

GOA: WHERE FAMILY IS THE RAJ

In the Goa Assembly, several examples illustrate the trend of 'Family Raj'. In Taleigao, we have Atanasio 'Babush' Monserrate and Jennifer Monserrate—a husband-wife duo—while their son, Rohit Monserrate, is the mayor of Panjim. In Calangute and Siolim, Michael Lobo and Delilah Lobo hold power, and their son, Daniel Lobo, has just become the sarpanch of Parra. It is widely speculated that he will contest the next Assembly election, either from Calangute or Mandrem.

In Shiroda, Subhash Shirodkar's daughter is an active politician. In Marcaim, Sudin Dhavalikar's son, Milind, is deeply involved in the political system, while his brother, Deepak Dhavalikar, has been an MLA and remains a key political figure.

In Ponda, Ravi Naik's sons, Ritesh and Roy Naik, are active in politics and have previously contested elections. In Valpoi and Poriem, Vishwajit Rane and his wife, Deviya Rane, form a political power couple.

Even in Sanquelim, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant holds sway. While his wife may not be formally in politics, she remains an integral part of the party and the system.



“In politics, it's always better to rise through the ranks—you cannot be parachuted into leadership. That applies to everyone, whether it's the Parrikar family or any other political family. You have to start from the grass-roots, perhaps at the booth level or even lower, prove your competence, and earn the people's trust. Since the BJP is a party of the karyakarta, it has shown that even a tea seller on a railway platform can aspire to become the Prime Minister
—Sidharth Kuncalienkar

The debate around family raj raises a fundamental question: Should individuals from political families be denied opportunities simply because of their lineage? However, the reality is that when powerful politicians promote their spouses, children, and relatives, it becomes increasingly difficult for party cadres to rise through the ranks on merit alone.

This leads to an entire raj of family politics, where powerful children from political families continue to win local elections and eventually move on to larger electoral battles. The key question we must ask is: Is this good for democracy? Is this beneficial for the party?

More importantly, does this system block genuine talent from emerging? When political power remains concentrated within a few influential families, it can prevent capable individuals from rising through the ranks. Senior politician and former Panjim MLA Sidharth Kuncalienkar, now in charge of the BJP in North Goa, pointed out that children following in the footsteps of their parents is quite common.

"If you consider any profession, a doctor's son or daughter often leans toward the same profession—it's a natural progression and an easier path from a facilitation point of view. The same applies to advocates—children of lawyers tend to pursue a legal career. Similarly, in politics, being born into a political family gives you a head start. However, ultimately, it is performance that should define career growth. That is what I believe, and that is what our BJP also believes in," he said.

What's happening is that Goan society is evolving in a way where voters are making decisions based on winnability. People may not see these candidates as the best choices, but they believe that supporting them ensures that their work will get done. The way voters perceive elections has shifted entirely

"Since the BJP is a party of the karyakarta, it has shown that even a tea seller on a railway platform can aspire to become the Prime Minister—something that perhaps only the BJP can make happen. I am a karyakarta, and the party gave me a chance to contest and get elected on a party ticket. That is what the BJP stands for—performance over lineage," he added.

At the same time, one must acknowledge both sides of the argument. While performance should matter, the reality of power politics cannot be ignored. With power comes influence, and with influence comes financial control. When certain individuals or families consolidate power over time, it becomes an almost insurmountable challenge for the common man to break into the system. This creates a cycle where power breeds more power, making it increasingly difficult for fresh, deserving talent to emerge in politics.

In a democracy, people's power trumps family or lineage, Kuncalienkar counters.

"I'll give you an example—back in 2012, everyone assumed that the Congress would dominate the elections. They were in power, they had influence, and they had financial backing. Nobody thought they could be defeated. But in 2012, the people of Goa proved otherwise. Under Manohar Parrikar's leadership, the BJP won 21 seats. This proved that having wealth and political influence doesn't guarantee perpetual success—democracy does not work that way. India has a strong and vibrant democratic system that allows change when people demand it," he said.

Cecille Rodrigues, a firebrand political activist and Taleigao resident said she has seen firsthand, how family raj has let the people of her village down.

