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# Dynastic dilemma in South Asia: influence, networks and shamefacedness

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## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the growing literature on political dynasticism in contemporary South Asia and shifts the focus from the much-debated national level dynasties to the usually ignored dynasties operating at subnational and regional levels. Analytically, it investigates the 'moment' of succession, conceptualised as the period when new heirs are actively enrolled in a dynastic formation. Such moments of succession can be perilous moments for dynastic formations, potentially disrupting its routine functioning style. And yet, these moments allow a clear identification and opportunity for analysis of the specific dilemma that all political dynasties have to negotiate. This dilemma can be described as follows: how to reconcile (1) the need to project emerging dynastic heirs as extraordinary beings embodying the special qualities of the original dynast, with (2) the equally pressing need to downplay inherited dynastic privilege – conceptualised here using Louis Dumont's idea of 'shamefacedness' – often portrayed as an illegitimate source of power and influence in postcolonial South Asia. A successful succession, as this article argues, relies on the ability to negotiate this dilemma. To demonstrate this negotiation in practice, the article analyses two cases of dynastic succession: Abhishek Banerjee in West Bengal, India and Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah in Barishal, Bangladesh.

## KEYWORDS

Political dynasticism; dynastic dilemma; shamefacedness; Abhishek Banerjee; Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah

## Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to the growing literature on political dynasticism in contemporary South Asia. This literature conceptualises contemporary 'dynasticism' as qualitatively different from that which we associate with prominent pre-democratic ruling class families. The new dynasties and their founders are rather part of a new democratic elite and are found in virtually all parties, embedded regionally or even locally. Members of such dynasties occupy not just elected offices but are found spread across representative institutions at multiple levels, with strong local roots and influence over regional politics (see Chandra 2016 for a detailed discussion on the definitional aspects). There is a temporality inherent in the idea, as a 'dynastic politician' is one who is preceded by family members who were active in electoral politics, thereby succeeding into a pre-existing

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political network (though see Ruud and Nielsen 2018 and Van Liefferinge and Steyvers 2009 for a discussion on the challenges of such delimitation).

Building on the argument that political dynasties are fundamentally trust networks based on reciprocity centred on a politically adept player (Ruud and Islam 2016; Ruud and Nielsen 2018), we argue that these networks may possess substantive autonomous power themselves – a power that becomes particularly acute and visible during the time of dynastic succession. During such moments the new dynastic heir is actively seeking to ensure the dynasty's reproduction. Moments of dynastic succession, then, are perilous moments when the routine functioning of dynastic formations is particularly prone to disruption. They are also moments that allow us to more clearly identify and analyse a specific dilemma that all political dynasties have to negotiate as they seek to reproduce themselves across generations. In simplified form, this dynastic dilemma consists of the following: how to reconcile (1) the need to project emerging dynastic heirs as extraordinary beings that embody the special qualities of the original dynast and his or her extraordinary capacity for effecting change in the world, with (2) the need to downplay inherited dynastic ties that leave the heir open to public accusations of nepotism and illegitimate privilege. A successful succession, we argue, relies on the ability to negotiate this dilemma.

Here, we seek to understand how this dynastic dilemma is negotiated in practice. We argue that this occurs in two different arenas, each with its own set of dynamics and challenges. In brief, these arenas are, first, public opinion and public perception, an arena particularly acute for political dynasties in the political environments in which leadership depends on some form of public approval; and, secondly, in the more closed set of relationships with activists, businessmen and associated leaders in which the dynasty's effective power ultimately resides. Ultimately, the dynastic dilemma is rarely fully or finally resolved. It lingers, partly in full view and trivialised and partly as an ever-present weak point. Dynastic inheritance, we argue, is a powerful source of strength for the heir and yet illegitimate and shamefaced.

In order to shed light on how the dynastic dilemma is negotiated in these two arenas, we analyse and juxtapose two cases of dynastic succession. For reasons that we elaborate on later, we have selected cases from the regional rather than national level. The first case is drawn from West Bengal in India, the second from Barishal city in Bangladesh. The former concerns dynastic succession to the second generation of a newly established political dynasty, while the latter concerns succession to the third generation of a sprawling and well-entrenched political dynasty. Each case has its own distinctive set of features and our juxtaposition is not based on similar constituent elements in each case. Nonetheless, we can identify clear commonalities across national boundaries and dynastic generations which allows us to propose a broader set of arguments about dynastic politics in contemporary South Asia. In terms of methodological design, both cases are based on insights from ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and a careful reading of relevant news coverage. The case from Bangladesh specifically draws from fieldwork by author two and his research collaborators carried out episodically over a period of 15 years, whereas the West Bengal case is primarily based on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted over 2019–2021. Alongside, all authors have conducted in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in West Bengal for shorter or longer periods over several decades, and we draw on this first-hand experience to contextualise our material.

The article is structured as follows. We first survey current debates on political dynasticism, focusing particularly on the South Asian context. We then define our notion of 'dynastic dilemma' in more detail, before we proceed to the analysis of our two cases. The conclusion elaborates on how the dynastic dilemma is negotiated in practice.

## **Political dynasticism in South Asia**

Many years ago, an Indian publication wrote that 'dynasties die nasty' (cited in Salam 2019). The author was referring to the Nehru–Gandhi family and the fact that two generations of the family

had met with a violent end. But, the statement might as well have been made with reference to the Bhutto family in Pakistan, members of which have been executed, assassinated, or forcibly exiled, or any of the other prominent political families in South Asia.

