

# Are regional parties in India facing a succession problem?

PARLEY

**T**wenty-four years after its formation, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) split on July 2 over the question of succession. In 2022, the Shiv Sena went through a similar churn. This malady is not unique to Maharashtra; many regional parties in India, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP), have gone through this. Others, such as the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), seem poised to undergo this churn. Are regional parties facing a succession problem? Sugata Srinivasaraju and Neelanjan Sircar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Sobhana K. Nair**. Edited excerpts:

**Why are we seeing succession battles in several regional parties in India today?**

**Sugata Srinivasaraju:** Essentially, the problem of succession has arisen because regional parties, or at least most of them, have become 'Hindu undivided families'. (Under Hindu law, a 'Hindu Undivided Family' consists of all those who have directly descended from a common ancestor as well as their wives and unmarried daughters). Many of these parties began with the lofty goals of promoting sub-nationalism and protecting their own caste or ethnicity. Several others, such as the DMK [Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam], came up on the question of larger federal interests. But over a period of time, they have all become parties run by a single family. There are several strands in these families which come into conflict with one another. This has primarily given rise to the succession issue. That is what we saw in the NCP [Nationalist Congress Party] recently. And more importantly, they [the parties] have given up their larger purpose.

**Neelanjan Sircar:** The rise of regional parties coincided with the decline of the Congress in the 1990s. Back then, you saw politicians going to the highest bidder. Coalition governments regularly fell apart or came together in complicated ways. The one way to ensure some sort of stability was to make sure that the voter was beholden to the leader or the family at the top [of the party]. As Sugata pointed out, these parties have a centralised party structure, low intra-party democracy, and are often controlled by a single family.

Now, we are coming to a period where the next step has to occur [succession]. And the kind of succession battle that you will see is going to be a natural problem for every one of these parties, even the national parties, which are handing the baton to the next rung of leaders. I think that regional parties that are able to sort this out, that are able to come up with an



Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar during a Nationalist Congress Party meeting led by him, in Mumbai. PTI

internal decision-making process in anointing the next leader, are going to be on far more stable footing, especially when they face the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party], which has far more financial and state institutional resources at its disposal. The BJP will seek to consolidate the splits exposed in these succession battles.

**Are regional parties more vulnerable to this power tussle or is it a universal problem irrespective of the national or regional status of a political party? Will we see similar power tussles in the Congress and the BJP?**

**SS:** Neelanjan correctly mentioned how these regional parties came up after the decline of the Congress. But we should also keep in mind that the spurt of regional parties also happened because of the breakdown of the Janata Parivar. The alignments were on the basis of caste, with the Mandal movement providing the necessary prompt. But today, that premise is being challenged on various fronts. There is splintering within castes, and caste identity itself has gone through a lot of change. The BJP has triggered a certain crisis not just in regional parties, but also in the Congress. The ideological stridency that the BJP brings in has forced everybody to go beyond the family, caste, or ethnic loyalty to create a larger purpose for themselves. And they suddenly feel that there is a vacuum there, because they have forgotten what they stood for. When the BJP talks about Hindutva or issues like the Uniform Civil Code, the dilution of Article 370, or construction of the Ram Mandir, the other parties are forced to stand for something. They cannot merely say that they stand for this patriarch or this caste. They are pushed to realign and to rethink. That's the reason why you see [Congress leader] Rahul Gandhi pushing the Congress towards a certain ideological position, when the party in the past never stood for any concrete ideological



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concerns. The BJP has bracketed everybody together and posed this huge question before them: what do you stand for beyond the family?

**NS:** There is one thing that we don't think enough about in this question, which is that there's a succession battle happening in the BJP as well. The party's old guard has been shoved aside; we have seen the pressure that [Chief Minister] Shivraj Singh Chouhan has faced in Madhya Pradesh and [former Chief Minister] B.S. Yediyurappa has faced in Karnataka. Every BJP Chief Minister who enjoys mass support has been cut down to size in the Modi-Shah era. The overarching principle of what we have seen since 2014 is extraordinary centralisation in the BJP. We need to see what it does to the party structure.

You cannot see the succession problem in isolation; you have to see it within the larger political environment and what this hyper centralisation is doing to every political player at the State level, irrespective of whether it is a political family or not. What we did have is a set of State actors who had largely consolidated power, so that we associated State units with individuals even within the national parties. Today, given the kind of demands of this top-down leadership from the Centre that is slowly being broken, where it refuses to break down, we see the Centre taking action and trying to force that to break.

**Would these succession battles lead to the demise of many regional parties, with their splintered groups being devoured by the larger national parties?**

**SS:** I want to add to what Neelanjan said about the BJP. Structurally, the BJP or the Sangh Parivar has the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] as a ready think tank. It sits as the arbitrator, to look for an alternative when required. The BJP at least has a mechanism, which you don't find in the Congress or the regional parties. The paradox about regional parties is that the family is central to their survival, but the family is also a liability. But I won't write off the regional parties. Indian politics is complex and diverse. Look at the

individual parties. For the BJD, for example, who [will be the leader] after Naveen Patnaik is a worrying question because there is no person in his bloodline to succeed him. And that is probably why the BJP is extremely patient with them [the BJD]. It doesn't want to disrupt anything, because it knows that there is going to be chaos after Mr. Patnaik. Similarly, with [Bahujan Samaj Party chief] Mayawati – though there is no direct bloodline, there is a family. Or will the party reconfigure? This is less of a problem for a party like the Janata Dal (Secular) because H.D. Kumaraswamy [son of former Chief Minister H.D. Deve Gowda] has already stepped in. He has taken control of the party, and the others in the family have sort of conceded much like how the SP reached an uneasy reconciliation.

**NS:** The short answer to the question on whether the regional parties will go is 'no'. India doesn't have ideologically consolidated systems like Western Europe and the U.S. Essentially, people are born into their political parties, like the RSS-model. The reality for the BJP today is that it has many 'impure elements' – those with regional aspirations who haven't really come through the BJP system. In the near future, or maybe even the medium term, the BJP will continue as a dominant party. During the Congress's heydays, the regional leaders stayed within the dominant party, but the moment it weakened, there was fragmentation in the form of these small family-owned parties. That is a structural phenomenon. And so, the big question for the BJP is, when it is time for Narendra Modi to go, it is not just about who succeeds him at the top; will all these actors at the bottom who bought into the BJP still going to be there? Will they agree to continue within the party?

I will just add one variable. The BJD, AAP [Aam Aadmi Party] or the TMC [Trinamool Congress] are not directly caste-based parties. Take the BSP. Do we believe that a Dalit party in Uttar Pradesh would close its doors wholesale? Maybe it would or maybe it would ally with the BJP or perhaps another Dalit party could replace it. I imagine that parties that have a clearly delineated social basis will not give up their position so easily and merge into another party. If they do, another political interest or set of political actors who represent that social base will try to take its place, at least in the short term.



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