

**Kinship in Indian Politics:
Dynasties, nepotism and imagined families**

Francesca R. Jensenius¹

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¹ Associate Professor, University of Oslo, Senior Research Fellow, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. E-mail: f.r.jensenius@stv.uio.no. I am grateful to Kristin Haugevik, Nina Græger, Iver Neumann, and Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygeson for comments on previous versions of this chapters. The chapter also benefitted from discussions with Deep Datta-Ray, Pradeep Chhibber, Milan Vaishnav, and Simon Wechsle.

*If I had not come from my family, I wouldn't be here. You can enter the [political] system either through family or friends or money. Without family, friends or money, you cannot enter the system. My father was in politics. My grandmother and great-grandfather were in politics. So, it was easy for me to enter politics. This is a problem. I am a symptom of this problem.*²

‘So, do you think you can get my wife a job at the Norwegian Embassy?’ The question came from one of the political advisers to a high-standing Indian politician. He had just helped me get a meeting with the politician he worked for and was interested in getting a favor in return. This happened early on during my dissertation fieldwork in India, and I felt unsure about how to reply. Later I got used to these types of requests, they happened frequently in my interactions with political actors in India.

India is a network society. People tend to go to their networks to get help getting into schools, getting jobs or a favorable job transfer, or even for more day-to-day activities such as accessing government services, or finding a plumber. Networks can be based on belonging to the same caste group, the same religious community, having attended the same school, being from the same neighborhood, or – perhaps most importantly – the same family. The political elite is no exception in this regard, as Rahul Gandhi – the Vice-President of the Indian National Congress – put it: without family, friends or money you cannot enter the political elite.

Kinship was an important theme in the socio-anthropological study of India in the 20th century. As Karve (1965, p. 1) put it: for those hoping to understand ‘any cultural phenomenon in India,’ it is crucial to understand the great variation between linguistic regions, the institution of caste, and the structure of India’s families. And indeed, both the patrilineal joint families of North India and the matrilineal communities in South India have received much scholarly attention.³

In the political science literature, however, kinship has played a minor role. The study of domestic Indian politics has to a large extent focused on how individual attributes such as caste group and religious affiliations shape the actions of voters and politicians. But blood kinship is a narrower social category than caste and metaphorical kinship extends beyond it. It is widely recognized that

² Rahul Gandhi, the Vice-President of the Indian National Congress (Gandhi 2012, p. 13).

³ See, for example, Mayer (1960), Schneider and Gough (1961), Raheja and Gold (1994), Kapadia (1995), and Waldrop (2004).

family connections are important for getting all types of jobs and for being nominated for elected positions, but this is rarely talked of in kinship terms. Dynastic ties between political leaders are commonplace. Recent research, which I will discuss in this chapter, has started to meticulously assemble datasets on the dynastic ties of Indian politicians that provide quantitative evidence for this popular knowledge. The conclusions of these studies have unequivocally been that dynasticism is business as usual in contemporary Indian politics.

Work on India's foreign policy has paid even less attention to the role of family and kinship. The literature has focused on the importance of colonial legacies in shaping the Indian Foreign Service, the role of individual Prime Ministers in making foreign policy decisions, as well as the economic and geographic interests underlying political choices.⁴ But few have looked at how individual loyalties and interests may influence the actions of India's envoys abroad, or how relational practices within the country are reflected in which types of metaphorical kinship that are invoked in the interactions with envoys from other countries.

This lack of attention to the individual loyalties of those acting as India's representatives abroad means that we may be missing important insights about how kinship structures shape political interactions and solidify political solidarities. As noted by (Schneider 1980) in the USA and (Lambert 2000) in India, blood relations are often assumed to come with a 'diffuse enduring solidarity' or a 'permanent affection.' Such a feeling of *relatedness* can be invoked for variety of purposes in political contexts: as a mobilizing metaphor (see introduction, this volume), to establish a hierarchy in a relationship (see Sverdrup-Thygeson, this volume), create a sense of legitimacy (see Lindgren, this volume), or – which I will provide several examples of in this chapter – as a tool for acquiring political positions and favors.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the prevalence of both blood kinship and metaphorical kinship in India's political life. The goal is not to summarize the vast literature on kinship in India, but rather to reflect on how and why kinship is important to the study of politics in general, and international relations (IR) in particular. The chapter starts with a series of examples of common occurrences of kinship-based terminology used in Indian political life. Importantly, these