Although pervasive and persuasive in postcolonial South Asia, political dynasticism is far from exclusive to the Subcontinent. It thrives under very different political and historical experiences and can be found in many democracies. Examples range from Brazil, Mexico and the USA in the Americas; Italy, Greece, Belgium and even Scandinavia in Europe; to Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and the Philippines in Asia (Camp 1982; Dal Bó, Bó, and Snyder 2009; Laband and Lentz 1985; Mendoza et al. 2012; Muraoka 2018; Patrikios and Chatzikonstantinou 2015; Querubin 2010; Tusalem and Pe-Aguirre 2013; and Sjögren 2018). These examples display many differences, in particular in degrees of persuasiveness and in terms of how important individual dynasties are in their country's political web. To a considerable extent, dynasticism seems independent of a range of other qualities that it could potentially be correlated with: Political dynasties can be found in liberal democracies, in both young and old democracies, in countries that move towards greater freedoms or away from such freedoms, in advanced or emerging economies, and in electoral systems using proportional representation as well as in 'first past the post' systems. Globally as well as within South Asia, we find substantial variation. Within South Asia, important contributions to the debate have identified enabling factors such as the institutional weakness of political parties (Chhibber 2013), the discretionary role of the state (Chandra 2016), or dynasticism as an organisational principle (Luce 2004). Yet, there remain significant conceptual ambiguity and lack of empirical granularity in such conceptualisations (for a detailed literature review see Chandra 2016; Ruud and Islam 2016; Ruud and Nielsen 2018).

In terms of the extent of political dynasticism in South Asia, estimates vary. For India, the proportion of dynastic members of parliament (MPs) declined slightly in the 2014 Lok Sabha (lower house of the parliament) elections compared to the preceding parliament to 24 percent according to one study and to 21 percent according to another (Chandra 2014).<sup>1</sup> In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections several prominent dynastic candidates failed to be elected and many commentators declared the 'fall of dynastic politics' (Bakshi 2019). However, closer analysis revealed that the dynastic factor had in fact increased as close to 30 percent of elected MPs belonged to so-called political families (Verniers and Jaffrelot 2019). The situation in Bangladesh is comparable although reliable nationwide figures are hard to come by. While two prominent dynasties dominate national politics, one study of four elections in 10 constituencies found that about 30 percent of all candidates were dynastic (Ruud and Islam 2016).<sup>2</sup> Although dynastic candidates are thus a minority, dynasticism has been described as 'business as usual' (Jensenius 2018) and is routinely endorsed by the electorate in both countries (Chandra 2016).

The pattern across borders in South Asia is that most political dynasties thrive locally or regionally. They are formed in states, districts, regions, or even single constituencies. This, we argue, makes the local or regional scale the most interesting location for the study of political dynasticism. Indeed, this is where the fate and future of dynastic politics is increasingly being shaped (Ashraf 2019; Ruud and Nielsen 2018). The persistence of dynastic formations at these levels also shows that dynasties do not necessarily die nasty. Some thrive for generations whereas others wither quietly; some prosper for a time, others linger on.

In an introduction to an earlier collection of ethnographically based case studies on such regionally anchored dynasties, we argued three points (Ruud and Nielsen 2018) that are relevant to the present discussion. First, and contrary to popular perception, political dynasties consist not merely of 'a family' but of larger networks based on reciprocity, a mesh of relationships in which family relations constitute a common form. These networks stretch far beyond the purely political domain, rendering the distinction between political and non-political dynasticism almost meaningless. Second, these networks have been built and held together by a dynast and are passed on to dynastic heirs. Dynasticism is, in other words, not just family projects but network projects built and sustained by particularly astute individuals. Nonetheless, the trust that holds this network

together is personal, forged and honed by the original dynast. In other words, in the world of opacities, dangers and mutuality that constitute politics, trust is crucial. When this trust is successfully passed on to the heir, the network fully operational and intact, there is a clear political benefit – what we refer to as a dynastic dividend: that which potentially gives a dynastic candidate the edge over internal or external rivals.

Third, in contemporary South Asia's political environment dynastic inheritance is no free-card to success.<sup>3</sup> Dynastic politicians must secure public approval, and whether this happens in fair elections or not, dynasties face continuous challenges in cut-throat political competition. While the networks remain key resources in this competitive game, the personal qualities, individual charisma or authority, or the lack thereof, remain crucial to maintaining the position vis-à-vis the public and internally within the network. Primary among these qualities is, we argue, the ability to negotiate the dynastic dilemma. And yet, even successful negotiations of this dilemma internally may be tarnished by how dynasticism may also, in public discourse, be seen as an illegitimate source of power and influence and associated with nepotism and corruption. This means that dynasticism may also be a liability – or, at the very least, that reaping the 'dynastic dividend' in the form of a network of useful relations will require ongoing and skilful negotiation not to grow sour with the public.

## Two moments of dynastic succession

We use moments of dynastic succession as privileged entry points into our analysis of the dynastic dilemma sketched above. Unlike the event of a coronation when an heir is officially installed on the throne, we conceive of moments of dynastic succession as drawn-out processes with a temporality of their own – as uncertain and perilous processes that often (as our two cases will show) unfold over many years, as dynastic heirs are gradually inducted into powerful networks. This understanding of dynastic succession as 'moments' is inspired by Bruce Kapferer's (2015, 2) writings on 'the event' as 'a moment or moments of immanence and the affirmation and realization of potential'. While we conceive of dynastic succession as temporally extended moments of immanence that shine a clear light on an established dilemma, we also argue that they are in fact moments of potency, during which the actors involved negotiate this dilemma to chart a new future for the dynasty. These drawn-out moments of negotiation may last several years, as we show later in our two cases from West Bengal in India and Barishal in Bangladesh.

