

The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi

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Book Review

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T.V. Paul's *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi* provides a rigorous and thought-provoking examination of India's long-standing aspiration for global recognition. As a distinguished scholar of International Relations, Paul blends historical insights, theoretical frameworks, and empirical data to explore India's evolving status aspirations, geopolitical constraints, and internal contradictions.

The book's central focus is on India's pursuit of major power status, set against the backdrop of structural limitations, geopolitical competition, and internal developmental hurdles that have impeded its ascent. Paul explores the fundamental question of what constitutes a major power: is it determined solely by tangible factors such as military might, economic scale, technological advancement, and population size, or do intangible elements like leadership, diplomatic influence, State capacity, and international recognition hold equal significance? More critically, can a nation declare itself a major power, or is such status ultimately conferred to it by other great powers through acknowledgement and acceptance? These questions lie at the heart of Paul's analysis as he systematically traces India's journey from ambition to its contested position in the global hierarchy.

Paul highlights India's positioning as a 'swing power' in an increasingly multipolar world, arguing that its role in balancing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific makes it a key player in global politics. He assesses India's use of both soft and hard power, noting that while India's cultural influence, democratic values, and diplomatic engagement have long been recognized, its hard power capabilities especially military modernization have only gained traction since the 1991 economic reforms. He also explores how India's nuclear tests, economic expansion, and technological advancements have transformed its international standing, even as internal inequalities and governance challenges persist.

Since the economic liberalization in 1991, India has emerged as the world's fifth-largest economy, a significant milestone in its pursuit of major power status. However, Paul critically examines the disparity between economic growth and human development indicators, raising important questions about the relationship between economic policies and developmental outcomes. While India has rapidly expanded its IT, pharmaceuticals, and engineering sectors, its per capita GDP

remains one of the lowest among major economies, highlighting persistent inequality. Paul critiques India's lack of investment in human development, arguing that low spending on education and healthcare continues to hinder productivity and overall quality of life. He suggests that a developmental State should allocate 6–7 per cent of its GDP to education and healthcare, a benchmark that India has consistently failed to meet. Without prioritizing inclusive economic policies, skill development, and social welfare, Paul warns that India's economic rise will remain superficial and unsustainable.

Paul highlights India's Weak State Syndrome as a fundamental obstacle to its pursuit of major power status. He argues that while India possesses significant economic and military potential, its State capacity remains limited, characterized by inefficiencies in governance, weak infrastructure, and inadequate public service delivery. Paul categorizes India as a 'truncated weak State', noting systemic issues such as a low tax-to-GDP ratio, an overburdened judiciary with millions of pending cases, and a bureaucratic system that is often reactive rather than proactive. Investment banker Ruchir Sharma aptly captures this paradox of immense potential yet persistent structural inefficiencies, when he observes, 'India is a country that disappoints both optimists and pessimists'. While the optimists perceive its economic growth, democratic resilience, and technological advancements, the pessimists point to its governance failures, policy drift, and deep-seated socio-economic disparities. Paul's analysis aligns with this duality, highlighting how India's aspirations for major power status are frequently undercut by its internal challenges.

Paul delves into India's internal governance challenges, particularly the entrenched caste system, income inequality, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. He argues that the deep-rooted caste system limits access to modern education and economic opportunities for large segments of the population. He further critiques the bureaucratic elite for being resistant to change, noting that developmental policies often take a backseat to caste-based electoral politics. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many of these vulnerabilities, particularly the fragile nature of India's healthcare system and the lack of social security for the poor. Paul uses this as a case study to illustrate how India's developmental shortcomings undermine its global ambitions.

One of the key themes in Paul's book is the comparison between India and China, two rising powers with divergent developmental trajectories. While China has focused on internal development, infrastructure expansion, and global trade, India has struggled with inconsistent economic policies, social fragmentation, and weak State capacity. Paul notes that China's ability to modernize its military, enhance living standards, and assert economic dominance has given it a significant edge over India. Despite this, India's demographic advantage presents an opportunity. With 1.42 billion people, India became the world's most populous country in April 2023, and by 2036, 65 per cent of its population will be of working age. However, Paul warns that India's poor human development indicators and lack of large-scale employment opportunities could turn this 'demographic dividend' into a liability.

Despite the book's comprehensive analysis, it falls short in addressing some crucial issues concerning the Middle-Income Trap, the Kindleberger Trap, and the Thucydides Trap. While the trajectory of India's economic growth has improved significantly following the economic reforms of 1991, a more explicit engagement with the frameworks explaining the challenges middle-income countries face in

transitioning to high-income status, is necessary. Paul implicitly discusses India's risks of economic stagnation but does not delve deep into the structural impediments that contribute to this phenomenon.

A recent World Bank Report underscores the gravity of these challenges. According to the *World Development Report 2024: The Middle-Income Trap* (World Bank, 2024), India is among over 100 countries that will encounter 'serious obstacles' in their pursuit of high-income status over the next few decades. The Report estimates that India could take as long as 75 years to achieve just one-quarter of the United States' income per capita, highlighting the significant hurdles in bridging the economic gap. In comparison, China may take over a decade to reach this milestone, while Indonesia could require nearly 70 years, indicating the broader struggles of middle-income economies in sustaining upward economic mobility.

While the author touches upon India's role in global governance, he does not fully explore how it could address the Kindleberger Trap in an era of great power competition, where the absence of strong leadership risks destabilizing the international order. In September 2019, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, speaking at an Alliance for Multilateralism meeting, underscored this concern, stating that 'the Kindleberger Trap on the shortage of global goods is far more serious than the Thucydides Trap' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). He also warned against nationalism, mercantilism, violations of international law, and outdated institutions incapable of addressing fast-evolving global challenges. Given India's growing influence in areas such as digital public goods and vaccine diplomacy, a more in-depth discussion on its role in global governance would have significantly enriched the book's analysis.

Paul's *The Unfinished Quest* is nevertheless, a meticulously researched and intellectually engaging analysis of India's foreign policy and strategic ambitions. While highlighting India's potential to shape the global order, the book also draws attention to the risks stemming from domestic policy inconsistencies, socio-economic disparities, and strategic miscalculations. For those seeking insights into India's trajectory in the 21st century, this Work serves as both a roadmap and a cautionary perspective, illuminating the challenges and opportunities that shape its pursuit of major power status. Moreover, it provides scholars with a strong foundation for further exploration, inspiring thought-provoking avenues for future research.

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