⁴ See, for example, Appadorai (1981), Nayar and Paul (2003), Dubey (2013).

examples show how frequently metaphorical kinship is invoked in the interactions between politicians and their followers, and how kinship terms are used both to create a sense of national unity and to mobilize around more particularistic identities. The second section turns to the importance of blood kinship in Indian politics. I discuss recent research that demonstrates the prevalence of electing dynastic politicians, and discuss how this evidence probably is only the tip of the iceberg of the many forms of kin-based favoritism that is likely to affect political decision making in India. In the third section I reflect on how these kin-based practices have not only shaped social relations in Indian politics, but even institutional choices. Looking at the Constituent Assembly debates in the late 1940s I show how concerns about nepotism and descent-based discrimination was a recurring theme in the discussions about how public institutions were to be designed. Examples from the debates serve to illustrate the expressed desire of several of the drafters of the Indian constitution to create institutions that would limit particularism and kin-based loyalties. The fourth and final section discusses how kinship-based language and loyalties also affect India's relationship to other countries and to the international community.

Bharat Mata and other examples of metaphorical kinship

For newcomers to India, a striking aspect of Indian culture is the great variation in and prevalence of family-related vocabulary. My first encounter with this was the bewildering differentiation of blood relatives introduced in my first-year Hindi class. While all the languages I was familiar with at the time had a single word for *uncle*, I learnt that Hindi has several different ones depending on the exact relationship, including *chacha* (father's younger brother), *tau* (father's older brother), *phupha* (father's sister's husband), *mama* (mother's brother), *masa* (maternal aunt's husband), and so on. Interestingly, the English term *uncle* is also part of the vocabulary, and is often used to address non-related male elders to whom one wants to show respect but also a certain amount of proximity, such as the parents of friends.

This myriad of family terms is used to address people related by blood or marriage, but are also often used when no actual family relation exists. Kin-like relationships seem to be invoked to create a sense of trust and connection.⁵ They also often seem to be used to establish a hierarchical relationship, similarly to what was discussed in the chapter about China (see Sverdrup-Thygeson,

⁵ See discussions of this in e.g. Wilson (1991).

this volume). Addressing someone with a family term in some cases seem to be an attempt to impose a feeling of responsibility, or guilt, in order to get someone to help out. And there is probably for the most part an unconscious mixture of these intentions underlying how someone is addressed. The exact choice of words carries subtle information about whether the metaphorical kinship is meant to create more intimacy, establish hierarchies or distance, or some other positioning in relation to the other.

Political leaders in India are often addressed with some family term by their supporters. Mahatma Gandhi was commonly called *Bapu* (the Guajati term for father) by his followers and has later been referenced as the ‘Father of the Nation.’ India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was often referred to as *Chacha* (father’s younger brother). Chaudhary Devi Lal – twice Chief Minister of Haryana – went by *Tao* (father’s older brother). Two of the most important politicians in the North Indian state Bihar – Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar – are known as *Bade bhai* (big brother) and *Chote bhai* (small brother) respectively.

Similarly, some of the most important female politicians are referred to by family term: The four-time chief minister in India’s largest state Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, goes by *Behenji* (respected sister), West Bengal’s Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee goes by *Didi* (elder sister),⁶ and Jayalalithaa, the recently deceased Chief Minister in the South Indian state Tamil Nadu, went by *Amma* (mother).