Abhishek Banerjee is two times MP from the Diamond Harbour constituency in West Bengal and represents the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the ruling party in the state. The state chief minister Mamata Banerjee is his aunt. She is also the party's founder and its undisputed supremo (Nielsen 2011). She has been chief minister of the state since 2011 and has won re-election twice since, the most recent one a resounding victory against concerted efforts by the nationally ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to wrest the state from her. Despite his young age (born in 1987), as Mamata Banerjee's *bhaipo* (nephew) Abhishek is now widely seen as her political heir. Party leaders, including the erstwhile national general secretary, reportedly said of Abhishek that he had 'inherited and developed political instincts' and that 'he is the future' (Bhattacharya 2018).

As political dynasties go, this is a small one. Only Abhishek's mother has a politically influential position as Mamata's trusted aide for years. Other family members do not seem to play any political role, including Mamata's six brothers. Nonetheless it is clear that Mamata Banerjee herself has taken her nephew under her wings and is grooming him as her political heir. His first entry into politics in 2011 was as the unofficial head of the TMC's cyber unit when he was still in his early twenties. After this his rise was swift. He made his first 'political appearance' at TMC's annual Martyrs' Day commemorations the same year, where he was introduced as the national president of a new outfit called All India Trinamool Yuva [youth]. TMC already had another youth association and the target constituency for and indeed the relevance of the new youth organisation was not immediately evident – except that it provided Abhishek with a political platform. Organising his support base over the next three years, Abhishek ran and won in the Lok Sabha elections for the first time in 2014, at

the age of 27. The same year, his All India Trinamool Yuva merged with the older youth organisation and Abhishek was put at the helm, making him the definitive youth face of the party.

In 2019, after years of speculation over Abhishek's future role, Mamata herself finally announced that she had brought a family member into politics 'knowingly', because 'a day will come when the current generation will have to hand over the baton'. In the national parliament elections a few months later, Abhishek was re-elected even if the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept several districts where he had been in charge of campaigning. He re-emerged as TMC's most influential campaigner after Mamata in the state assembly elections two years later. He is credited with bringing in poll-strategist Prashant Kishor to the TMC camp and has been seen as instrumental in activities contributing to the TMC's resounding election victory (Gupta 2021). In the 31 seats of his own district (South 24 Parganas), BJP won only four, and it drew a blank in Jhargram district where Abhishek was in charge.<sup>4</sup> After this and almost a decade after his first political 'outing', Abhishek was firmly established as the heir of a fledgling political dynasty headed by his aunt.

While the Banerjee dynasty in West Bengal follows the script of ruling political leaders who introduce an heir to ensure the continuation of their local power, the Mujibur dynasty across the border in Bangladesh is of the established kind, three generations deep and fully in control of a nation. Prime minister Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the unquestioned leader since 1982 of the ruling party, Awami League. She has been prime minister since 2008 and there is little reason to believe her grip will loosen any time soon (Ruud 2021). The state under her stewardship is characterised as a hybrid regime or a one-party state (Riaz 2019). Her extended family includes at least ten former or current members of parliament,<sup>5</sup> former or current government ministers or advisors, a mayor of Dhaka South and another of Barishal city in the south, a distant member was the country's president, one served as president of the chamber of commerce and one heads a major think tank. It would be an exaggeration to claim that Bangladesh is turning into a dynastic polity, as there are many other local dynasties and indeed individual leaders of considerable significance in different parts of the country (Ruud and Islam 2016). And yet the position of the Mujibur family is unassailable, and hence there should be a clear 'dynastic dividend' to be appropriated by any aspiring member. That this appropriation was far from easily executed in the case of Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah that we now turn to, offers key insights into the practicalities of dynastic succession and the perils of dynastic liability.

Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah is the prime minister's great-nephew and mayor of Barishal city. He is the son of Abul Hasnat Abdullah, often referred to as one of the country's 'godfathers', a political leader not afraid of dirtying his hands (Ruud 2019). Hasnat is several times MP, former whip, former cabinet minister, the prime minister's cousin and the most powerful Awami League leader in this part of the country. He is also son of Abdur Rab Serniabat, the brother-in-law and close ally of the Father of the Nation. Serniabat was assassinated in the same ill-conceived coup that killed Mujibur and that today is marked as National Mourning Day. This makes Sadiq member of a political dynasty that is not only powerful but with which the nation and its destiny are closely identified in both popular and governmental narratives (Mookherjee 2007; Ruud 2022). For National Mourning Day, banners displaying photos of Mujibur and other victims of the assassination, including Sadiq's grandfather, are displayed prominently in city streets along which mournful processions walk.

This powerful family legacy, however, does not immediately or automatically translate into political acumen or influence. Sadiq was first launched into the political limelight when former city mayor Sawkat Hossain Hiron in 2014 suddenly died two weeks after being elected MP. The only place in this part of the country Sadiq's father did not control was this, the region's largest city. Moreover, the late MP and Sadiq's father, though leaders within the same ruling party, had been bitter rivals for years. Only a few months earlier they had had an acrimonious fall-out in full public view.

However, within days of Hiron's death a large banner featuring a photo of Sadiq was displayed on the city Awami League building. It was the first sign that Hasnat wanted his son to be the party's candidate for the bye-election. But Sadiq was largely unknown in the city and the network built

by the deceased MP successfully resisted Hasnat's move. This broad and powerful coalition of business associates, party leaders and activists, contractors, local media owners, officials and police officers and enforcers, lobbied for Hiron's inexperienced widow instead (Ruud 2019).

The next opportunity for Sadiq was the Barishal mayoral election in 2018. By then Sadiq's political CV was still short albeit not that short. He had been made joint secretary of the Barishal City Awami League which indicated that resistance to Hasnat was weakening because without Hiron as the master network builder their power withered.

