

'The People's Choice'

Democracy is dead or dying. Long live dynastic democracy. This is the South-Asian paradox. This is a curious mix of hypocrisy and corruption. And yet it functions with a bold face multiplying hopeless 'democratic' institutions all the time and creating a more undemocratic system based on social injustice and monumental inequality. Barring a few interruptions the Nehru dynasty has been ruling India since 1947. Pakistan's democracy is militarised with religious and communal overcoat. And it works. But Pakistanis too, despite limited democratic space, boast of their dynastic culture in the Bhutto clan. Nearer home Mujibur's daughter Sheikh Hasina has now made it clear, after the recent poll that the people of Bangladesh have a 'future' in promoting dynastic culture.

In India feudalisation of democratic establishments is so complete that even states are being run on dynastic doctrine. It does not matter whether the parties in power are regional or mainstream national in character and ideological orientation. After the poll victory of National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir the house of Abdullahs can be very much identified with J&K fiefdom. A third generation dynastic rule is no mean achievement. In the South it has been a norm in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to nurse political parties with dynastic leadership and ambition. Bihar, otherwise dubbed by many as the symbol of feudal backwardness, enjoyed dynastic democracy, thanks to the redoubtable Lalu Prasad Yadav, for a short period.

The democratic tradition of political parties in this region is so weak that they cannot think of survival in the rat race of looting exchequer through parliamentary power and privilege without cultivating personality cult. Charisma coupled with myths, mostly manufactured rather crudely, sells. And voters too do not bother much about dynastic democracy because non-dynastic variant is no better in fulfilling people's aspirations. No doubt individuals are important in mobilising masses but the way dynastic leaders are being projected as the saviours in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan borders on caricature of democracy. Parties are treated as family properties and leadership is at worst a hereditary thing to party-loyals. So kings, queens, sultans, subedars, mansabdars and zamindars with democratic signboards are doing well because people accept them as their natural leaders without questioning the viability and credibility of such family-oriented political enterprises.

The concept of dynastic succession is equally strong in communist culture. Democratic centralism is a misnomer in most communist establishments. Successors are chosen or elected in a typical feudal way. After father, son being projected as the supreme leader has been ruling North Korea. And North Koreans too cherish the heritage and tradition. So it seems. Luckily for the North Koreans North Korean President and Party head Kim Jong-II is said to be reluctant to allow any of his three sons to succeed him. During the hey days of Chinese revolutionary appeal to anti-Soviet communist parties across the world Lin Piao was billed as an able and most natural successor to Mao in no less feudalistic way. Lin Piao was unfortunate that history moved in a different direction. Cuba, otherwise an exemplary instance in protecting revolution in the face of American

blockade and sabotage, had no option but to choose Castro's brother as the future helmsman of that island nation.

But feudalisation of democratic institutions is nowhere so pervasive as in India. The members of parliament enjoy privileges and rights like the heads of princely states of yester years. They spend money from their statutory funds specially allocated for development purposes. After the death of an incumbent, his (or her) relative is awarded the seat to contest election even if he (or she) does not have any party or political back-ground. So there are so many widows in electoral fray all the time, riding on emotive issues and tears. They call it sympathy wave and it works in terms of vote because of the existence of strong feudal currents in society.

Nepal and Sri Lanka are notable exceptions in not pursuing dynastic mandate at the moment. But they may soon revert to dynastic democracy as feudal influence is so powerful in social life in those countries. Nepal has just abolished monarchy but the old legacy continues to haunt a large number of people. True, the Bandernayekes and Senanayekes are no longer around in Sri Lankan politics but the tentacles of feudalism are so widespread that people can hardly escape dynastic trap.

In the South Asian context kingdoms, sultanates have been re-christened as republics, rather people's democratic republics without changing the essence. It is futile to expect something remarkable to happen in dynastic democracy because what is shown as reflection of people's choice is not really so. □□□