Politicians may also reciprocate by referring to their followers and voters as family members. For instance, the charismatic actor-turned-politician and three-time Chief Minister in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, N. T. Rama Rao, used to say that all the women of Andhra Pradesh were like sisters to him Singer (2007, p. 207). In her presidential address to the Indian National Congress, Sarojini Naidu described India as a ‘house,’ the Indian people as ‘children,’ and the Indian woman as ‘mothers’ who have to work hard to put the house in order (Basu 1995, p. 99). According to Basu (2016, p. 129), invoking the family in this way enables leaders to forge an aura of intimacy with citizens and to reach across ethnic, class and religious divisions that otherwise

⁶ See Nielsen (2010, pp. 81–82) for a discussion of how *Didi* has a motherly, caring, connotation in Bengali.

are seen as strong political cleavages. For female politicians, using family references may also have the additional benefit of allowing them to overcome some of the social constraints related to them appearing in the political sphere (Dutoya 2013, p. 152). By portraying themselves as sisters and mothers of men they interact with, they not only invoke a sense of trust, but also provide a justification for interacting with strangers at all – something that is considered indecent in many parts of India.

The respectful references to political leaders and followers as family members are not the only uses of kinship terminology in Indian politics. Throughout the 20th century too, the political arena was rife with family terms.

An obvious example that comes to mind is the reference to the country itself, the earth, as a loving mother: *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). As Rushdie (1995, p. 137) put it: ‘Motherness – excuse me if I underline the point – is a big idea in India, maybe our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet.’

The image of India as a mother became an important symbol of the fight for freedom from British colonial rule in the late 19th century. This is the motivation behind the song *Vande Mataram* (literally ‘Hail Mother’), which became India’s national anthem after independence from British rule in 1947. The love for the mother was, among other things, used as an example to create a sense of ‘otherness’ compared to the British colonial rulers. The Indian freedom fighter Bipin Chandra Pal expressed this nicely:

Our history is the sacred biography of the Mother. Our philosophies are the revelations of the Mother’s mind. [...] It is, I know exceedingly difficult, if it be not absolutely impossible, for the European or American to clearly understand or fully appreciate this strange idealization of our land, which has given birth to this cult of the Mother among us (Pal 1958, p. 134).

This, and other similar references, were part of the mobilization for an independent India. While the British colonial rulers saw India as a member of the British imperial family⁷ – of Mother Britannica – Indian freedom fighters depicted India as a mother that had been violated by the

⁷ Similarly, to the rhetoric of the Russian - Chechen relationship (see Wilhelmsen, this volume).

colonial forces. In this tradition, the external invasion of India was imagined as rape, and the members of the independence movement were her sons fighting for her independence (Shimkhada and Herman 2009, p. 277).

The focus on India as a mother, and as *Shakti* (female power), has also been understood as a way of getting more women involved in the nationalist struggle. As argued by Basu (1995, p. 99), the mother-centered nationalist rhetoric helped to make female power less frightening as more and more women became involved in nationalist activities.

In making India the mother, and all Indian's her children, the freedom fighters were trying to mobilize all of India against a common external aggressor. But the chosen imagery of *Bharat Mata* was also (at least in some contexts) clearly Hindu, thereby indirectly excluding non-Hindu Indians from the family (Menon 2010). *Bharat Mata* has therefore also been perceived as a symbol of the Hindu-national mobilization of all Hindus against Muslims and other non-Hindus in India. This mobilization played a particularly important role in India in the late 1980s and 1990s, with the saffron 'brotherhood' of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (National Volunteer Organization) gaining an important political position as the grass-root mobilizing organization of the Hindu-nationalist party Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) which grew to become one of India's major political parties during this period (Hansen 1999, Jaffrelot 2003).

The reference to India as a mother has thus been used both to invoke a sense of India as a united family and to mobilize around a community-based political agenda excluding large parts of the Indian population from the family. And it remains important today. As of 2012, the Indian army has allegedly been instructed to end all outdoor events with the battle cry *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* (long live mother India) (Kumar 2012). And in the spring of 2016, the Chief Minister of the western state Maharashtra incited a media frenzy when he reportedly said in a BJP rally that people who refuse to chant *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* have no right to stay in India (The Hindu 2016).