That still did not mean an open road for Sadiq. The party delayed announcing its candidate and several contenders seemed in the race, some of whom were senior and had long records of party service. At one stage a frustrated Sadiq left Barishal, sensing that he might not be nominated. Eventually his father Hasnat travelled to Dhaka to insist that his son be nominated by reminding the party high command of his family's sacrifices. Eventually, the party high command relented. Other contenders were bought off, rumours have it, with the assurance that they would be considered as candidates in the parliamentary election to be held later the same year. Sadiq was then nominated and duly elected mayor of Barishal in July 2018. But, as we shall see, even now his dynastic position is not sufficient for his political career to go unchallenged.

We have here the case of two dynastic heirs, both pushed forward by eager and powerful dynasts. And yet the process of dynastic succession took time and considerable effort and political capital to achieve. It is this initial resistance and the later relenting after concerted efforts by the dynast which we need to investigate, and which will help us understand what we have identified as both liability and dividend of political dynasticism.

### **Dynastic dilemma: liabilities and dividends**

The fact that political dynasticism simultaneously offers dividends and liabilities throws up the dynastic dilemma we formulated above in a schematic form: how can dynastic leaders (1) convincingly project an image as extraordinary beings that embody special dynastic qualities and an extraordinary capacity for effecting changes in the world, while simultaneously (2) credibly downplay inherited dynastic privilege? This dilemma, we argue, cannot be resolved once and for all. Nor can the twin imperatives that it places on dynastic candidates be reconciled.

Looking at the first element in our dilemma, it is widely acknowledged in the anthropological literature on popular politics in South Asia that voters frequently expect their elected politicians – irrespective of dynastic pedigree – to be capable of effecting important changes in the world, of 'making things happen' (Price and Ruud 2010; Nielsen 2012; 2018, 147–187; Michelutti et al. 2019). They need to be seen as helpful and supportive to their constituency, protective of their supporters, capable of bringing jobs, infrastructure, and 'development' to people. To do so, they should possess, or be able to access, wealth and be seen to use it to the benefit of the people to enhance their well-being. Similarly, elected leaders are expected to be powerfully protective, capable of guaranteeing their supporters' safety and their protection from harassment from rivals or state representatives. In this sense, voters' perception of the personal qualities and capacities of the candidate matters. For dynastic political leaders, the capacity for 'making things happen' is rooted in the extensive networks of power and influence that place significant wealth and material resources (and muscle power) at their disposal.<sup>6</sup> As indicated above, these networks represent what we call the dynastic dividend. It is what enables the dynastic politician to appear powerful.

Dynastic heirs, however, cannot passively accept being ascribed this status – they must actively claim it. At moments of dynastic succession, a prospective heir must stake a convincing claim that he or she is capable of taking on the task of holding the network together over time – of nurturing it and ensuring its reproduction on an expanded scale. Prospective dynastic heirs must, in other words, claim to have special qualities that make them (and not their rivals) superior network managers.

While this dynastic dividend is arguably the strength of dynastic formations – that which may give an edge over non-dynastic rivals – the modality in which this dividend is reproduced over time may

also become its biggest weakness. As Jensenius (2018) shows in her analysis of the Constituent Assembly Debates in the 1940s, dynasticism was viewed by the framers of the constitution as something decidedly negative, a threat to democracy and closely associated with nepotism, corruption and favouritism. These negative connotations linger and emerge in public discourse today as well, often surfacing around the time of elections when questions about inherited privilege become particularly politicised. A recent case in point is Narendra Modi's 2014 election campaign, where he portrayed his dynastic opponent Rahul Gandhi as *shahzada*, a Muslim princeling (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019, 3), and his family as mired in nepotism, corruption and undeserved privilege. If elected, Modi would liberate India from such exploitative and oppressive *naamdars* (dynasts), he asserted, while casting himself as a selfless and dedicated *kaamdar* (worker) (Mannathukaren 2019). Such political rhetoric taps into the ideas and values that we ideal-typically associate with democracy – ideas and values that in India have gradually been vernacularised into everyday life (Banerjee 2022; Michelutti 2008), including ideas about the voter as supreme, and elected leaders as servants rather than masters (Ruud and Heierstad 2016). Faced with such rhetorical challenges, aspiring dynasts cannot disavow their dynastic pedigree. Indeed, doing so would amount to giving up on the dynastic dividend altogether. Instead, dynastic heirs try to deal with this challenge through a shamefaced recognition of dynasticism. This argument is partly indebted to Louis Dumont's idea of hierarchy as shamefaced. Dumont argues that the hierarchies and strict interdependencies of the caste system were in fact never entirely hegemonic but instead structurally balanced by the presence of the ascetic renouncer, who provided 'the contradictory' to hierarchy (Dumont 1980, 185–186). He makes a comparable argument for 'Western society', noting how they contain hierarchical forms of social organisation (class, racism) despite their ideological focus on 'the individual' and professed ideals of egalitarianism (Dumont 1980, 66; 237). Dumont takes this to mean that hierarchy does not disappear 'in the modern age' – it rather becomes shamefaced (Dumont 1980, 66).

One need not subscribe to Dumont's structuralist approach and overdrawn binaries to appreciate his argument about the shamefaced nature of hierarchy in contexts such as democratic elections where an egalitarian ethos is dominant. We build on his argument to suggest that at the current conjuncture, dynasticism – which is inherently hierarchical – necessarily appears as shamefaced and repressed. As we show below, at the level of public self-representation, while their dynastic privilege is public knowledge, this 'shamefaced dynasticism' registers in concerted efforts by aspiring heirs at trivialising the significance of dynastic inheritance in favour of an image as a hardworking, entrepreneurial individual who has made his own way in the world through talent, merit, commitment and perseverance. At the risk of simplifying, we argue that aspiring dynasts need to be simultaneously unexceptional and extraordinary; hyper-networked and individualistically entrepreneurial – and convincingly so. The next part of this article is devoted to analysing how this is sought to be achieved in practice in the two arenas identified earlier: public image and perception, and internally within the network.