"For nearly 25 years, the Monserrate family has been at the helm in Taleigao. At this point, I wouldn't just call it family raj—it has become more of a political dynasty. It's not just about the husband, wife, and son taking turns in power. Their close associates, friends, and extended family members also secure positions in various political and administrative spaces. This strengthens their hold over the system, making it even harder for outsiders to challenge them," she lamented.

"The problem with political dynasties is the lack of accountability. When the same group controls power for years, how do you hold them responsible? Promises are made—to develop villages, to maintain infrastructure, to protect constituencies—but in reality, unchecked urbanisation takes over. Villages start turning into chaotic urban centers, and essential services like water supply become unreliable. If one part of the constituency faces a crisis, the entire area suffers. For instance, let's say the husband is in power, and then the wife wins the ZP election from the same constituency. How do you hold her accountable for unfinished work?" she questioned.

"As Sid (Kuncalienkar) said, if a doctor enters the profession, their child often aspires to follow in their footsteps. But is politics a business? Certainly not. We all have our professions. But here's what I'm saying—don't you think the children of these so-called elected representatives have any other skills or aspirations to start their own businesses?" she quipped.



Family raj is a phenomenon that transcends parties and ideologies—it has become either a way of life or a strategic tool in India's political landscape. Even in Goa, all parties are adopting it because winnability has become the most important factor, and family raj offers a convenient way to ensure electoral success. But when political power remains concentrated within a few influential families, it can prevent capable individuals from rising through the ranks. This dynastic dominance may work in Bollywood, but is it truly beneficial for politics—where real people and real issues are at stake? In this week's Herald TV debate Point-Counterpoint, **SUJAY GUPTA** discusses the phenomenon with a panel of two political activists and one politician, a former MLA.



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PANELISTS

Sidharth Kuncalienkar, incharge, BJP North Goa district
Cecille Rodrigues, political activist, Taleigao
Roshan Luke Mathias, activist and president of Mog Foundation, Calangute

"Coming to India's democracy—it has also thrown out dynastic families. If you look at the 2012 elections, you'll see fathers, daughters, uncles—many from political families, like the Alemaos—were defeated," Kuncalienkar recalled. "Being born into a political family does give you



“Being an MLA or an elected representative is not a profession—it is supposed to be a public service role. The money they receive is not a salary but a remuneration. So even referring to it as a 'profession' shows how the BJP has framed elections as a business-oriented, money-making enterprise. I'm not against family rule per se. But when politics starts being seen as a business, then trade becomes the most important factor. That's why we see a system today where buying and selling dominate—whether it's buying votes, buying voters, or even buying MLAs after they've been elected
—Roshan Luke Mathias

a head start. You're more exposed to the system, you have easier access to power," he admitted.

But here's the irony. The BJP came to power largely because it projected itself as a party against family rule, positioning the Congress as a party driven by dynastic politics. Yet, if you look at the names coming up today in the BJP, the reality doesn't seem to reflect that claim.

With all due respect to Rohit Monserrate, if he wasn't Babush Monserrate's son, would he still have been the mayor of Panjim? If Daniel wasn't Michael Lobo's son, would he have been elected to lead the Parra Panchayat?

We're not even considering the various panchayats—family rule in panchayats is 100 times more prevalent than this. Somebody's wife, somebody's husband, somebody's son, somebody's daughter—it's everywhere.

So, the real question isn't just about getting a head start in politics. We need to ask—is it a fair head start, or an unfair one?

"Take Rohit Monserrate, for example. His family resides in the village section, but during the CCP elections, his address was shifted to the CCP area so he could contest. Before that, he hadn't done a single social work initiative on the ground. And this is the issue—you pour massive amounts of money into elections, telling people to vote for someone who has zero experience. Even his own father kept him sidelined when he was in politics. Now, he's been made mayor—which is a huge responsibility. But when he took charge, he was completely unprepared. Everyone remem-

remains, who takes responsibility for this mess?

There are multiple agencies, different authorities—but at the end of the day, their roles overlap. The local MLA is on the board of the Smart City project. Can he really wash his hands off the issue and say, "Oh, that's Smart City's problem"? Someone needs to step up, and that someone should ideally be Panjim's MLA.

