

# Nepotism in Indian Politics and Centralized Financing of Elections – A Study

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study the **Nepotism in India** common in **politics**, judiciary, business, the film industry, religious circles, arts, industry, and other type centralized financing of elections. Nepotism can be defined as ‘the act of using power or influence to get unfair advantages for members of one’s family’. You may wonder: Why does nepotism exist even today? We live in a time where everybody strives to protest against hierarchical inheritance, but seizes to protest against such an open exertion of dominance. This, on the broader spectrum, is the entire society’s view when it comes to the stars of nepotism. We often think that because some already know the ‘who’s and how’s’ of a particular field, they are in more deserving for a position in that field than the rest. But while we do so, we forget that hierarchy doesn’t ensure intelligence or talent. Indian Politics has seen the most of nepotism in its history, despite ours being a democratic country.

Right from Motilal Nehru to Rahul Gandhi (Congress Party), India has been ruled by a dynasty, which is still trying to perpetuate its rule. But apart from this party, that of course is on the top when it comes to nepotism in Indian politics, there are various other parties, mainly regional, like the Samajvadi Party (governed and formed by Mulayam Yadav and later taken over by his son Akhilesh Yadav) which have been working on the principles of nepotism. In Maharashtra, the Thackeray’s have maintained their domination from Balasaheb to Uddhav Thackeray. In Kashmir, the Abdulla’s and the Muftis’ have been in power for years. These are few yet major examples of nepotism being followed in India. There are various factors that contribute towards such political nepotism, especially in a country like India, the first being its citizens. Some might strongly agree, while the others may not but the people of India are used to being dominated. They are used to hierarchical rule in the olden days, to the kingship in these modern times. It is mainly because of the notion, brought up by the ‘Varna System’, which states that only the son of a priest becomes. This still prevails because most of the Indian population is still illiterate and therefore, this becomes the best and the easiest way to choose their representatives. The reason is the stars of nepotism themselves. When you are living happily and your coming generations too can live with all the luxuries, why would you give up something that brings you these luxuries. Indian politicians strive to do their best before elections to have this hierarchical domination prevailing. They often state that they won on the basis of merit and not because of their family background, but this veil is too thin to not be seen through. We all can hope that like most major changes taking place in the country, this also becomes an issue that is strongly raised by all.

*Key words: Nepotism, political competition, employment, economic opportunity*

## Introduction

*This 8 letter word is destroying everyone in today's world. And who is responsible for creating such a hypocrite. We the people have to repose this curse and make sure to control it with our coming generations, else it will destroy the whole world. And there'll be no humanity left in this world" - Ikramul Hannah.*

Nepotism is based on favoritism granted to relatives instead of giving a fair chance to others in a particular field, be it business, politics, sports, entertainment or any. Nepotism is generally defined as "the bestowal of patronage by public officers in appointing others to positions because of blood or marital relationship". It exists almost all over the world, but in India it is found to be a bit too much. As stated by Rahul Gandhi, "Nepotism is a culture in India". In addition to this, we can say that Nepotism is a product of nepotists; means- powerful or well-established people giving preferential treatment to their relatives and friends in employment irrespective of their qualifications, whereas showing intolerance to outsiders. It creates stress in the workplace and increases dissatisfaction among the staff about their organizations which indirectly leads to self-criticism, self-doubt and retardation.

Nepotism is found in almost all the fields but it is practiced most in business, politics, sports and entertainment sectors. It has been in practice since time immemorial, but some special cases have made it to the limelight in the past few decades. Despite being a democratic country, Nepotism has always existed in politics in India. Various factors have contributed to it, the first being its citizens. Some might strongly agree while the others may not, but the people of India have always been used to being dominated. It is mainly because of the notion brought up by the 'Varna System' which upholds that only the son of a priest can become a priest. This same mentality still exists even today because most of the Indian citizens are still illiterate which in conclusion makes it common for them to choose their political representatives with a notion rooted in Nepotism. If this political Nepotism goes on, corruption in the country will never end and it will keep on rising as ever. It has become an issue that needs to be strongly and immediately tackled. Everyone has a right to stand a fair chance in all professional fields, and it can only be possible when all the hurdles are removed and only smart and talented politicians are elected irrespective of their family background, who in turn will take our country to new heights.