## Negotiating public image and perception

In Sadiq's case, his dynastic position is for all to see all the time. There are posters and banners all over Barishal displaying his portrait alongside those of his father, often his grandfather, and invariably his great aunt the prime minister and her father. Such posters are an everyday part of political life in Bangladesh (Kuttig 2020). Even aspiring local activists put up posters of themselves with those of their senior leaders and those of the prime minister, her father and sometimes also her son. Normally this is to emphasise a line of political loyalty and connection but in Sadiq's case they are simultaneously dynastic connections.

Yet instead of referring to his obvious family connection when running for mayor in 2018, Sadiq made sometimes oblique and sometimes more open endorsements of Shawkat Hossain Hiron, the MP who died suddenly in 2014 and who had been a very popular mayor of Barishal some years



earlier (2008–2013). Hiron, as we noted above, had also been the locally most prominent rival of Sadiq's father. During the election campaign, Sadiq expressed a hope that he would be able to 'complete the unfinished work of the erstwhile popular city mayor, Sawkat Hosen Hiron' according to news reports (Ahmed 2018). Reports from between election and inauguration portrayed him as riding around town in a rickshaw much like Hiron had. One report is even called 'Sadiq in Hiron's footsteps'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Sadiq's election manifesto was little beyond promising to continue the initiatives that had characterised Hiron's time as mayor. When asked to spell out his aims, Sadiq is reported to have said:

I will combat drugs and terrorism in the city. I want to stop early marriages, set up community clinics in every ward of the city, arrange international games at Barishal Stadium, recover the city's clogged canals, resolve the waterlogging problem and create employment for youths.

These were all references to the urban development works for which Hiron as mayor had been famous. He had supposedly turned around a city previously known as backward and suffering from waterlogging, smelly wastage canals, unlit city streets, and few public spaces. Sadiq's stated aim was to create a *Ruposhi Barishal*, 'Beautiful Barishal', a direct reference to Hiron's beautification works. In a private communication, a journalist said that on the streets of Barishal, Hiron was part of the election even four years after his death.

For Sadiq to model himself on Hiron is interesting because he did not model himself on his father or emphasise his family lineage or his family's legacy or influence. His unique dynastic heritage was widely known, but unlike Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who invariably refers to her father's assassination and her own exile and suffering, Sadiq did not explicitly mention his father during his public campaigning. He referred instead to his father's rival.

There is infamous baggage in the family's history which is likely to have worked against him in popular perception, and which may have led him to downplay his dynastic pedigree. As one of the country's 'godfathers', a strong-arm political leader with wide-reaching influence and allegedly unsavoury methods, his father and brothers gained a reputation for strongarm politics including land grabbing during the 1996–2001 period. Allegations even appeared in national newspapers during the 2001 election. The allegations were not repeated in print media during the subsequent 2014 and 2018 campaigns, but they lingered in popular memory.

Sadiq has been clear about his family links, but in a circumspect manner – distancing himself from some aspects without denouncing others. He regularly takes part in important national commemorations in which his family's loss and suffering are an important part. He has also inaugurated a religious compound and a student dormitory in the name of his mother – the sister of the Father of the Nation. Opening an institution in her name underlines the dynastic legacy and its claim to hold an extraordinary place in the nation's history.

Across the border, in West Bengal, India, Abhishek Banerjee faced the same dilemma but chose a different strategy. When in 2019 it became clear that Mamata Banerjee favoured him as her official heir, he soon became a chief target in BJP's campaign strategy. From the prime minister to district level leaders, no one in BJP completed a speech without accusing the '*tolabaj bhaipo*' (extortionist nephew; Banerjee 2020), hinting at his alleged disproportionate wealth (Loiwal 2019). In April 2019, Modi spoke of the 'game of the aunt and the nephew';<sup>8</sup> in 2021, Union Minister Anurag Thakur compared Abhishek to Gulf sheikhs (Upadhyay 2021); and the same year, Home Minister Amit Shah claimed that 'Mamata Banerjee is wondering when she can make her nephew Chief Minister', adding that the TMC had only one slogan: '*Bhatija bachao, bhatija kalyan*' (save the nephew, nephew's welfare; Gupta 2021). Abhishek countered these persistent allegations by daring the BJP to bring a law banning more than one member from a family from entering politics and by promising that he would be 'publicly hanging himself' if any of the corruption charges were proven true.<sup>9</sup> Mamata herself seemed to implicitly confirm his rising position when she quipped in response to BJP's allegations: 'First fight Abhishek, then me'.<sup>10</sup>

The dynastic dilemma was perhaps most visibly negotiated on the campaign trail. On the one hand, Abhishek's 'extraordinary' status was here asserted through his close physical proximity to Mamata in all party functions, rallies and demonstrations – they were, for example, often seen to be having private conversations in front of the media and other public platforms. He was also allotted a helicopter for campaigning, a privilege only Mamata herself enjoyed. And he was put in charge of several districts where he acted as an observer for the selection and nomination of candidates and their campaign strategy. At the same time, he used the campaign trail to carve out a more independent profile. For example, in the run-up to the 2021 elections, Abhishek did 60 public events covering 60 assembly constituencies across ten districts over 26 days; he was seen 'crisscrossing the entire length and breadth of the state in order to boost the TMC's chances in a fiercely fought election', with a schedule 'as exhaustive as that of any top BJP leader, and ... just a shade below the CM's itineraries' (Sharma 2021). He also had an active social media presence, curated to strike a more balanced tone than the more confrontational attitude Mamata usually displayed.

