

BOOK REVIEW

The unfinished quest: India's search for major power status from Nehru to Modi

T.V. Paul, Oxford University Press, 2024, ISBN 9780197669990, \$29.99, 280 pp.

Status is a crucial element of any state's international standing. A state's status, defined as the collective international recognition it receives based on its valued material and non-material attributes, is pivotal in understanding its actions within its immediate neighbourhood and on the global stage. India, being a rising power, is a status-conscious state. Since its independence, India tried hard to achieve status beyond its material capabilities. India's journey from being perceived as a 'Fallen People'¹ to earning recognition as a 'rising power' is remarkable, albeit it's still evolving.² With the evolution of status literature, the book *'The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi'* narrows the literature gap between India and its quest for higher status.

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- 1 Rahul Sagar, ed., *To Raise a Fallen People: The Nineteenth Century Origins of Indian Views of the World* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
 - 2 T. V. Paul, *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 3.

Although status has become mainstream and has gone global,³ India's status in contemporary world politics remains relatively unexplored.⁴ The book tries to fill the gap between the existing literature regarding the status of India in world politics.

India's quest for status started well before achieving independence from the British Empire; India was stated as an Empire within an Empire. Since the time of PM Nehru, India, being relatively weak in terms of economic indicators, has tried to influence global politics with its soft power. From PM Nehru to PM Modi, India's quest for enhanced status got more traction as the world became more globalized and the status hierarchy became more rigid. In the conventional hierarchy structure, the already dominant state resists the status accommodation of the rising power. In the case of China and the USA, it is the UAS that tries to limit China's status, yet in India's case, it is China that is challenging India's status claims globally and regionally. India's mixed status anxiety concerning China because of 1962, increasing material gaps and territorial issues made India an ideal partner of the US-led West, which is trying hard to limit China's influence and status on a global scale.⁵ Although the book attempts to look at India's status quest through multiple dimensions, it focuses more on the social, democratic, and secular credentials of the state. The only issue with these elements is that they can't be quantified, and it's hard to compare which state is more democratic and which is less secular. Also, the book explores the elements of hard power, such as military capacity, economic progress, and infrastructure, that enhance the status of a state in the hierarchy. Economic growth contributed the most to elevating India in the global hierarchy, and it was post-1991 when India liberalized its economy and became a crucial global state.

The author argues that despite being a large country in terms of population and economy, India still needs to catch up to many states such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea because these states fulfilled their global status aspirations with reforms in their domestic social, economic,

3 Steven Ward et al., 'H-Diplo ISSF Roundtable, Volume X, No. 27 (2019) on Book "Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers" by Steven Ward', 2020, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-10-27.pdf>, 2–3.

4 Rajesh M. Basrur and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, *Rising India: Status and Power* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 1.

5 Paul, *The Unfinished Quest*, 4.

and political systems. India needs to catch up in the social indicators where a large chunk of the population still needs necessities, and a small part has accumulated unprecedented resources. This unequal society may never allow India to be a true global player. Despite being the world's fastest-growing economy, more than 20 per cent of the Indian population sleeps without proper food and nutrition. It is worth remembering that despite these challenges, India has done considerable social upliftment projects such as Mid-day meals and the Swachh Bharat Mission. With India showing weak state syndrome domestically, can it project a strong state image abroad? This is the central question that the large section of the book tries to find out. Although no large state exists without problems, not many high-status states exist with these many domestic issues. But for India, the quest for a higher status image abroad passes through the social and cultural upliftment at home.⁶

The book compares India and China critically, as both were at the same economic levels from the 1940s till the 1980s. Yet China received more respect than India globally. With China now having an economy of around five times, a defence budget of around three times and trade of around five times that of India, these material gaps create status anxiety and troubles between India and China.⁷ The book was written at a crucial time as India went through its democratic exercise and proved its democratic credentials to the world. Although the author argues that India's democratic credentials are threatened under PM Modi,⁸ the election results proved something else. However, the current political party retained its majority along with its allies. Yet it proved that India is not losing its democratic status, and the institutions that conduct surveys to rate democracies need to either change their methodology in India or they can expect unexpected results from India's democracy. Although social markers are crucial to elevating itself in the global hierarchy for a country like India, it can also resort to international diplomacy to manage its identity. India's attempt to include the African Union in G 20 shows that India is trying to woo the third world to elevate India's status.⁹ The book is a must-read for

6 Paul, *The Unfinished Quest*, 169.

7 Paul, *The Unfinished Quest*, 145.

8 Paul, *The Unfinished Quest*, 94.

9 Paul, *The Unfinished Quest*, 129.

all foreign policy students and researchers. The book also sheds light on how India can enhance its status in such a competitive world. With the evolution of strategies to compete in the 21st century, states are trying hard to manage their crisis and elevate themselves in the global hierarchy. India should try to manage domestic and regional issues to claim its destined place in the global order. The time of abrupt change is gone, and now the international order is changing gradually and incrementally, and India's quest for higher status should be guided by its historical principles of non-violence and mutual respect.

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