

- Posted: Sun, Feb 28 2010. 8:41 PM IST

Politics for people

No longer is a members-only club with strict dynastic rules, politics in India opening its doors to a wider leadership base. You too can groom yourself for a career in governance, but not before going through the grind

Ruhi Tewari and Santosh K. Joy

Prakash Chand Karad, 39, contested the Arki assembly constituency in Himachal Pradesh in 2007 on a Congress ticket. Karad, who lost the election, found an unusual way of entering the political arena. His father Padam Ram was a cook with former prime minister Indira Gandhi, then with her son Rajiv Gandhi and later with Sonia Gandhi. His father's proximity and loyalty to the Gandhi family paid off and Karad got his chance.



New-Age politicians: (left) Shiv Shakti, a BJP member, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; (right) Shehzad Poonawala is vice-president of the NSUI wing in Pune and works as a volunteer with the All India Congress Committee's media cell. Photos by Pradeep Gaur / Mint and Sandesh

Bhandare

Rajiv Satav, 36, a former Maharashtra Youth Congress president, was appointed president of the Indian Youth Congress in February. Satav, the first in his family to join politics, chose the traditional path of entering politics, starting at the grass roots—he dabbled in student politics at Fergusson College in Pune, then became a member of the block panchayat and later, the zila parishad.

Shehzad Poonawala, 23, is a member of the research team of the All India Congress Committee's (AICC's) media cell and vice-president of the National Students Union of India (NSUI) wing in Pune. His work includes briefing the party's national spokespersons on various issues. Poonawala chalked out a route to politics that is largely unexplored so far—an organized course to groom yourself before seeking a career in politics and governance. He is a graduate of the MIT School of Government (MIT-SOG), Pune.

A career in politics is no longer out of reach “for middle-class people who don't have relatives such as uncles, fathers and grandfathers associated with politics,” says Vineet Mishra, in charge of institutional relations at MIT-SOG. It's not easy, it takes many years to establish a career in politics, and it doesn't pay well—or at all—initially. But gaining entry to a political party or working with a member of Parliament is easier now for a youngster without a background in politics. Says Mishra: “We get enquires from MPs and political parties asking for people who can work in their research wings. They are often hired on project basis.”

Youngsters such as Poonawala know they will need an independent income initially. "I know it will take time for me to establish myself and that I will have to work in another job to sustain myself for a while, but I want to do something for my country and I believe politics is that way for me," says Poonawala, who is studying at the Indian Law School, Pune. "As a lawyer, I will earn my bread and butter until I establish myself as a politician."

Business of governance

While some choose planned routes to politics, a few have unusual career trajectories. "There is no fixed pattern or trend of entering politics as such. Earlier, student politics and trade unionism in urban areas and social movements in rural areas were common ways of joining politics. That still happens but another trend has emerged in the last 10-15 years. Corporate people have found their way into politics," says MP and Congress Working Committee (CWC) member V. Kishore Chandra Deo.

In recent times, people with corporate backgrounds, certain technical skill sets and a strong political inclination have been tempted to enter the power loop. One way of entering politics is contesting elections as an independent. Meera Sanyal, 47, CEO of ABN Amro Bank, tried just this, contesting the 2009 Lok Sabha election from the South Mumbai constituency. Sanyal, who is still with ABN Amro, did not win.

Others such as Prodyut Bora, who used to head the Bharatiya Janata Party's, or BJP's, information technology cell, is a graduate from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and left his corporate IT career to enter politics. Bora is now the general secretary of the BJP's Assam unit. "It has to be a conscious decision to join politics. It takes a lot of time and effort to adjust for someone who comes from the corporate and managerial side. Since in management everything is calculated in quarterly terms, one tends to expect results fast (in politics as well)... In politics, success may require some real wait before it arrives," says Bora.

The education route

A systematic path to establishing a career in politics could be to join a formal course. MIT-SOG, started in June 2005 in Pune, is the first institute in Asia to train people for a career in governance and politics. The school offers a one-year master's in government (MPG).

Around 200 students have completed the one-year postgraduate course so far. "We attach our students as interns with politicians after the completion of our course. Like we have had students attached to M. Veerappa Moily (Congress), L.K. Advani (BJP) and Satyavrata Chaturvedi (Congress)," says Mishra.

Poonawala joined the institute in 2007. "I had no relatives or family members in politics and thought this course would be a good way to get a foothold." The Gujarat riots in 2002 had left Poonawala determined to work in the political arena so that "I could work towards retaining India's secular fabric". The course helped him get access to political leaders, hear their ideas up close and also gain theoretical knowledge about psephology (the study of political elections), governance issues, etc. "It was a brilliant experience coordinating the media activities of the party during the 2009 assembly polls and the 2009 Lok Sabha election. I plan to build on the experience for my future activities," says Poonawala, who interned with Congress leader Suresh Kalmadi during the general election last year and later joined the central team.

As a volunteer member at the AICC, he does not earn a salary or get a stipend; he even has to meet his own expenses when he travels on party work. Poonawala doesn't mind this. "My parents are supporting me currently since I am a student and once I complete my law degree I will be able to get a job to support myself."

Research / editorial wings

A different route is association with political parties' research divisions or editorial teams—or even with individual MPs. Most parties have teams working for their weekly and monthly

magazines. They also have dedicated research wings and cells working in varied areas such as economic affairs, foreign policy, minority affairs, legal and human rights issues. Being a part of these groups can give you a platform to enter politics and interact with leaders of various parties. To gain entry, however, you would in the normal course have to know political leaders of the party closely or have established yourself at the grass-roots level.

Shiv Shakti, 35, a member of the editorial board of the BJP's Kamal Sandesh, which is published from Delhi, started out as a student activist from Giridih, Jharkhand. Shakti rose to become the Jawaharlal Nehru University unit president of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the BJP. Currently, he is part of the BJP's central team and is expecting greater responsibility in the days to come, given the emphasis on youth participation in the party's renewed strategy.

Being a full-time worker may not bring in a regular salary, but Shakti says his daily expenses are taken care of by the party and he has been given a place to stay. The party, it appears, generally bears all official expenses.

The recruitment route

Congress general secretary Rahul Gandhi has used recruitment drives, which started in 2008, to induct youngsters into the field. The candidates are selected on the basis of leadership qualities and political understanding. Around four million people have enrolled as Youth Congress members since Gandhi launched his drive, according to AICC figures. "Since Rahul Gandhi's initiative in this direction, the trend of a lot of youth joining the party has emerged. We have spotted some great talent across states...(participating in these recruitment drives) is one critical way of making a foray into politics," says Satav.

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