Also, Abhishek carefully kept away from government positions. Unlike many other dynastic claimants inducted into formal government positions, such as Sadiq, Abhishek proudly asserted that he had not even been four days inside Nabanna (where the West Bengal state secretariat is located) over the preceding ten years.<sup>11</sup> This distancing from governmental power enabled a stronger focus on his individual qualities, and his capacity for using political determination, grit and entrepreneurial spirit, to build a career independently of political office. The fact that he exerted no formal influence over the state government, and that the party and all party leaders assert that there was, in fact, no chief minister-in-waiting, helped Abhishek to deflect accusations of dynasticism.

While Abhishek mimicked Mamata's style of addressing a crowd and rousing an audience, he otherwise cultivated an image very different from his aunt, as a strategic effort to establish an independent political profile. Sartorial style and 'dress performances' are important acts of political communication in South Asian contexts (Nielsen 2016; Vittorini 2022), and Abhishek was often clad in a starched white *kurta*, blue denim and branded sneakers, his rimmed glasses and gelled hair a far cry from Mamata's simple cotton saris, slippers and *jhola* (cotton shoulder-bag). His style was closer to that cultivated by the new breed of younger Congress leaders like Rahul Gandhi and Sachin Pilot, both of whom also labour in the long shadows of dynastic inheritance. In a similar vein, TMC has sought to project Abhishek's youth, energy, and entrepreneurial abilities, and not his kinship connection, as his main source of political capital. Party insiders confirmed that during the initial days of his political career, a PR company was hired to provide image-building consultancy, and several meetings took place with 'sympathetic' journalists to chalk out a campaigning strategy to project him as a youth leader and a leader of the new generation – and not merely as 'the nephew'.

Summing up how public image elucidates the dilemma of dynastic succession; in both our cases the allegations of dynastic privilege was an element that had to be countered. In the case of Abhishek, his dynastic privilege was explicitly used against him. In the case of Sadiq, the assault was unstated and existed more as a public misgiving and yet it too caused embarrassment and conscious effort to deny its relevance. Abhishek and his aunt countered the accusations head on with great vigour in what may be seen as a move very typical of the 'firebrand' Mamata Banerjee, whereas Sadiq's strategy was to downplay his dynastic privilege while never denouncing it.

The dynastic dividend for the heirs is evident in both cases. Neither of them would have been where they ended up without the proactive and concerted effort of their respective dynast. In fact, the effectiveness of these two heirs is linked directly to the dynast – a fact publicly known and emphasised as part of their dynastic specialness. And yet this link is underplayed, at times almost hidden. It is, and it isn't.

While public scepticism towards dynastic heirs is perhaps to be expected, it may seem more surprising that there should also be reluctance internally within the more closed network that underpins a dynastic formation. Nevertheless, we shall see resistance or at least reserved enthusiasm also here. As with their public image and appearance, heirs need to come across also internally as

dynamic and able to guarantee opportunities and protection. But as young heirs with little by way of experience they also need to negotiate rank within the closer network.

### Managing the network and negotiating rank

After close to a decade in politics, Abhishek's ability to extend the dynastic dividend on his own terms remains somewhat ambiguous. Although evidence remains largely anecdotal and circum-spect, based on conversations with party insiders and journalists close to the TMC camp, it is possible to develop a sense of the network project that Abhishek has ascended to and is now looking after. What seems to have affirmed his status in the party hierarchy – and the network – is his gradual elevation to the most coveted responsibility, handling the party coffers. It is a responsibility that was earlier entrusted to Mukul Roy, one of Mamata's longest and closest deputies. When Roy resigned from the TMC in 2017,<sup>12</sup> the responsibility of party financial management was transferred to Abhishek.<sup>13</sup> And here it remained even though Mukul Roy returned to TMC in 2021. In addition, he is reported to have a say in key administrative decisions about promotions, postings and transfers of top-level bureaucrats and police officers. Promotions and postings are an important source of money for the party, as desirable posts are often known to fetch a good 'price'. Alongside this, there are three other important networks that generate significant funds for the party: illegal coal mining, sand and stone-chips mining, and cattle smuggling (altogether estimated at INR 30–40 crore per month). BJP has repeatedly alleged that Abhishek is involved in all these more or less illegal networks, but in spite of ongoing investigations against him and his family,<sup>14</sup> the charges have not been proven.

However, if we look at how Abhishek handled this authority, and how he sought to enhance his own political capital in the process, it seems that he was slow in building trust-based relationships within the party. A pro-TMC businessman, known to be close to both Abhishek and Mamata, cautiously explained that some businessmen keep following him 'solely to ensure a better access to *didi*.' They just use Abhishek, he claimed, because Abhishek 'is a *bachha chhele* [young boy] after all.'<sup>15</sup>

Despite having come a long way in little time, as a 'young boy' Abhishek remained an heir who still depended on his aunt for power and authority. In fact, his rapid rise within TMC in 2019 caused factional struggles to brew within the party, with several veteran party leaders expressing their displeasure about Abhishek's rapid ascent within the ranks. Under conditions of strict anonymity, one of the senior-most TMC leaders and a trusted aide of Mamata, articulated this criticism:

All senior party leaders are today alienated and threatened by Abhishek's meteoric rise through the party hierarchy. Not only do they harbour anti-Abhishek sentiments, but they even go to the extent of abusing him behind closed doors. The only reason this is not out in the public is because of a primordial loyalty most older leaders have to Mamata herself, and of course the share of the pie most of them enjoy. Neither does he have, nor does he seem to be interested in developing the kind of political capital that would allow him to sustain the party networks after Mamata. He rarely travels through the state, which is an absolute must if one is serious about building political networks and relationship. He cannot also claim to be a good parliamentarian, having not made a single memorable speech till date. Abhishek is protected, at least from a factional revolt, as long as Mamata is at the helm. But if we lose the next state election, knives might be out.<sup>16</sup>

