

T. V. Paul, *India's Unfulfilled Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2024, 263 pp. (hardback) ISBN: 9780197669990.

India uniquely shares land borders with two nuclear-armed adversaries. One of them has a de-facto anti-India national identity whereas the other has become the penultimate global power. India's other neighbours are much smaller, but they do not accede to India's hegemony and occasionally try to subvert Indian interests. Despite such a hostile geopolitical environment, it is not only the world's largest democracy but also a multi-ethnic, multilingual country with a thoroughly pluralistic civilisational ethos; the sheer diversity found within this single country is unparalleled anywhere across the globe. Consequently, its trajectory of rising to a higher status in the international system too has unique features. In his book, *India's Unfulfilled Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*, T. V. Paul takes the reader on a deep-dive into how the Indian elite has navigated the last 77 years in pursuit of becoming a major player on the world scene.

The first chapter provides a brief introduction to India's post-independence history. In this chapter, the author lays out the basic theme of the book that along with the goals of security and prosperity, a more intangible status aspiration in the international system has driven the policy choices of the elites in New Delhi. The second chapter contains a discussion on why countries seek higher status in the international system. In the third chapter titled 'Hard Power', the author identifies military power, economic strength, scientific prowess and the demographic dividend as the markers of hard power for India. In the fourth chapter titled 'Soft Power', the author identifies India's soft power assets spread in its region and highlights the distinction between having soft power assets and materialising those assets (p. 74). The fifth chapter titled 'Great Powers', describes the evolution of India's relationship with the USA, Russia and China as well as France and Japan. The sixth chapter titled 'The Neighbours' describes India's relationship with its neighbours and the power distribution in South Asia. In the seventh chapter titled 'State Capacity', what stands out is the pinpointed description of widespread systemic problems in the Indian bureaucracy such as corruption along with some of their features unique to the Indian context (pp. 167–183). For instance, the author highlights that unlike other similar countries such as China where corruption is rampant, Indian bureaucrats can't be counted on to deliver even after accepting bribes (p. 168). The last chapter titled 'The Future' concludes with an explanation as to why other powers should accommodate India as a major

power, what India brings to the table (p. 200) and a brief discussion on how major powers have been historically accommodated in the international system (p. 190).

One of the merits of the book is that it sheds light on several lesser-known facts about contemporary and historical developments crucial for understanding India's status quest. Paul states in the fifth chapter that after the 1962 war, the United States offered Taiwan's permanent seat at the UN Security Council to India and Nehru rejected that offer (p. 104). This is astonishing in the contemporary context given India's consistent efforts to obtain a permanent veto-holding seat in the Security Council for itself. Another lesser-known fact to Western observers is how India implemented the biometric digital identification technology called *Aadhaar* (p. 67). In the third chapter, while describing India's achievements in the science and technology sector, the author explains how the IT prowess of the country was leveraged to help ordinary citizens through the *Aadhaar* system and the widespread online instant payment system. While highlighting the prevalent corruption in the Public Works Department in the Indian bureaucracy, the author sheds light on the fact that the same companies that build substandard roads across India build fantastic roads and infrastructure such as world-class airport terminals abroad such as in Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Qatar (p. 176).

Another great aspect of the book is that it discusses common critiques of Indian policies in the contemporary geopolitical context. Regarding the acquisition of multiple aircraft carriers by the Indian Navy, the author mentions a critique focused firstly on their large costs and secondly on their uncertain role considering the present-day evolution of military technology and the possibility of them being sitting ducks in a conflict (p. 51). The author addresses the question of India's relationship with Russia that occurs frequently in Western discourses, namely why India–Russia cooperation thrives in the present day despite Western pressure in the context of the Ukraine War. The author states that this is the case because of the Indian conviction that 'at crunch time, it was Russia, not America, that came to India's rescue' (p. 123). The author also contributes to the present-day literature by laying out his argument regarding soft power that 'Soft power alone doesn't produce results; rather it acts as a legitimising layer on top of hard power of a nation, giving its leadership a certain credibility on the international stage' (p. 76). He justifies this argument through the example of the 1962 war against China, the defeat which decimated India's prestige obtained through an over-reliance on soft power (p. 76).

However, it appears at a few places that conclusions have been drawn by the author without providing evidence. While describing India's soft power assets, the author states that there's been a decline in India's democratic ethos and that illiberal policies have been adopted against the nation's minorities (pp. 73, 82, 84, 85, 181). This is a recurring theme throughout the book. These statements are not backed up with sufficient evidence other than the works of a few Western scholars. Also, it appears at times that the factor of status enhancement creeps into the author's calculations even when the decisions under consideration were taken largely for real-world reasons with minimal, if any, status calculations involved. This occurs in the discussion about Russia–India defence relationships regarding the transfer of crucial military hardware to India by Russia and the banning of

several Chinese apps by the Indian Government post-Galwan clashes in 2020 (pp.116,122). The author overlooks that the defence relationship between Russia–India gave India the opportunity for the indigenisation of crucial military technology and that the Chinese Government could have used the apps to influence Indian social media and critical infrastructure such as 5G. Instead, Paul ascribes these actions to status calculations by the Indian elite and focuses on their rewards in terms of status.

Overall, *India's Unfulfilled Quest* offers a rigorous account of India's journey from 1947 to the present day with a focus on its evolving worldview, its evolving capabilities and challenges and the evolving perceptions of India by other powers. The occasional references to Indian songs, the author's familiarity with modern-day Indian literature and the mention of Sanskrit names given to Indian indigenous weapons provides the book with a touch of cultural authenticity. If one wishes to understand India's post-independence journey along the military, economic and interstate relations dimensions with an eye towards the future, T. V. Paul's book would be a great pick.

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