per cent of India's parliamentary constituencies have been 'continuously represented by dynastic MP' (49). I was therefore left uncertain as to whether dynastic politics is ascending or receding in India.

Who Does Dynastic Politics Benefit?

Dynastic politics has proved to be beneficial for politicians of all groups, although not in equal degree. It has been good for women (49; 147), Muslims (50), Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (205) but, above all, dynastic politics has favoured Forward Castes — already the most dominant group (Chapter Seven).

Forward Caste parties only favour Forward Caste members. For anyone familiar with Indian politics, this shouldn't be surprising, but Chandra gives an institutional reason for it: in a Forward Caste party, Forward Caste members are powerful and can grapple with party leadership for nomination. To avoid defection and internal politics, the party leadership obliges. However, what is surprising is that even in Non-Forward Caste parties (except Muslim parties), Forward Caste members get party preference. The reason: in Non-Forward Caste parties, Forward Caste members are innocuous and weak. To maintain stability and the status quo and to keep competition at bay, political parties prefer weak politicians over strong candidates.

In theory, dynastic politics is also a substitute for lack of experience at a local level. In practice, however, this substitution only helps female MPs and Forward Castes (240) according to Anjali Thomas Bohlken (Chapter Eight). Even here, we find that institutional logic invariably favours Forward Castes. No matter what, Forward Caste parties and politicians always seem to benefit. Is this why dynastic politics continues?

Does dynastic politics favour voters? In the case of women, yes. It is as a result of dynastic politics that more women have entered politics. And data shows that women MPs, dynastic or not, are generally beneficial to female citizens (147). Research on [Pakistani women parliamentarians](#) shows women MPs 'push pro women legislations' (Bari, 2010) and, despite some women MPs siding with party interests against 'women interests', they are still better at representing women's concerns than men. The main problem, according to Basu, is that there are still too few women MPs. India has a lower number of women MPs than Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh (145). Reservation seats for women will, Basu argue, correct this quantitative marasmus.

Basu's chapter leaves the reader thinking dynasties and reserved seats can be positive for underrepresented groups, but in Chapter Six Chauchard counters that reserved seats have in the long run hindered the political relevance of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), and there is no evidence to think that SC/ST dynasties will favour SC/ST people.

It is true that reservation seats have enabled more SC/ST politicians but it is also likely that reservation seats have maimed powerful candidates. The Hawk-Dove matrix can explain this phenomenon. Irrespective of being a Hawk or Dove, given a choice, the political party will choose to negotiate with the Dove. The same principle applies to constituents. Voters, irrespective of being a hawk or a dove, will choose to deal with a dove. Chauchard uses this logic and backs it up with evidence. Political parties, even the ones that claim to support SC/ST groups, prefer weak candidates (198). And constituents, due to the hierarchical caste system in India, also prefer weaker candidates (200). Thus, SC/ST candidates selected by party and voters are all 'dove' i.e. weak candidates.

But even if strong candidates win, they don't have legitimacy because candidates who emerge from reservation seats are seen by political parties and voters with a negative gaze (201) as if they somehow have not 'earned' their place at the table. All this translates into a weaker overall position for SC/ST politicians — symbolic designations and omission from cabinet positions. Only through a rise in the number of dynasties, Chauchard suggests, can SC/ST candidates achieve some temporary political equity (205).

Conclusion

Given the contrasting positions that Basu and Chauchard take on reservation seats, it would have been interesting to include some element of conversation between the two. A chapter linking dynastic politics and Muslim politicians would also have added another dimension to the book. Exploring in detail how and why Muslim dynasties have continued to exist would be appropriate reading, especially when tensions between Hindus and Muslims are simmering.

There are several editing mistakes, for example, Sujata Koirala is the female politician from Nepal, and not 'Sushila Koirala' (143), while Pakistan's year of independence is 1947 and not 1952 (145). Although these are harmless, they occasionally add to the confusion given the complexity of many of the narratives.

Warning for casual readers: The book is not for you. You need some understanding of the Indian political and cultural setting. Even then, not all the characters in the book and their stories will stay with you. But the thesis and the method of analysis — both fundamental in understanding dynastic politics — will.

Asad Abbasi has a Masters degree in Political Economy of Late Development from LSE. Currently, he is researching conceptual frameworks of development.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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