

over the last century? An incisive follow-up he asks in Chapter 2 is, “Is the notion of ‘great power’ an outdated European-era concept?” (Paul 33). Indeed, India’s ongoing fight for global status assumes a legitimate, if ever-shifting, global hierarchy: one determined by military aggression, conquest (whether soft or hard), and resource dominance, rather than mutual accountability, interdependence, and cooperation. While the book consistently deconstructs the terms through which the discipline more specifically, and geopolitical discourse more generally, understands global power, we must collectively reckon with new categories of analysis that prioritise international community and responsibility for the future, particularly as we tackle imminent and catastrophic shared global challenges.

**Response to Anuradha Sajjanhar’s Review of
*The Unfinished Quest: India’s Search for Major
Power Status from Nehru to Modi***

doi:10.1017/S1537592724002500

— T.V. Paul 

The review by Anuradha Sajjanhar offers a succinct evaluation of the core arguments in my book. I am gratified that she finds the central arguments in the book compelling. She notes that the book presents a good account of the opportunities and constraints that India has faced, both internally and externally, to obtain its goal of a major power status in international politics since independence. She also notes the high quality of the work in terms of writing and argumentation. For me, the motivation for writing this book came from a realization that theories on status are much advanced in the international relations discipline today and yet there have been scant attempts to apply these theoretical insights on the Indian case. The review probably could have benefitted from an appreciation of this motivation in terms of applying status theories adequately as her main focus is on the India-centric aspects of the book. Many comparative elements of previous rising powers are discussed in this context. In fact, a criticism I raise in my review of her well-written work relates to the avoidance of discussing international aspirations of the Hindutva movement.

The criticism she makes that the book should have gone deeper into the public perceptions in key countries, especially in the neighborhood, is fairly valid. However, this would have required gaining access to public opinion data from these countries on this subject which seems nonexistent or not reliable. The elite-level strategies to balance India in both power and status terms received more focus in the book, especially in the context of the arrival of China as a serious contender to India’s dominance of South Asia and today New Delhi has to compete with Beijing in the region. Further, the smaller neighbors have acquired enough agency to bargain with both China and India for

much economic aid. The domestic politics of these countries are also shaped by this contestation as political parties compete on the basis of their pro-China or pro-India positions for electoral advantages. Pakistan is an exception to this as it mounted the most consequential status challenge to India from their joint birth in 1947, although in recent years it has found itself in a less favorable position. The borrowing of status and power through alignment with the US and China helped in this process. The book addresses status contestation as a key variable in explaining India-China and India-Pakistan rivalries, an aspect that is missing in the extant literature on these subjects. The main constraint in adding more analysis is page length as I wanted a tighter and shorter book to attract readership beyond the academy.

I also believe that the book does an adequate job in addressing the challenges facing Modi’s foreign policy, especially in terms of the democratic backsliding under his rule, which has affected the legitimization of India’s status globally, especially in the liberal world as exclusivist religious nationalism has few takers as an emulative approach to state building. In an era of right-wing populism, especially in the West, some level of elite level acceptance of India has been occurring. This is largely due to India’s swing power position in the context of China’s rise and the potential to act as a possible counterweight to Chinese economic strength. I also discuss the limitations of diaspora politics as both facilitators and inhibitors to India’s status enhancement. The book concludes by arguing that India needs to offer better conceptions of world order and ideas for tackling collective global challenges rather than engage in the veto-payer role it often takes on crucial negotiations on climate change or trade liberalization.

The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic

Promises in Modi’s India. By Anuradha Sajjanhar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 189p. \$105.00 cloth, \$34.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592724002482

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This book is one of the rare works that deals with the ideational, intellectual, and technocratic bases of the Hindutva movement and the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)’s success in obtaining political power in India. The book argues that populist movements and political parties such as the BJP use particular intellectual groups, think tanks, and opinion makers to embellish their views of a nation state that they want to create in their countries, as in India’s case. This strategy has allowed the party to gain substantial followership after being on the margins of Indian politics for decades. Populism, like any dynamic

political movement, relies on propaganda and ideological instigations of the unconverted to their cause. However, these efforts need not succeed without organized groups with some intellectual caliber and technical skills working for the movement in an effective manner. It is the capacity of the groups to use the intellectual workers for their purposes and dominate the political narrative above all others which gives political power and electoral advantages to a party like the BJP.