Whereas the 'Mother India' reference has been used as a rhetorical tool to unite large parts of the Indian population, there are also several examples of family references used to mobilize politically around narrower political identities. The 'Sons of the Soil' movement in Maharashtra –

an anti-immigration movement which emphasized the rights to jobs and services for those born and raised in Maharashtra – is but one stark example of this (Weiner 2015). This movement, which at times got quite militant, invoked a regional sense of kinship to mobilize against an ‘other’ coming from other parts of India.

On dynasties and other forms of favoritism based on blood kinship

The previous section demonstrated the prevalence of metaphorical kinship in Indian political discourse, but Indian politics is also full of blood-based family ties and relationships. One clear manifestation of this is the strong traditions of political dynasties. These dynasties have partly sprung out of royal families. In addition to British India, which included a large part of the territory of today’s India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the sub-continent also used to be home to several hundred princely states governed by Indian royal families (under suzerainty of the British Crown). Under this arrangement, the local rulers had considerable local political power, and the 21 largest princely states had their own local governments (Corbridge and Harriss 2013).

At the time of independence, the Princely States acceded to either India or Pakistan,⁸ but the rulers retained some of their privileges. With the 26th Amendment to the Indian Constitution of 1971 the royal families lost these special privileges, including their ‘privy purses’ (a payment they received from the government). However, many of these families still remained powerful in their areas – partly because they owned a lot of land – and several members of the royal families ended up running for election and becoming ‘elected Maharajas.’ In the 1957 election in Madhya Pradesh, for example, 20 of the politicians elected to the state assembly were from royal families (Carlevan N.d).

Members of royal families have had an *advantage* in electoral politics because of their access to money, muscle power, and social status Jaffrelot (2011). But not all the royal families succeeded in transforming themselves to democratic leaders. Brass (1965, p. 70) told the story of how the Indian National Congress chose to give tickets to royals in two neighboring districts, but that only

⁸ The majority of the states signed Instruments of Accession by independence August 15, 1947. A few waited, and either signed later or were occupied by one of the sides. The conflict related to the confusion about the accession of Jammu and Kashmir is still ongoing.

one of them succeeded in politics. Of the two, the Raja of Mankapur succeeded in leveraging his economic dominance in the area for political gain. He therefore became the ‘uncrowned king of Gonda district’ and managed to establish a post-independence political dynasty.

But dynastic traditions in Indian politics go far beyond royal families – something Chandra (2016) has labeled ‘democratic dynasties.’ The most stereotypical example of a ‘democratic dynasty’ is the long-standing political prominence of the ‘Nehru-Gandhi clan.’ Although often talked of as the descendants of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, he himself was the son of the prominent Congress politician Motilal Nehru who again was the son of one of the highest ranked police officers in Delhi. Jawaharlal Nehru was in power in India from it became independent in 1947 until his death in 1964. After that his daughter Indira Gandhi entered politics, and dominated Indian politics until she was assassinated in 1984. After that her son Rajiv Gandhi took over the reins of the Congress party until his assassination in 1991, after which his widow Sonia Gandhi has led the party. It is his great grandson Rahul Gandhi, the reluctant scion of the Congress party today, who pronounced the damning judgement on Indian politics quoted as an epigraph to this chapter.

In the chapter about Japan (see Lindgren, this volume), it is described how kinship references can play an important role in legitimizing political rule and that they are used actively to communicate power to voters. These same patterns are also evident in how members of the Nehru-Gandhi family choose to represent themselves publicly. Their legitimacy is closely tied to the family and they often appear (or are depicted) in front of large pictures of other family members.

Kinship references have also been used against them: Sonia Gandhi was born in Italy and although she was the leader of the Congress party, many were opposed to her becoming Prime Minister, labelling her a *videshi bahu* [foreign daughter-in-law]. Emphasizing that she was foreign was in itself important, as many Indian were uncomfortable with a foreign-born person ruling the country. But by labeling her a *bahu*, the opponents were also drawing on the North Indian tradition of exogamy – that brides move from their own natal village to the village of their groom. This means that *bahus* are outsiders, and are associated with creating tensions and conflicts in the family (see Nielsen 2010, Skoda 2004).