Inside the party Abhishek had a rather 'arrogant' image. He was known to make senior party leaders stand in attendance or to open the door for him as he gets out of the car. A change in his use of kinship terminology vis-à-vis elder leaders was also noted by senior journalists: he addressed leaders much senior to himself in age and experience informally as *dada* [elder brother] rather than the customary and more respectful *kaku* (uncle).<sup>17</sup> TMC members who had at various times left the party also often cited Abhishek's autocratic manner, and unlike his aunt, he was widely seen as inaccessible to the public.<sup>18</sup>

This lack of trust and the perceptions of arrogance were further fuelled by the preferential treatment Abhishek enjoyed. There have, for example, been repeated allegations of him and the Banerjee

family acquiring properties and land in the area surrounding the Chief Minister's family home and making a fortune from it (Chakraborty 2019).<sup>19</sup> And indeed, Abhishek's burgeoning wealth was hard to miss. The senior TMC leader quoted above observed that:

All ministers and party members want to remain in the good books of the Chief Minister. But privately, most of them are fed up with the level of benefits showered upon Abhishek. Many of them have even said to me: 'Who is he to enjoy such benefits? What has he done for the party? He has just been catapulted from above'. Apart from his own coterie and networks that have gathered for financial benefits, the entire party is against him.<sup>20</sup>

Later, however, his elevation to the position of party general secretary was unanimously approved by the party's working committee and senior leaders seemed to be 'falling in line'. Calling him 'passionate and dedicated', TMC MP and national spokesperson Derek O'Brien held that while 'his opponents have maligned him endlessly, today he should stand tall'.<sup>21</sup> In terms of rank, then, there was no doubt that Abhishek was now 'the true heir' to the party even if his rise within the network had been disputed.<sup>22</sup>

In a somewhat different situation, Sadiq battled some of the same challenges arising from misgivings within a network supportive of the party but reluctant to accept the seemingly privileged dynastic heir. This is interesting for several reasons. They chose to resist the claims made by a powerful member of the country's first family. Even more intriguing is that the decision to nominate an inexperienced widow over the dynastic heir suggested that even the party's central leadership had not immediately warmed to the idea of a further consolidation of Hasnat's family position in Barishal. There seems to have been hesitation higher up in the party regarding an expansion of Hasnat's power and possibly – albeit evidence is circumstantial – even within the dynasty. As prime minister and party leader Sheikh Hasina catered to her extended family and its position, but she also guarded against individual members and kept them down when required. A dynasty may be family, but the dynast does not necessarily see their interests purely in that light.

After his election as mayor, Sadiq faced new challenges and seemed to lack influence in places that would secure the future as a self-established politician independent of the dynasty he hailed from. There were rumblings within because of a lack of new major undertakings during Sadiq's time as mayor.<sup>23</sup> This situation made the politically crucial contractors in the network unhappy and constituted a problem for financing political activities. Major public undertakings ensure work and income for local contractors, who in turn finance political leaders. The reason for the dearth of public works under Sadiq was that allocations to Barishal were increasingly channelled through the district administration rather than the city corporation. This was possibly an expression of frustration on the part of the ruling party and government with what was considered an underperforming mayor. Money channelled through the district administration came under the control of the MP, Zahid Faruque Shamim. This MP was an experienced politician and former army officer who had emerged as a separate node of power in Barishal, separate from Hasnat and his family. He had also been made minister. Shamim had easier access to decision-making in Dhaka than Sadiq, being closer to it and more well-connected, and he was able to secure more contracts. Much of the network former mayor Hiron had built only reluctantly accepted Sadiq's take-over efforts and when Sadiq proved inadequate, moved their allegiance to the more effective MP. A physical clash and shooting incident that took place at the compound of a local administrative officer in the autumn of 2021 was linked to the mayor's frustration and rivalry with the minister.

The Hasnat family should have strong supporters and contacts high up in the party apparatus, and yet it seemed unable to secure for Sadiq the same level of contracts. There are several theories locally about why this was so, and they all point to the dilemmas inherent in dynasticism. First, Hasnat's family had opponents even within the party. Most MPs from the region were not happy with the family's omnipresent influence. Secondly, some contractors expressed unhappiness with Sadiq because they felt he did not treat them with respect. This was particularly his father's men, a point that underlines that negotiations for dynastic succession require deft management skills as not one but several strategies are necessary. Sadiq was alleged to have misbehaved with some

of his father's associates – there were rumours of insults and assault, although these may be exaggerations. Sources more sympathetic to Sadiq suggested that he was annoyed by demands made by his father's men and that he wished to establish his own group. He wanted to be seen as the one in charge, which was necessary if he were to build his own political platform. A third element is that when family matters in politics, family matters become politics. There were rumours of a rift over Sadiq's marriage to the daughter of a leader from the opposition. Whichever the merits of all these elements, taken together they created unrest in the network and undermined the credibility and force of Sadiq's efforts to secure contracts.

Both Abhishek and Sadiq struggled with rumblings internally in their respective networks and organisations. Both men were by some perceived as arrogant and disrespectful, in particular by the older guard who had been active in the decades of struggle that formed their organisations. These party veterans found it difficult to subordinate themselves to young and inexperienced leaders catapulted into positions due to their dynastic background while the young heir sought to establish himself as leader in his own right and possibly with his own network. This fact underlines how the dilemma dynasties face is not confined to their public image alone. These rumblings were all the more important because they threatened to directly affect the power on which the dynasty's position relied: the ability to draw on the support of an extended network of contractors, businessmen, activists, and local leaders.