Nepotism in the Entertainment Industry: It is normal to see the struggling actors and youngsters who don't bear a tag of being relative or associated with big names ruling over the entertainment industry. As it can clearly be seen, Bollywood for years has always been dominated by 'some' celebrities bearing a particular surname, coming from particular families and starkids from within the circle. Youngsters and newcomers to the industry, often more talented than most 'star kids', hardly get a fair chance. It is more clear by seeing the current situation of Nepotism and favoritism excessively prevailing in Bollywood after the sudden demise of Sushant Singh Rajput, a talented actor who didn't get what he deserved. Several actors like Kangana Ranaut, Dharmendra, Raveena Tandon and Payal Rohatgi have opened the issue that has been going on in the film industry and also reveals the dark side of

Bollywood. We see how the undeserving ones receive plenty of awards while the deserving ones are not even nominated. This shows how this Nepotism is functioning in Bollywood. This can be stopped only if we raise our voices against nepotism like how Kangana Ranaut and several other actors have done and continue to do, otherwise, one day the whole world will get destroyed and there will be no humanity left over. If this political nepotism goes on, corruption in the country would rise once again, like it had in the past decade. Everyone has the right to stand a fair chance in all professional fields and any possible hurdle in the way of achieving this right should be removed. It will only be when the hurdles are removed that we get talented and smart politicians who take the country to new heights. Nepotism is unfair. It causes a severe negative impact on the common people who are often treated as outsiders at their workplace, and face adverse effects and decline in morale also. Nepotism means promoting inequality which kills the positive attitude and confidence of people involved in as victims. It also creates insecurities among the ordinary employees or artists. And, if they dare go against the norms, they have to face consequences as there are high chances that the person raising his voice would get banned from the industry/company whereas the product of nepotism, on the other hand, enjoys the attention and luxurious life. It's high time that we need to call this trend out. It's difficult to raise our voices against this when our political parties are already engaged in this toxic culture. We live in a time where everybody strives to protest against a system of hierarchical inheritance but seizes to protest against such an open exertion of dominance. But, we must stop it!

### **Objective:**

This paper intends to explore Indian politics is the motherland of nepotism and this has been the case right from the time of independence. Despite being a democratic country, Nepotism has always existed in politics in India

### **The current debate**

What is now derisively described as 'nepotism' is how things were traditionally done. In pre-modern societies, the realms of domesticity and work were merged, with the family playing a central role in determining an individual's entry not only into an occupation, but also the public sphere. In insufficiently modernised societies such as India, this tendency remains strong. Second, traditional social norms still dictate that family comes first, caste/clan second, and everything else, including merit, last.

In India, where upper caste dominance across domains is well documented, nepotism extends beyond the family and operates along the axis of caste as well. Deep historical inequalities and a dwindling welfare state have made India one of the most unequal societies in the world, with the richest 1% holding more than four times the wealth of the bottom 70%. It stands to reason, therefore, that anyone concerned about nepotism would want to attack the cause of which nepotism is the symptom: the reproduction of inequality. After all, the more unequal a society, the greater the scope and incentive for nepotism. In a hypothetical society of perfect socio-economic equality, each individual's nepotistic reserves would cancel out that of everyone else's. So, tackling nepotism calls for political mobilisation against socio-economic inequality. The most effective means of reducing such inequality are social

justice measures such as affirmative action, universal access to public health and education, and redistributive policies such as an inheritance tax.

But the theme of inequality is conspicuously absent in the nepotism discourse. Its preferred binary is not ‘privileged’ versus ‘non-privileged’ but ‘outsider’ versus ‘insider’, with all the outrage reserved for the insiders. The idea is not to call for a level playing field but to stoke the so-called outsider’s desire to displace the ‘insider’ as the new ‘insider’, without dismantling the insider-outsider structure as such.

The key to understanding the nepotism discourse lies in the parallels it shares with the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement. First, beneath the hood of moral righteousness, the nepotism discourse is also powered by right-wing majoritarian elements. As was the case with the anti-corruption movement, this aspect remains understated, if not hidden, thereby enabling the discourse to get traction across the political spectrum, including from liberals.

Second, the nepotism discourse is right-wing populist in precisely the same way that the anti-corruption movement was, with both having the same objective: to consolidate the base of Hindutva politics by channelling public resentment against traditional elites. In politics, where the old elite, symbolically and literally, is the Nehru-Gandhi family and its allies, the strategy worked brilliantly – giving the illusion of authentic change while one faction of upper caste elites displaced another to become the ruling elite.

The contours of this factional war are clear in the Bollywood context. Since 2013, several notables at the periphery of the Bollywood power structure have chosen to ally with majoritarian politics. But six years down the line, their strategic alliance with the new power elite in Delhi is yet to yield a meaningful change in their status vis-à-vis their own industry’s power centres, which continue to be the same old families. As these families continue to monopolise lucrative opportunities for those disinclined to challenge their supremacy, life could get tough for anyone who has fallen out of favour.

Understandably, there is genuine cause for resentment here. Also, since many of these ambitious ‘outsiders’ to Bollywood themselves come from bubbles of privilege in terms of their class and caste origins, they are not easily silenced, unlike, say, an Adivasi or Dalit summarily displaced from her home in the rural hinterland. In a society where a feudal sense of entitlement simmers beneath a veneer of economic modernity, aspirational upper castes with bottled up resentments are legion in every domain. They represent a political resource waiting to be mobilised. The 2011 Anna Hazare movement showed how it’s done.

