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The Impending Succession in Indian Politics: The Inevitability of a Gandhi-Nehru Scion

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Abstract:

Though dynasty politics has been a recurrent phenomena in Indian Politics, still, i claim here that Democracy in India will continue to be dominated by dynasty politics. The study on Dynasty politics reflects on few things. Firstly, Though Dynasty politics started as an unintended happening, yet it continues to be a permanent feature of Indian democracy. Secondly, Institutions continue to be manipulated for the larger interest of the dynasty. Yet it would not be entirely correct to state that Dynasty has hampered Democracy because it has been the Dynasty that have been able to provide an alternative power whenever Indian Politics have seen phases of turmoil.

Keywords: *Impending Succession, Gandhi/Nehru Scion, De-institutionalization, Elections, Democratization*

1. The Impending Succession in Indian Politics: The inevitability of a Gandhi-Nehru Scion

History repeats itself first as a tragedy and second as a farce, is a very well known dictum in the field of politics. Developments in Indian Politics has witnessed the same. Though dynasty politics has been a recurrent phenomena in Indian Politics, still, i claim here that Democracy in India will continue to be dominated by dynasty politics. Now moving to the question of why is Rahul Gandhi inevitable in Indian Politics has nothing to do with Rahul Gandhi as a person. In spite of the fact that he is not a very charismatic leader unlike his predecessors, the fact remains that Congress as a party still largely depends upon the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty to provide leadership to the party at large and without the dynasty the party is bound to be at a backseat in Indian Politics. However the roots of dynasty politics lies in the practices developed within the party itself. Although Sudipta kaviraj assumes that Nehru had no dynastic plans as such, but arrival of Indira Gandhi into Indian politics was a benchmark, whereby she began “de-institutionalizing” institutions in Indian Politics and flouting of rules became the order of the day culminating in the proclamation of Emergency in 1975 regarded as the darkest period in the history of post independent India.¹

The role of opposition in Indian Politics is also worth mentioning. Though India has seen several opposition parties coming to power at several times starting from Morarji Desai as the first non-Congress prime minister in the late 1970s yet the opposition in India even if they came to power could never establish itself as a force to reckon with. This gave the Congress party the time to revive itself inevitably in every circumstance.

After the death of Rajiv Gandhi, although the reins of power did not shift automatically to the dynasty. The period from 1991 is remarkable in Indian politics because there are many events of historical importance which have unfolded during this period. This period can be better understood by dividing it along two axis whereby events in this period unfolds within this axis. One axis represents the decline of one-party dominance system and the other represents the subsequent rise of regional political parties. During this period, the rise of regional political parties in the Indian politics coincided with the declining significance of the Congress in the Indian political sphere. This period is marked as ‘impending’ succession to implicate the succession which might take place with Rahul Gandhi coming to play a central role in the Congress party, in keeping with the trend of dynastic succession by this family. During 1991, there was wide expectation that Rajiv Gandhi might come back to power but was assassinated in Tamil Nadu. With the death of Rajiv Gandhi the hope that this dynasty would take over again after the V.P Singh government remained unfulfilled.

This phase is important for several reasons. The most important being the death of Rajiv Gandhi. The death of Rajiv Gandhi marked the end of a phase of dynastic succession since Sonia Gandhi - the wife of Rajiv Gandhi and current Chairperson of UPA - was unwilling to join politics then. As a result for the first time a person not belonging to the Gandhi/Nehru rose to the position of Prime Ministership from the Congress party. This period is also important for several other reasons, which Yogendra Yadav has aptly put as

¹ Kaviraj, Sudipta. 1986. Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics, EPW, Vol. 21, No.38/39, September

‘the coming of the three M’s, that is, Mandal, Masjid and Market’.² This period marked the formal opening up of the Indian markets to the forces of globalization, which was initiated by the Rajiv Gandhi government. This phase witnessed the completion of term by Narsimha Rao who was not a member of the dynasty. Rao was the first to complete full term by a non-dynastic leader from Congress. This phase is also important because of the rise of Sonia Gandhi to power after she formally joined Congress as party president in 1998. After she joined the party she initiated certain major changes to revive the party. Though initially she did not meet with much success her efforts were paid off in the 2004 and 2009 general elections. The Congress party which seemed to be in a state of disarray till then, suddenly revived under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. Therefore history has it that only a member of the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty can revive the party whenever the party is in disarray.