The dynastic patterns in India's top leadership have high visibility, but dynasticism is by no means confined to this elite. Around the time of every recent election in India, the media revels in digging up stories about the various family ties linking the many candidates running for election across the country. Newspapers in India and abroad have headlines such as 'Across India, Nepotism as a Way of Life,' 'Nepotism: the way they do politics in India' and 'Dynastic daughters.' As one author aptly put it: 'The Indian elite is a system where there is a 100 percent reservation for its own genetic material' (Joseph 2012).

In recent years, a number of studies have painstakingly gathered information about the family backgrounds of Indian politicians that provides quantitative evidence of the dynastic culture that is visible to all. Looking at the family backgrounds of the members elected to the Indian parliament (MPs) in 2009, French (2011) found that *all* of the MPs under the age of 30 were from political families – or what he referred to as 'hereditary MPs.' The majority of those in the age group 31-40 were also from political families.

Using data on the family backgrounds of the MPs elected to the Indian parliament in 2004, 2009, and 2014, Chandra (2016) similarly showed that about one quarter of India's MPs were dynastic – defined as MPs who were preceded by family members in electoral politics. Through a series of chapters looking in more detail at different sub-groups of politicians, Chandra's book shows that the dynastic tendencies cut across all regions of the country, main communities, and age groups. Importantly, it is also found that while there seems to be a decline in the number of dynastic politicians from *royal* families, there is no decrease in the presence of non-royal 'democratic dynasties,' suggesting that while the former may be a remnant of feudal past that will gradually disappear, the latter is an integral part of democracy in contemporary India (Jensenius 2016). One of the paradoxical results of the dynastic tendencies is also that it has opened the door to more female leaders than in other parts of the world, as about two thirds of all female MPs included in these data were dynastic (Basu 2016). Their family background seems to have trumped their disadvantage of being women.

So why is dynasticism so common in contemporary India? Giving examples of dynastic practices across Indian parties, Chhibber (2013) held that it particularly is parties with weak internal organization structures that tend to rely on dynastic candidates. Chandra (2016) argued that the new democratic dynasties in India also should be understood as the result of the high returns to elected office, making politics a profitable family business.

Voters also do not seem to mind. A recent survey found that almost half the Indian voters preferred to vote for a candidate from a political family (Vaishnav et al. 2014). When voters were asked why they supported dynastic candidates, many said they thought they were better at politics because it is their family occupation and that family-backed politicians are more likely to succeed in office because of greater exposure to politics. Thus, many voters seem to believe that dynastic politicians have an inside track to being better politicians.

And while this summary of recent literature shows that kinship – operationalized as political dynasties – is a major topic in Indian politics today, it is important to bear in mind that this data is just the tip of the iceberg: First, dynastic practices do not only occur in parliament, but also in state assemblies and in local-level politics. Anecdotal evidence even suggests that it may be more common in local-level politics than at the national level. Second, kin-based privileges are much more than dynastic practices. People may get nominated for election because of an important family member in some powerful position *outside* of politics. This does not count as dynastic, but is still a result of family connections. Similarly, people may be chosen for *any type* of job, promoted, given an important contract, or getting off the hook for a crime, because of family members in powerful positions. Although recent research has unearthed the prevalence of one form of kin-based practice in Indian politics, there is much more work to be done to gain a clear sense of when, how, and to what extent kinship networks affect political decision making in contemporary India.

Fighting descent-based privilege with institutions

So far, I have focused on how kinship can be found in the language and practices in the contemporary political arena in India. But awareness of these issues has even affected the

country's institutional choices. There are a number of ways this has happened, but I will in particular focus on how it influenced the important moment of institutional design surrounding the drafting of the Indian constitution.