## From the same old toolkit, centralized financing of elections

Corruption did not peak in 2011, when the movement began. But a media-supported public campaign made it seem like it had, helping foment resentment against the UPA regime, which became synonymous with a venal elite that owed everything to the nepotistic influence of the Nehru-Gandhis. Corruption did not disappear after 2014. But the anti-corruption mobilisation had done its job — as a Trojan horse that enabled the forces of Hindu majoritarianism to capture power at the Centre.

The increasing sophistication of right-wing propaganda and its layered execution through social media campaigns has meant that it rarely registers early enough on liberal radars. Nepotism is the latest instrument from the right-wing populist toolkit. As an ideological weapon, it is a missile with multiple warheads. At one level, it does what populism always does: fuel rage against an elite in the name of “the people”. At another level, Hindutva forces are using it to achieve three objectives: consolidate their upper caste base by appearing to empathise with their frustrations; translate status anxieties into resentments against sections of the elite that are yet to make a break with the Nehruvian consensus and embrace Hindutva; and, finally, communicate to recalcitrant sections of the liberal-Nehruvian elite the same message that goes out to some MLAs whenever a non-BJP government needs toppling: switch sides or face the consequences.

Fomenting new social antagonisms along the axis of ‘the people’/outsider versus the elite/insider is a proven political strategy of right-wing authoritarian populists. The nepotism rhetoric is a similar operation where the resentments and frustrations of the less privileged, aspirational, upper and middle castes are sought to be weaponised against older, relatively more privileged upper caste factions, now ‘othered’ as the Nehruvian elite. Have heard of a diabolically ingenious little stratagem that shows how determined political families are to keep the cash flowing in. When, say, an MP’s son is getting married, his parents will try to find a suitable bride from a rival opposition party in the state so that, no matter which party ends up in power, the bribes keep pouring into the family coffers. There is no dry period at all. How neat is that? Naturally, the beneficiaries of nepotism all look wide-eyed and innocent when challenged. Have been watching them for a week now, on television, arguing cogently that they have been chosen on merit, not family connections. "Being my father’s son should not qualify me to get the ticket, but nor should it automatically disqualify me either," said Karti Chidambaram, son of the Finance Minister, disingenuously to a TV anchor. Nepotism is, to a large extent, inevitable in a society where your family name is all-important as an entry into society, to jobs, to favours, to contracts and everything else. In that sense, India is still feudal. Both the corporate world and Bollywood are full of children who are given opportunities because of their parents. This is a country where you rarely hear the word "self-made" prefixing any famous name. Nor do the "nepotees" feel the slightest embarrassment. Where is their discomfiture at hanging on to daddy’s coat tails? Where is the self-respect that comes from proving yourself the hard way in your own field? The only hope is that, as Indian voters mature, they will stop voting for a famous politician’s child. They are already moving away from letting religion or caste determine how they vote. Increasingly, voters are showing that all that matters is an MP’s performance. If they don’t deliver, they are booted out. If this voting behaviour continues, then these pathetic

offspring, unable to do anything but fly in the slipstream of their parents, will certainly get one chance to fool the voters, but only one. If they let their voters down, their lineage will not save them. And that will be a healthy development for Indian democracy. To understand its effect on an economy or a political system, it helps to unbundle the term by identifying specific types of activities or transactions that might fall within it. In considering its strategy the Bank sought a usable definition of corruption and then developed a taxonomy of the different forms corruption could take consistent with that definition. We settled on a straightforward definition—the abuse of public office for private gain.<sup>1</sup> Public office is abused for private gain when an official accepts, solicits, or extorts a bribe. It is also abused when private agents actively offer bribes to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantage and profit. Public office can also be abused for personal benefit even if no bribery occurs, through patronage and nepotism, the theft of state assets, or the diversion of state revenues. This definition is both simple and sufficiently broad to cover most of the corruption that the Bank encounters, and it is widely used in the literature. Bribery occurs in the private sector, but bribery in the public sector, offered or extracted, should be the Bank's main concern, since the Bank lends primarily to governments and supports government policies, programs, and projects.