With the projection of Rahul Gandhi as the next heir apparent, the process of succession gains momentum, although time has not favoured Rahul Gandhi till now yet it appears that only as Rahul Gandhi sharpens his quality as a Leader the possibility arises that the party will resuscitate. What is important to note in the mean time is that, when on the one hand, there was no overarching issue in the 2009 elections which could have united an opposition against the UPA, the issue of corruption has acted as a strong impetus to act as a challenge in 2014 general elections initially and the oratorship of Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India which led to dismal performance of the Congress party.

Kanchan Chandra and Wamiq Umaira points out that the roots of these democratic dynasties lie in contesting elections. Unlike traditional aristocrats who are guaranteed their position by birth, these aristocrats must fight elections to obtain and maintain their offices. They also add that birth does not guarantee victory, there is every possibility that a candidate with dynastic roots lose. For example, the case of Ajeya Singh, the son of former Prime Minister V.P Singh. In the 2009 elections, Ajeya Singh fought elections from his father’s old constituency of Fatehpur. But with 1% of the votes which he polled, he did not make it even to the list of serious contenders. The same happened with Vibhakar Shashtri, the grandson of former Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, also in the running for the Fatehpur seat lost.³

Kanchan Chandra and Wamiq Umaira states, the first step lies in explaining why the family members of existing politicians choose to enter politics in present-day India. Newspaper accounts of election campaigns from the 1950’s, ‘60’s, ‘70s and ‘80s, do not show up cases of family centered campaigns as do newspapers describing the last two decades. They also suggest that the increasing returns associated with the state power in the 1990 onwards. As has been suggested by many scholars of Indian politics post-colonial India has historically been a “patronage-democracy” in which access to state office brings with it immense returns.

2. Conclusion

The study on Dynasty politics so far reflect on few things. Firstly, Though Dynasty politics started as an unintended happening, yet it continues to be a permanent feature of Indian democracy. Secondly, Institutions continue to be manipulated for the larger interest of the dynasty. Thirdly with the demise of one-party dominance system, rise of regional political parties have become inevitable. Fourthly, unless there is an effort towards democratization of party system, it is inevitable that dynasty politics will go.

When Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India, he made efforts towards the democratization of the Organization. No where there was a trace to be seen where he might have wanted his family to hold the reins of power forever. But situations turned out to be so after his death that Indira Gandhi was made the Prime Minister by a negative decision. Her ‘ideological indistinctiveness’ made the power-brokers within the Congress party feel that she would make a pawn to their fulfillment of political ambitions. But situations turned different as soon as she came to power. She initiated a process of de-institutionalization by which she formed a ‘pyramid’ where the apex of the party constituted of her dynasty.⁴

Thus when she became the Prime Minister of India, she did metonymically represent her father but her policies were quite different from her father. The second conclusion asserts that de-institutionalization and manipulation of institutions initiated by Indira Gandhi are here to stay for some time. Commenting on the style of working of Indira Gandhi, Henry C. Hart commented that Indira has de-institutionalized, but did not re-institutionalize the system. Zoya Hasan states that, under the regime of Indira Gandhi, the once robust Congress party’s roots withered and governance became less institutionalized, more personalized and centralized. She adds, the erosion of institutional arrangements was intimately bound up with the deinstitutionalization of the Congress party and the emergence of genuinely pluralist politics in the post-1977 period.⁵ The de-institutionalization process continues till today with the growing dependence of the Congress party on the Dynasty.

Dynastic politics are usually thought of as the antitheses of democratic politics. But there seems to be a causal link between the two. The systemic importance of dynastic ties in India is a product of democratic politics. Two features of Indian Democracy in particular encourage the emergence of dynastic politics – the large returns associated with state office, and the organizational weakness of political parties.⁶ Apart from BJP and the Left Organizations which have a clear ideology and a cadre-based organization around their ideology, other political parties do not have a clear ideology and therefore their organization structures are very weak.

² Yadav, Yogendra. 1999. Electoral politics in the time of change, India’s third electoral system, 1989-1999, EPW, Vol. 34, No.34-35, August 21- September 3rd

³ Kanchan Chandra and Wamiq Umaira: India’s Democratic Dynasties, Seminar 622, June 2011, pp 16

⁴ Hasan, Zoya. 2011. Parties and Party Politics in India, Oxford University Press

⁵ Zoya Hasan: Conflict, Pluralism and the Competitive Party System in India, Parties and Party Politics in India, Themes in Politics, OUP, pp 10-11

⁶ Kanchan Chandra and Wamiq Umaira: India’s Democratic Dynasties, Seminar 622, June 2011, pp 14.

Lastly, it is important to assert that, there has not been an effort towards democratization of the Congress party which makes it forever depend on the Gandhi/Nehru dynasty. In other words, it can be said that the re-institutionalization process has not started yet.

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