As India was preparing for independence from British rule, a Constituent Assembly was elected to write a constitution for the new country. This Assembly met regularly between 1946 and 1949 and debated various aspects of how independent India would look. The debates bear witness of great idealism and also provide an interesting snap-shot of the main political discussions that have shaped Indian politics.⁹

An interesting aspect of these debates in the context of this chapter, was the evident contradiction between the strong dynastic traditions in Indian society and the liberal democratic institutions that were designed. This was a recurring theme in the constituency assembly debates. A content analysis of the detailed minutes from the debates shows that terms such as 'family', 'descent', 'nepotism' and 'favoritism' were used throughout the discussions. The use of the word 'family' is informative: It appeared in 42 of the paragraphs in the debate. Some of the uses were about actual families – such as landowners needing to be able to provide for their family – but the term was also used several times to invoke metaphorical kinship. For example, all of India was referred to as a family, India was talked of as part of the British imperial family, and one person called the whole world a family.

Another recurring issue was that several members of the assembly raised concerns about nepotism and the tendency that people favored their family members in the allocations of positions. A statement by the representative Naziruddin Ahmad summarizes many of these concerns: 'In India the proposed Constitution is a new experiment in democracy. There are forces of disintegration and disorder already visible everywhere. There is corruption, nepotism, favouritism and inefficiency in many parts of India today' (CAD 1999: 2 August, 1948).

⁹ The full debates can be accessed at <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/>.

The desire expressed by many of the members of the assembly was to formulate the clauses in the constitution in a way that would limit such practices. For example, in the words of the representative Raj Bahadur:

it is a kind of grievance with most of us that in the distribution of offices and appointments of the State and also in the services, some discrimination is observed on the basis of birth and descent. We see it in the recruitment to the Air Force, and to some extent in the Army or elsewhere in the services of the Government (CAD 1999: 29 November, 1948).

He also said: 'It is my humble submission that when we are here to forge our constitution, we should eliminate all sorts of distinctions arising on the basis not only of religion, caste, sex etc, but also on the basis of family and descent' (CAD 1999: 29 November, 1948).

Similar concerns were raised in relation to the appointments of ministers and judges, the organization of the civil service, and in the discussion about creating an independent election commission. For example, during the discussions about the requirements for ministers, the representative B. H. Khandekar stated that: 'ministers should not only make a declaration of their interests and their property but they should also make a declaration of their relatives and friends. There is so much of favouritism, nepotism and partiality [...]' (CAD 1999: 31 December, 1948).

Some of the politicians expressed pessimism as to the ability of the assembly to affect the culture of favoritism, as exemplified by Chaudhri Ranbir Singh's comment about the attempts to prevent nepotism in the civil service:

So far as nepotism is concerned it will continue even in future, it is not so easy to check it as you imagine. There are numerous considerations before members of the Public Service Commission; I think we need not be too apprehensive of the evil. Nepotism can be checked only if their conscience becomes strong, their ideas change. Till the present ideas and minds of the Public Services Commission change, you cannot check it by prolonging the life of any Public Service Commission (speech by CAD 1999: 22 August, 1949).

What these examples indicate is that several of the institutional choices that were made in India were a response to experiences of nepotism and favoritism. In this way, kinship practices shaped not only the composition of the Indian elite, but also the institutional fabric of independent India.

Kinship in international relations

The previous sections have provided examples of how kinship references and relations permeate Indian political life. In this last section I return to a discussion of how kin-based language and practices may also affect how India relates to other countries and to the international community – and why it therefore should be of interest of IR scholars.

A first thing to note is how the cultural practice of invoking family terms to establish relationships – signaling trustworthiness, intimacy, hierarchy, or a feeling of responsibility – can also be observed in how India has chosen to relate to other countries.

The classic example of this was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s diplomatic line of *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* (Indians and Chinese are brothers) in the 1950s, when he worked to build good relations with this large neighbor. Although he privately distrusted the Chinese,¹⁰ he chose to invoke a symmetric sense of brotherhood – probably as an attempt to tone down some of the thorny border issues the two countries were involved in. When China invaded (and defeated) India in 1962, it was a major blow to Indian aspirations for great power status and to Nehru’s personal prestige.¹¹

Attempts to build relationships by calling other countries brothers and sisters can also be observed in interactions with other neighboring countries, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Some international observers have noted that it is Pakistan and India that really should be referred to as *bhai-bhai* (brothers), given that they are literally ‘twin offspring’ in terms of colonial background and culture.¹² However, having been at war on and off since 1947, this family relation is rarely invoked in public discourse.