"I've seen firsthand how local governance works, and let's be honest—the system in Goa requires a political push. Unlike other states where bureaucrats often take initiative, here, they have to be pushed at every step. This is where the problem lies—it's not just the politicians, it's also the bureaucrats who need to be blamed for this mess," said Kuncalienkar.

This, despite the courts constantly pulling them up, repeatedly questioning their inefficiency. Now, the court has even gone so far as to say they don't believe the government's deadlines anymore. It's an embarrassment—for Panjim and for Goa as a whole.

The irony here is that the son of the former Chief Minister, Manohar Parrikar himself has criticised the MLA for the Panjim situation, essentially rejecting the very concept of family raj—and this comes from a family that the BJP once hailed as its greatest leadership.

"BJP doesn't believe in family politics," Kuncalienkar reiterated. "Take the Parrikar family, for instance. Manohar Parrikar was in the BJP, but he rose purely on his own competence. He wasn't pushed into politics by a family member holding a party position. He built BJP's presence in Goa, climbed the ranks, won elections on his own merit, and became Chief Minister—later even serving as India's Defence Minister," he argued.

"In politics, it's always better to rise through the ranks—you cannot be parachuted into leadership. That applies to everyone, whether it's the Parrikar family or any other political family. You have to start from the grassroots, perhaps at the booth level or even lower, prove your competence, and earn the people's trust," he added.

Moving the discussion to Calangute—despite the odds, Michael Lobo continues to win—whether on a Congress ticket or a BJP ticket, whether he switches sides or returns. If tomorrow he contests under the BJP's Lobo faction, he will still likely win. Similarly, his wife has won in Siolim against supposed odds. The fact remains: this family still commands voter support.

"It's simple—this is the result of long-term political planning," said Mathias.

"If you look at it from a regular voter's perspective, the government has systematically reduced people to a state of dependency. Jobs are scarce, and government schemes have created a situation where voters have little choice but to accept whatever

One key issue raised is the way MLAs switch parties after elections, effectively invalidating the mandate given by the voters. People elect representatives based on party ideologies and promises, but once in power, these politicians often shift allegiance to the ruling party, primarily for personal or political gain. This raises a fundamental question—where is the power of the voter when the very representatives they elect abandon their mandate?

assistance is given to them," he pointed out.

Now, in Calangute, the biggest issue isn't just unemployment—it's land, development, and expansion. But instead of addressing these concerns legally, no government, whether Congress or BJP, has taken meaningful action. Instead, voters are handed informal and illegal solutions, with the promise: Don't worry, we'll take care of it. Since Michael Lobo has been in power since 2012, many people feel helpless. If they approach the panchayat, they won't get help—but Michael Lobo can get things done. This creates a dangerous dependency—drifting away from him feels risky because nothing else seems to work," said Mathias.

Politics can be about passion, but what was Michael Lobo's political passion when he officially entered politics in 2012, he questioned.

"Before his first election, he was not active in the panchayat. Instead, he was directly appointed as a Zilla Panchayat member, thanks to the backing of Manohar Parrikar, who was preparing for the 2012 elections. Parrikar helped bring Lobo into the fold. But what was Michael Lobo's real background? Real estate. That's not a secret. And he can always argue that anyone can aspire to enter politics. But what has been his consistent mission across all political parties? Real estate," he pointed out.

Whether its Calangute or Candolim or Siolim—all development pertains to real estate, and the locals are left to watch the widening of roads, cutting down of trees, land grabbing, large-scale sale of land, rapid permissions being granted, said the activist.

But if there is so much frustration and anger, why isn't there a movement against him? Why don't the citizens of Calangute take a stand and decide to vote a different candidate into power?

"The issue now is that people fear stepping away from his influence. Even the panchayat is controlled by Lobo's network. The fear is that if they stop aligning with him, they will become nobodies in society. And fear is a powerful tool. Also—who is the alternative?" asks Mathias.