## Conclusion

Dynastic pedigree is a contradictory phenomenon that comes with both liabilities and dividends: it can be a powerful source of strength for the heir, and yet is simultaneously illegitimate and shame-faced. This comes out in several ways in the preceding pages covering the dynastic succession stories of the two heirs, Abhishek and Sadiq. Networked-based political dynasties such as those analysed here spread their influence far and wide, much beyond the domain of electoral politics. Nevertheless, it is in this domain that their popularity is routinely assessed and their fate decided. And here, public opinion matters. Although dynastic candidates often win elections, voters may have reservations about particular aspiring dynasts and dynastic rule in principle. In other words, voters need to be continuously convinced that government by dynasty is acceptable. A dynasty is potentially problematic in a world where rhetorical commitment to the principles of democracy has become the norm, and where political rhetoric often links dynasticism to nepotism and ill-deserved privilege. A dynasty operating in the domain of electoral politics must thus come across as powerful, in their own capacity, which may mean playing down inherited legacies and emphasising personal qualities instead.

Public opinion and perception matter crucially, but so does internal negotiations. In contemporary South Asian politics, a dynasty's power and position lie in its network, its ability to build, maintain and expand contacts to people who are useful and who see it as useful to them to be part of the network. Such networks are configured in different ways depending on political and economic context, as well as the subnational or regional level where the dynasty operates. They may include other party leaders, party activists and cadres, but also non-party individuals and groups who are helpful – such as police officers, bureaucrats, contractors, businessmen, cattle smugglers, sand mining barons, and people in the media. A dynastic heir's obligation is to maintain this network and, if possible, to expand it. But as long as the principal is still around and active, the heir's scope for independent action is limited: The network consists of people who have been around perhaps for a long time, old warhorses who know a thing or two, and who might have power bases of their own. They must be treated with respect, deference even, and given the benefits they – and others with them – feel is their due. At the same time, the aspiring heir needs to be assertive and show that they are, or are likely to be, capable of managing and even expanding the network when the time comes when the principal is no longer around. This situation requires

delicate handling and skilful negotiation and positioning within the closer network by the dynastic heir.

In both arenas where the dynastic dilemma is negotiated, the inescapable conundrum is that for a successful dynasty, the legacies that matter are embodied by the principal. While the principal should not be eclipsed, their heir should come across as no simple proxy, in which case he or she would be of little value. This makes dynasticism shamefaced – with shamefaced understood as a shorthand for real dilemmas.

## Notes

1. Also see <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lt%E2%80%99s-all-in-the-family/article10763540.ece>; accessed on 5th January 2022.
2. The picture is not dissimilar in Pakistan either, although information is scantier (T. Hussain 2011; Z. Hussain 2012).
3. From Bangladesh, for example, Ruud and Islam (2016) show how dynastic candidates fail at the same rate as other candidates.
4. See <https://results.eci.gov.in/Result2021/ConstituencywiseS2512.htm?ac=12> for assembly election results.
5. Depending on how to count 'family members' or if past generations are to be included, the number of MPs is about a dozen. Being a family member does not, however, indicate power. The PM's cousins Hasnat and Sheikh Selim are powerful and rule their constituencies; the more distant Nixon Chowdhury is MP but controversial and his power constantly challenged.
6. See Ziedfeld (2015) for a detailed discussion about the importance of certain characteristics when it comes to the candidate selection process, even after controlling for party popularity. Also see Sircar (2018) for a discussion on candidate 'winnability'.
7. Source: <https://newsbarisal.com/?p=12580> and <https://www.crimefocus.net/archives/13065>. Sadiq's campaign also featured an active online presence, including videos and social media, and he targeted youth voters; accessed on 7th September 2021.
8. Source: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/mamata-banerjee-lets-out-nephew-secret/cid/1690014>; accessed on 24th September 2019.
9. Source: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/will-quit-if-centre-brings-law-against-dynastic-politics-trinamools-abhishek-banerjee-2357517>; accessed on 15th May 2021.
10. Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/first-fight-abhishek-then-me-mamata-banerjee-challenges-amit-shah/articleshow/81090833.cms>; accessed on 12th May 2021.
11. Source: <https://www.anandabazar.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/wb-election-2021-interview-of-mp-abhishek-banerjee/cid/1277843>; accessed on 26th April 2021.
12. After spending four years in the BJP, Mukul Roy once again returned to TMC in June 2021, and was appointed as the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee in the state legislative assembly. He was personally welcomed back into the party by both Mamata and Abhishek. However, his role in party affairs, as of now, appears relatively more subdued than what it was before (Singh 2021).
13. There is anecdotal evidence of Abhishek and Roy's relationship being frosty at best before turning acrimonious, and even physical confrontation ensued towards the end of Roy's tenure. Abhishek is believed to have been clandestinely supported by Mamata to gradually curtail Roy's role in the party (Ghosal 2019). Since his departure from the TMC, Roy and Abhishek have filed defamation suits against each other, with Roy alleging that *Biswa Bangla*, a widely used logo by the government, is not a state entity but a private limited company owned by Abhishek (Banerjee 2017).
14. Source: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/family-of-trinamool-congress-abhishek-banerjee-coal-scam-linked-funds-ed-2409466>; accessed on 17th May 2021.
15. Source: Interview, 13th July 2019, Calcutta.
16. Source: Interview, 14th July 2019, Calcutta.
17. Source: Email interview, 4th December 2018.
18. Alongside these concerns related to honour, status, experience, and organisational achievement, there is also apprehension that the fast-tracking of the relatively inexperienced Abhishek will send a wrong signal to the electorate.
19. Also see <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/barb-for-barb-on-cm-family-s-property/cid/198755>; accessed on 16th September 2019.
20. Source: Interview, 14th July 2019, Calcutta
21. Source: <https://twitter.com/derekobrienmp/status/1388797412190261250>; accessed on 16th May 2021.
22. Source: telephone interview, 10th May 2021.
23. The main exception is a climate change programme: <https://www.banglanews24.com/index.php/national/news/bd/852182.details>

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## Disclosure statement

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