The spread of BJP's ideology from a small group of ardent supporters to a pan-national movement in India today is a major puzzle. Some argue that it is the decline of the Congress Party, especially due to the failures of the last government under Manmohan Singh that gave BJP its opening. Even though the Congress-led government made many socio-economic advancements, allegations of corruption generated a major decline in its popular support. The dynastic leadership of Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi could not mount a convincing challenge to Narendra Modi who managed to rise from the western state of Gujarat with a message to make India stronger through a muscular religious ideology and corruption-free governance. The Hindutva movement had already taken strong roots in northern, central, and western states following the Ayodhya Ram temple building agitation, spearheaded by the Hindu fundamentalist groups in December 1992. The party was waiting in the wings, and the movement led by Atal Behari Vajpayee and subsequently, Narendra Modi, in particular, became attractive to a large segment of the electorate. This would not have happened without a substantial propaganda infrastructure, especially the astute use of social media platforms by Modi and his party. In the extant literature on Indian politics, the subject of how the populist leaders use established technocratic institutions and thinktanks are not yet given the importance they deserve. Beyond thinktanks, consulting firms, information technology (IT) cells, and government advisory groups help to create and nurture "shared visions of glorified technological and hyper-nationalist futures." (page 4). The book thus explicates the marrying of modern technology and expert group strategies by the populist campaign and the successes such movements have obtained compared to more mainstream political parties that are slow or unable to harness these assets.

The book offers insights from several interviews that the author conducted in India with leading figures of the BJP as well as Congress Party. The book begins with an analysis of how modern technology is helping to propagate the mythical past that the BJP wants the electorate to believe in. It then goes on to discuss the role of various think tanks as discourse custodians, and the double-sided nature of Hindutva movement, one that seeks to create "a distinct form of nationalism that is both seemingly pragmatic and yet ethnocentric." (p. 13). Other chapters explore the

increasing market of professional consultants as well as BJP's efforts at rebuilding "centers of traditional intellectuals to legitimize its identity politics." (p.14.)

One challenge here is in understanding why the BJP is more successful in using technocratic or think tank platforms while the liberal-centrist-oriented parties like the Congress, less so despite spending a good amount of money on its own IT cells and propaganda machines. The leader's charisma and eloquence as well as the superior resources available may be partially the answer. More than that, the populist BJP successfully showed that the past rule of the Congress did not produce the results that BJP could have brought in even though data tells a different story. There is some evidence that the two terms of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh produced more economic growth, employment, and poverty reduction. India's overall arrival as a rising power through improved US-India relations and memberships in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) grouping, all happened during that period. The Modi regime has basically improved or expanded schemes like welfare payments and made them more efficient through the use of better technology and projects like direct transfer. It is also the ability of the Government to sell its policies through massive propaganda tying everything to Modi's name that helped this endeavor. The question then arises why, despite the many advantages on the propaganda front, the party failed to secure a majority in the May 2024 elections. The Congress improved its position and its leader, Rahul Gandhi was able to use some of the same techniques that BJP employed, while adding long marches across India to sell himself and his agenda as alternatives to Modi's employment-scarce growth. If the opposition was a bit more strategic in striking electoral coalitions with key regional parties, they could have formed a government as some of them switched side to the BJP-led coalition after initial interest in joining the opposition front.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is related to Modi's global ambitions and selling those ideas to the Indian electorate and the diaspora which contributes funds to the party. Modi has publicly aired the dream to make India a developed nation (*Viksit Bharat*) by 2047. More than that the agenda is to make India a great power along with the established powers of the day. The swing power role that India seeks in the context of China's rise is also significant here. He has been constantly travelling and making friends with world leaders while seeking a UN Security Council permanent seat for India. The nationalist agenda in this regard is very captivating, especially for many of the upper caste/upper class Indians as well as expatriates who live abroad. Often, they are made to believe that India has arrived, or is about to arrive as a world power and that it has been for so long denied its role and status as a civilizational power thanks to the millennia-