"The system has become so corrupt and overbearing that people have lost faith in all governments—whether it's the ruling party or the opposition. They no longer believe that the government can offer real solutions. Instead, they survive on what they get for free or through goodwill, rather than expecting meaningful governance," he opined.

Kuncalienkar said that Mathias' take completely undermines the voter. "The voter deserves respect—after all, they vote for their own well-being, their family's well-being, and the betterment of society. The voter is the force behind change. Since 1961, Goa has seen multiple governments come and go when they exceeded their limits. You cannot disregard this fact," he said.

It is however quite obvious that the voter today isn't voting for a party—they're voting for a person. That's why we see individuals winning elections more often than political parties. If the party took control, things would be different. But as things stand, many of the BJP's current MLAs don't even come from a BJP background. They're there because of "viability factors."

Kuncalienkar however had a different stance and chose to illustrate it by referring to the 2022 elections. "In the run-up to the elections, the mood on the ground suggested BJP might not return. Yet, the opposition failed to capitalize, and BJP secured the



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—Cecille Rodrigues

numbers," he said.

This however, says more about the Opposition than the voter, really. The opposition has withered away—not because of external factors, but because of its own shortcomings. The biggest issue is that many Congress leaders do not raise their voices—likely because they have skeletons in their cupboards. When politicians are afraid to speak up, they become ineffective, and voters lose hope in them as an alternative.

The issue isn't just about one party or one leader anymore—it's about how politics in Goa has become completely transactional. People are no longer voting based on ideology, development, or long-term vision; they're voting for immediate personal benefits. And that's where governance is failing.

If the same BJP leaders who once slammed the Monserrates are now embracing them, what does that say about principles? Development isn't just about building high-rises and filling up fields—it should be about improving infrastructure, healthcare, education, and public spaces. If people have to queue up every week for school funds while real estate projects flourish, then something is clearly broken," said Rodrigues.

"Whether it's unfulfilled promises, forged documents, or selective enforcement of rules, leaders are getting away with it because the system allows them to. And voters, out of desperation or habit, keep choosing the same people because they feel there's no real alternative. That's the cycle we need to break," she added.

Even if we did a "report card" on every MLA every three months, highlighting their failures versus successes, would that really change the voter's choice? Maybe in an ideal world. But in Goa's current political landscape, many voters still choose the same candidates despite knowing their shortcomings—because they feel there's no better option, or because of personal benefits they receive. "Elections aren't just about individual power; they're about timing, public sentiment, and larger political shifts. In 2012, for example, it wasn't just about BJP's strength—it was also Congress's failures, like the regional plan controversy, that created an opening for change," recalled Mathias.

Mathias likened the brand of governance in Goa today to the behaviour of petulant children losing at a game—when victory seems elusive, they want to change the rules of the game.

"Instead of addressing governance failures or responding to public dissatisfaction, they change the rules to suit their needs. In this "game" of development and sustainability, whenever the BJP is at risk of losing—whether politically, legally, or in terms of public opinion—they amend laws, tweak policies, or introduce new regulations that shift the goalposts. This makes it difficult for opposition leaders, activists, or citizens to challenge them," said Mathias.

Previously, legal frameworks and judicial processes served as tools for fighting injustices. However, when these tools become too effective against the ruling establishment, the laws are altered, rendering them ineffective. Meanwhile, the judiciary, which is supposed to uphold justice, does not automatically provide new mechanisms to compensate for these changes, leaving citizens and opposition forces powerless in their fight for accountability," he explained.

Questioning Kuncalienkar's claim that the voter is all-powerful and can decide who comes to power, Mathias retorted, "When we say the voter is powerful, we need to ask: How powerful are the voters who cast their votes for Congress MLAs, only to see those very MLAs switch to the BJP? Where is the power of the voter in this? Who snatched that power away?"

"The beauty of democracy is that every five years, the voter gets a chance to choose again," Kuncalienkar replied.

The next election will be crucial as it will show us how many of the defectors manage to win again, and how many candidates contest purely on their fathers' or their family's merit. If they do, then what does that say? Probably that the Family Raj is here to stay, unfortunately, reflecting how citizens are using their vote—for selfish reasons rather than the greater good of Goa.