10 According to the diary of the Indian ambassador to China in the late 1950s, see Indian Express article from 22 January 2010. Available at: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/dont-believe-in-hindichini-bhaibhai-nehr/570332/>. Accessed 31 August 2016.

11 See <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/de-classified-of-cia-reports-highlights-the-chinas-game-plan-of-conspiracy-in-sino-india-war-1962/1/155356.html>

12 See

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2518&dat=20081203&id=201aAAAIAIAJ&sjid=DCgMAAAAIAIAJ&pg=828,227850&hl=en>

For the IR scholar, it should be of interest which family terms are chosen in different international settings, but also what connotations these labels have in different cultural settings. This volume argues that kinship should be understood as a foundational concept in the study of IR, and the examples provided throughout the book demonstrate the importance of kinship terminology and family connections in political relations both within and between countries. As noted in the chapter about China (see Sverdrup-Thygeson, this volume), many of the discussions about the importance of kinship are implicitly Eurocentric. It seems to be assumed that terms like ‘family’, ‘brother’, and ‘cousin’ hold a similar meaning in different settings. However, both the connotations of terms, and the expected behavior associated with relationships depend on culture and context.

In a Norwegian context, for instance, being called a ‘cousin’ or ‘daughter-in-law’ may seem like an expression of a close relationship. However, in cultures where first and second cousins are usually referred to as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, referring to someone as a cousin may actually be an expression of quite a distant relationship. And, as the discussion of Sonia Gandhi being labelled a ‘daughter-in-law’ exemplified, a term that may seem positive in some cultures may have a negative connotation in another. Similarly, invoking the parent-child relation may be interpreted as a sign of intimacy by some, if they associate this with parents caring for the child. For others, it may be associated more clearly with hierarchy, and with an expectation of obedience by the children. The intention here is not to suggest that there is a clear-cut Western-Eastern divide between more and less hierarchical understandings of kin relations, simply that the meaning of kinship terms differ across cultures and can easily be misunderstood in cross-cultural interactions.

Different cultural connotations may also be actively used in inter-cultural dialogue. An interesting spin on this occurred in 2015: when India initiated an informal blockade on Nepal in 2015 to express dissatisfaction with some political choices in the country, a leading Nepalese politician announced that Nepal would not accept any more ‘big brother’ behavior from India – a term that has a clear negative ring to it from a Eurocentric perspective. India’s Ministry of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, rejected this negative interpretation of the term by reverting that ‘we are adopting an elderly brother’s approach, a caring and sharing approach’ (The Tribune India 2015). With this she tried to manipulate how India’s actions were understood, by shifting the connotation from that

of a meddling big brother to a caring figure acting in the best interest of the whole family. She maintained the kinship reference, but reframed it in a more positive light – bringing it ‘back’ from a Eurocentric to a more South Asian interpretation.

As these examples indicate, increasing our understanding of cultural variation in how kinship references are used and understood, what connotations terms hold, and what expectations follow from them in different contexts, can help us better understand the subtleties in the rhetorical choices of countries.

Another way in which domestic kinship patterns seep into the international arena is through the appointment of personnel that relates to other countries – as appointments are often not based on merit alone, but rather a combination of merit, experience, and being connected to the right people.

As previously discussed, many of India’s royal families retained some of their power after independence by entering politics – they became ‘elected Maharajas’. Members of former royal families entered the diplomatic service in large numbers too, and were often given important assignments abroad (Datta-Ray 2014, p. 55). But as in politics, only some of them performed well in office. As noted by Prime Minister Nehru: ‘I do not think one can entrust them [royals] with diplomatic work. They have not been a success at it’ (Datta-Ray 2014, p. 55). Over time, the presence of royals in both politics and in the foreign service declined.