long invasions by the Muslim and Christian empires, as well as the failures of the Congress leaders to seek that role aggressively since independence. Modi's frequent visits abroad often include public meetings attended by large numbers of the diaspora who seem to believe that India is rising under Modi and can obtain its status and recognition through religious nationalism and astute diplomacy. Increased status for India is a desirable goal for both personal and religious reasons, especially for those who believe that both the nation and religion are coterminous and that their Hindu religion has been at the receiving end of imperialism of the past millennium. Modi has the charisma and capacity to achieve this goal largely through diplomacy, oratory, personal connections to world leaders and high economic growth rates and infrastructure development in India. Here lies a conundrum—no political party can challenge this vision without being branded as anti-national. None has made a serious effort to show great power status including membership in the UN Security Council with veto power may not arrive without much struggle and improvements at home of the living standards of millions. A bit more attention to this dimension would have helped to capture the BJP's narrative fully and ability to influence public's imagination in this regard.

The strategic use of propaganda has always been the key source of populist and authoritarian leaders capturing power from an unwitting democratic space. For this purpose, they use more effectively the dominant technologies of the day. There is always a group of intellectuals and opinion makers who share this vision and if they are able to use democratic instruments and institutions then it is because of the narrative they sell fits with their deep-rooted status angst or past humiliations faced by a section of the population. Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement is an example. Others such as Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hungary's Viktor Orbán have all tried this route. Historically, all authoritarian parties, especially Fascist and Communist parties, have been successful as well at least in the short run using this technique. However, populists rarely succeed in the long run as they often fail to bring the glory or economic prosperity as constraints from within and outside make their plans difficult to implement. Some end up in internal or external conflicts to survive as Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu shows today. Much violence and social discords can occur, with minority groups at the receiving end of the discriminatory policies. India is already showing that tendency in the internal repression of minority groups, especially Muslims. Further, we also need to know when populists fail and the reasons for such failures even when they may have an upper hand in the propaganda domain. A proper analysis of the BJP's earlier success under Vajpayee and its electoral defeat by the Congress in 2004 and 2008 can help elucidate the answers to this question.

This book is well written, and it succinctly brings forth the key arguments on the mustering and use of technology, think tanks, and opinion makers by the BJP with the help of the author's interviews and their assessments. The anecdotal evidence is also interesting although a bit more comparative data would have helped to show how the BJP outmaneuvered the other parties in this arena. Overall, this is an excellent book which gives much substance to our understanding of the Hindu nationalist movement in India and the reasons for their relative success in the past decade.

Response to T.V. Paul's Review of *The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India*

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— Anuradha Sajjanhar 

T.V. Paul's review captures many of the central arguments I aimed to convey, particularly the intricate relationship between populism, intellectual elites, and technology that has fuelled the rise of the BJP and the broader Hindutva movement. One of the most gratifying aspects of the review is its recognition of the interplay between ideology and technocratic expertise in shaping modern populist movements. The BJP's success, as I argue, cannot be understood solely in terms of its ideological messaging. It is the party's ability to effectively harness intellectual and technocratic resources (through think tanks, IT cells, and consultancies) that has allowed it to consolidate its electoral power. This is precisely the nuance I wanted to bring to light, moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy of populism as purely an ideological project. The BJP's reliance on experts—whether technocrats in IT cells or intellectuals crafting policy at think tanks—mirrors a broader global trend of populist movements that seek legitimacy through their technocratic competence, even as they simultaneously undermine pluralist democratic norms.

However, while I appreciate the review's overview of the BJP's use of propaganda and social media, I would like to emphasize that the significance of technology in populist movements extends beyond mere propaganda. The BJP's ability to embed itself within technocratic institutions and reshape India's public discourse has been transformative. This is not just a matter of using technology to spread a message but of creating a "new expertise" that reshapes how governance and policy are perceived by the public. By positioning themselves as both traditionalists and modernizers, BJP elites have successfully claimed the mantle of expertise in a way that appeals to both India's past and future. Unlike movements that are often characterized by their anti-intellectualism, the BJP has been able to integrate technocratic and intellectual elites into its project, which distinguishes it from, say, the populism of Trump's