- Government contracts. Bribes can influence the government's choice of firms to supply goods, services, and works, as well as the terms of their contracts. Firms may bribe to win a contract or to ensure that contractual breaches are tolerated.
- Government benefits. Bribes can influence the allocation of government benefits, whether monetary benefits (such as subsidies to enterprises or individuals or access to pensions or unemployment insurance) or in-kind benefits (such as access to certain schools, medical care, or stakes in enterprises being privatized).
- Lower taxes. Bribes can be used to reduce the amount of taxes or other fees collected by the government from private parties. Such bribes may be proposed by the tax collector or the taxpayer. In many countries the tax bill is negotiable.
- Licenses. Bribes may be demanded or offered for the issuance of a license that conveys an exclusive right, such as a land development concession or the exploitation of a natural resource. Sometimes politicians and bureaucrats deliberately put in place policies that create control rights which they profit from by selling.
- Time. Bribes may be offered to speed up the government's granting of permission to carry out legal activities, such as company registration or construction permits. Bribes can also be extorted by the threat of inaction or delay.
- Legal outcomes. Bribes can change the outcome of the legal process as it applies to private parties, by inducing the government either to ignore illegal activities (such as drug dealing or pollution) or to favor one party over another in court cases or other legal proceedings.

The nepotism discourse, then, is another salvo in a battle between two elites: the Nehruvian ‘ancien regime’ with its pluralistic instincts, and the brash new aspirational faction that wants its share of the spoils of power. This is a share it feels entitled to on the basis of its political commitment to Hindutva. But given the heavy competition and the small size of the pie, a great many feel deprived and resentful as they see the old liberal elites continuing in their privileged perches, as they always have. It remains to be seen whether deepening this social antagonism through polarising rhetoric offers enough fuel for a propaganda campaign capable of insulating the ruling party from the political costs of governance failures and economic headwinds. In much the same way, nepotistic privilege affects the overall quality of many parts of the Indian economy. Our newsrooms are full of children of journalists and even politicians. A well-known journalist’s son or daughter gets an internship with a phone call whereas those without such access keep emailing their CVs with no one bothering to even open their emails.

The unfairness does not stop there. The other day, I saw a prominent academic promote a senior journalist’s daughter on Twitter, praising her with superlatives for an ordinary cub reporter’s work. Nepotistic privilege is thus a life-long privilege. You get a free pass because you are the son or daughter or relative of XYZ. It’s bad enough that she has the advantage of getting story ideas, leads and contacts at home while an ‘outsider’ in the same newsroom will have to struggle much harder to be at the same level. But for your father’s powerful friends to be promoting you on Twitter blindly is absolutely distasteful. To flip it, we need to start seeing nepotistic privilege as a matter of shame. India’s woke millennials, Gen Z and Gen Alpha tend to learn political correctness from American shores. But nepotism is not such a big social issue in the US. We need some originality in our woke politics to start shaming nepotistic privilege. When woke millennials say ‘check your privilege’, they don’t include nepotism because American news sites haven’t yet written about it yet.

In the way that woke people go around ‘cancelling’ those who are misogynistic or homophobic or fatphobic or those who think skin colour defines beauty... yeah, riding pillion on your dad’s career should be seen like that.

## Conclusion

In India politics is not a vocation, but a family business. If father is an MP, then his darling son or daughter regard the constituency as their heirloom. When the time for choosing a candidate for the general election comes round - as it has now with the impending general election in May - parties hand out tickets to the relatives of MPs as though they are a family inheritance. Whichever party you look at, in every part of India, nepotism is rampant. Merit, a record in public life, knowledge, skills, character, are all irrelevant. If you have the right surname, you will get a ticket. Of course, the ruling Congress Party, run by the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty for more than six decades, is responsible for turning dynasty into a governing principle of Indian politics, but all the other parties have also proved pretty adept too at treating politics like family fiefdoms so the disease is now deeply rooted in the body politic. Three years ago, author Patrick French, in a study of the Indian Parliament, unearthed some troubling data. He found that 100 per cent of MPs in the current lower house of Parliament under the age of 30 are from families

with a political background, a fact that would be astounding anywhere else in the world. French dubbed them "hereditary" MPs. Of the MPs who were aged 40 and above, two-thirds were hereditary MPs.

"If the trend continued," wrote French, "it was possible that most members of the Indian Parliament would be there by heredity alone, and the nation would be back to ... rule by a hereditary monarch and assorted Indian princelings." Judging by the names chosen for the next general election, India is moving towards French's prediction. It was bad enough that Indian voters tended to vote, not for the person who is best for their area and best for country, but for the candidate of the same religion or caste as they. Superimposed on this now is another layer of irrationality, namely, voting for someone because of his or her surname. India's joint family system makes the nepotism worse. With a nuclear family, at least it's only going to be the wife or offspring who will be favoured, but with the sprawling extended family, you have nieces, nephews, uncles, sons-in-law and aunties getting tickets. Indian politics, for many MPs, is a tool for self-enrichment. Once elected, they take bribes, for five years. Some end up unimaginably wealthy. With so much money to be made from corruption, who would not want to keep a parliamentary seat in the family so that wealth can pass down the generations?

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