But family and connections still matter for who end up being posted abroad. There are many actors involved in the formulation and implementation of India’s foreign policy. The main agencies involved in making the foreign policy are the Prime Minister’s Office (PM), the National Security Council (NSC), and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), but a number of other ministries are also involved – including the ministries of Defense, Commerce and Industry, Finance, Petroleum and Natural Gas, Environment and Forests, Overseas Indian Affairs, and others (Madan 2015).

India has about 160 missions abroad, usually headed by a career officer from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), and the rules for how IFS officers are selected and posted are quite strict. But many officers at the foreign missions come from other services. In addition to the stationed officers, there are political appointments to some of these missions, local employees, and various special envoys and delegations. Sometimes there can be more non-IFS officers than IFS officers serving at a mission (Madan 2015, p. 240). In other words, those representing India abroad come from a variety of services and institutions across India – some of which may be more prone to nepotism and favoritism than others.

It is hard to come by accurate numbers for how common it is to get a position due to family connections, but a survey of Indian civil servants from 2010 can give us some idea.¹³ Out of the 4,800 civil servants who responded to the survey, 67% said they thought that some, most, or all officers used influence for getting good postings (30% said they thought most or all did so) (Government of India 2010, p. 88). Similarly, among the IFS officers that responded to the survey 66.5% said they thought that some, most, or all officers used influence to get the jobs they wanted (17.2% said they thought most or all did so) (Government of India 2010, p. 89).

Take for instance the scandal of Devyani Khobragade – an Indian diplomat whose father was an influential civil servant – being given a posting in Berlin. One of her peers accused the Ministry of External Affairs of having bent the rules in her favor due to ‘a great amount of political pressure’. The Supreme Court did not find conclusive evidence of any misbehavior in this case, but many have pointed to it as an example of the unhealthy importance of family connections in getting jobs.¹⁴

The outrage about how common it is to use connections, family networks or other, to get attractive postings is probably in part a result of a sense of what is fair or ethically right. But it should also be of concern because it may result in people being posted to positions they are not

¹³The survey was sent out to 18,432 civil servants and about 4,800 responded to it. This is therefore a large sample, but the respondents were not a random sample of the total cadre and the responses can therefore not be considered representative.

¹⁴ The judgement is available at: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/68739874/>. See also this article about it in the Times of India <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/MEA-bent-rules-to-favour-Devyani-Khobragade/articleshow/27744181.cms>.

qualified, and it may affect how they work once in office. The former may affect the overall quality of work being done, but the latter is also important as it may skew the loyalties of those holding positions and consequently also the decisions that they make. An important reason for this is the cultural expectation of reciprocity. I started this chapter with one of my personal experiences of such an expectation of reciprocity. And similar stories can be found in many accounts by people who have spent time in India. Reciprocity is also frequently brought up as one of the main challenges for international actors wanting to do business in India, as they run into 'gray practices' that are on the border-line of what they would consider ethical and legal.¹⁵ Loyalties driven by kinship, metaphorical or by blood, probably strengthen such a culture of reciprocity.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the importance of kinship in Indian politics: the prevalence and diversity in how family-related terms are used to establish relationships and mobilize politically, the actual frequency of family ties in powerful positions, how concerns about nepotism affected even the institutional fabric of India, and finally how all of these domestic issues related to kinship may seep into the international arena, thereby affecting the relationships between India and the rest of the world.

The variation in kinship language and practices should matter for the IR scholar because it can shed light on the cultural context underlying rhetorical choices that countries make. It can also improve the understanding of the actions of countries' international envoys. As in most parts of the world, decisions in India are not always made based on listed criteria, people are not always selected only because of merit, and complaints and scandals may be silences because the issue hits too close to home (literally) for some powerful individual. For the IR scholar, often concerned with the motivations underlying actions of different countries, it is important to take such individual-level motivations underlying the actions of counties into account.

¹⁵See <http://www.forbes.com/sites/riskmap/2014/06/25/indias-corruption-culture-a-dangerous-game-for-businesses#6c437ac11d84>.

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