

The Road A Head

Rise of Rishi Sunak – Real Lessons for Our Democracy

Jayaprakash Narayan

Rishi Sunak's rise to power as the Prime Minister of the UK made all Indians proud. That one of our own could lead the former colonial power which ruled India for nearly two centuries gives us vicarious pleasure. This is one more event that boosts our self-confidence and helps us overcome fatalism, self-doubt, sense of humiliation and inferiority complex.

Immigrant Indians, wherever they live, work hard and achieve success. Our hierarchical culture and rigid societal norms often inhibit ambition and create perverse incentives undermining our potential. But once uprooted, Indian immigrants retain the best of our society – strong family system, a culture of thrift and delayed gratification, love for education and accomplishment, and capacity to embrace any culture while retaining our own identity and values. This unique blend is the secret behind the success of people of Indian origin in North America and Europe where opportunities to fulfill human potential abound.

Sunak, at 42, is the youngest in two centuries, and the first person of colour to become British Prime Minister. He did not become PM because of his minority faith or race; like elsewhere in all democracies, not being a part of the dominant culture or ethnicity is a disadvantage to political rise in Britain too. Sunak became PM overcoming the disadvantages of race and faith, because the conservative MPs believed that he was the best bet for their party and the country in a moment of deep economic crisis. His competent and sober stewardship of the Treasury earlier gave him credibility and stature. While the UK is in long-term relative economic decline, Liz Truss's profligate

policies led to market meltdown and the MPs wanted a safe pair of hands. Sunak warned the nation of the potential dangers of Truss's economic policies during the leadership race two months before, and his prediction came true. This enhanced his credibility enormously and helped overcome racial bigotry.

There are many talented, public-spirited, young Indians who want to improve our politics and governance. The question we have to ask of ourselves is do these promising young Indians have a realistic opportunity to rise in politics. There are three formidable obstacles blocking the rise of promising young leaders in Indian politics.

First, very few young Indians are chosen by major parties as candidates for elective office without their family being established in politics. There are indeed 64 MPs in the current Lok Sabha who are under forty years of age. But most of them have been chosen as candidates at a young age because they are the scions of formidable political families with local clout. There are a few notable exceptions; TMC nominated popular young actors as candidates in West Bengal and they were elected to Lok Sabha. Such exceptions apart, as a rule young candidates are nominated for State Assembly or Lok Sabha only when they have a strong family name and network supporting them.

Contrast this with Rishi Sunak. He had no political pedigree. He was a successful professional from a comfortable family, and his wife inherited a fortune. His family background or money played no role in his being selected as the conservative candidate from Richmond in October. When William Hague, the former leader of the conservative party retired as MP from Richmond, the constituency committee comprising of locally elected leaders of the party selected Sunak as their candidate as they believed he would be best suited to project the party's goals and the constituency's interests. It was a democratic choice. Sunak was elected comfortably in the safe seat, and made a few deft moves like strongly advocating Brexit and joining the bandwagon of Boris Johnson early on. When opportunity came his way he performed creditably in the government. Finally his credibility and a crisis propelled him to leadership as the MPs felt that he was their best option in a difficult situation.

Clearly, we need to build institutions and practices to nurture young talent in politics and promote them on their merit and accomplishment, not pedigree and money power.

The second obstacle to the rise of any promising candidate committed to public good is the murky election process. Even if a major party nominates the right candidate, our political culture and electoral system demand vast expenditure for vote buying and inducements. In many states, an expenditure of Rs 2 crore for a corporator, and Rs 20-30 crores for MLA is quite common. Obviously most of this expenditure is illegitimate and unaccounted. On top of it, short term individual welfare at the cost of long term public good has become the formula for electoral success in our dysfunctional democracy. A young, principled candidate finds it almost impossible to succeed through ethical and rational means.

Election expenditure is increasing exponentially. In just one by-election for the Legislative Assembly underway in Munugodu in Telangana, the estimated spend of major parties is about Rs 400 crore! This for a by- election in a small state when the term of State Assembly is due to expire next year! Compare this with Britain.

The expenditure ceiling for a MP candidate is £ 8500, and all candidates invariably adhere to this limit. Both the major parties in the UK spent a total of £ 28 million or Rs 296 crore at current exchange value for all the 650 parliamentary constituencies put together in 2019 national election. If one state assembly by-election is costing more than the British national election, then alarm bells should ring. We need to devise a better model to alter the incentives and minimise or eliminate illegitimate, unaccounted election expenditure. Proportional representation with safeguards to ensure stability and direct election of the executive in states are ideas which need to be taken seriously to save our democracy from this invasion of illegitimate money power.

A third obstacle to the rise of talented, young people in Indian politics is the vastness and diversity of our country. In a multi-lingual, continental nation of our size, decades of experience and limelight are needed for young aspirants to emerge as viable leaders at state and national level. As a result inheritors of a political dynasty or those who can buy their way into office without any qualms have a decisive advantage to the detriment of

our public life. The answer lies in genuine decentralisation of power. For a large country and a democracy, we have the most centralized system of government; Pakistan and Bangladesh, ASEAN nations, Latin America, and even authoritarian China have far greater decentralization than India. The median age of our population is 29 years. If local governments are genuinely empowered and become strong, then many talented young leaders will have the opportunity to make an impact, and grow in stature at the local and city level. Then they can be trusted with power in larger tiers of government, based on their past record. Over-centralisation and the PM-CM-DM culture are undermining our democracy, and in particular distorting political recruitment and quality of governance.

Our democracy is still young. We have done well in many respects; but there are glaring failures. Britain had centuries of experience and opportunity to improve their political culture and governance. Democracy is always a work in progress. Even as we recognize our strengths, we should acknowledge our failings and work constantly to improve our institutions, practices and political culture. Are we ready for the obvious changes needed?

*The author is the founder of Lok Satta movement and Foundation for Democratic Reforms. Email: drjploksatta@gmail.com / Twitter [@jp_loksatta](https://twitter.com/jp_loksatta)