

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

T.V. Paul (Oxford University Press, 2024), 280

*Mobeen Jafar Mir**

'The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi' is written by T.V. Paul, a distinguished scholar and professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Throughout his esteemed career in international relations, Professor Paul has held numerous prestigious academic and visiting positions at leading institutions around the globe. He earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles. His research covers a broad range of important themes, including international security, international relations theory, conflict and war, nuclear proliferation, and the politics of South Asia.

In his latest volume, Paul examines India's leadership strategies, highlighting significant achievements in economic growth, technological advancements, and military modernization through his extensive expertise in international relations. Nonetheless, he argues that India's aspirations are obstructed by domestic constraints, regional challenges, and structural limitations. The book frames India's ambitions within a broader competition for international status, defined as the "collective international recognition of an actor based on its valued material and non-material attributes."

Paul points out two significant missed opportunities in India's pursuit of global status: its exclusion from a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 1945 and its classification as a non-nuclear state in 1968. He suggests that these setbacks have created enduring obstacles to India's ambitions as a great power, despite its advancements in

* Reviewed by Mobeen Jafar Mir, Research Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS), Islamabad

economic, military, and technological areas. Regionally, India faces opposition not only from Pakistan but also from other smaller neighboring countries, which highlights the challenges it encounters in effectively utilizing its hard and soft power strategies. Domestically, issues such as unequal wealth distribution, limited access to education and healthcare, and underdeveloped infrastructure continue to hinder India's global aspirations.

Following the preface, the book is structured into seven chapters. Broadly, the first three chapters titled *The Pursuit*, *Hard Power*, and *Soft Power* analyze the evolving markers of India's international status. The author highlights the importance of the 2005 US-India Nuclear Accord, which recognized India as a de facto nuclear power despite its non-signatory status to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In *The Pursuit*, the author explores the motivations and limitations of India's elite in their quest for global recognition, emphasizing socio-psychological, material, and philosophical factors. He attributes India's incremental status gains to its strong Gross Domestic Product (GDP), strategic role as a swing state counterbalancing China, and institutional recognition through memberships in the Group of Twenty (G-20) and the Quad Alliance framework. In the subsequent chapters entitled *Hard Power* and *Soft Power*, the author evaluates India's military, economic, scientific, and technological capabilities and demographic strength. He examines the impact of India's soft power, focusing on cultural influence, civilization, political systems, diplomacy, strategy, and the global Indian diaspora.

In the subsequent chapters *The Great Powers*, *The Neighbours*, and *State Capacity*, the author assesses the policies of major powers such as the US, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom toward India's ambitions, while briefly addressing the evolving strategies of Japan and Germany. He also highlights India's outreach to the Global South as part of its strategy to enhance global influence. The author contends that regional dominance is essential for achieving global power status but argues that India's regional position has often been precarious. This is due to persistent border disputes, strained relations with neighbors, and the growing influence of external powers like China, which challenge its dominance and generate hostility from its South Asian neighbors.

In the chapter *State Capacity*, the author identifies the lack of inclusive development as a critical barrier to India's global aspirations. The chapter examines key development indicators such as education, infrastructure, healthcare, and climate change, comparing India with global peers like China. The author asserts that India's progress is hindered by a "weak state syndrome" and argues that without significant improvements in its Human Development Index (HDI), its aspirations for global power will remain unrealized.

In the final chapter, *The Future*, the author contends that while material indicators are essential, they are insufficient for India to achieve major power status. He posits that India's most viable path lies in its "accommodation and acceptance" by the US as a crucial ally, particularly in the context of countering China's growing influence.

In conclusion, the book provides a valuable scholarly analysis of the motivations and underlying factors driving India's pursuit of global power status. While being insightful, the book has certain limitations added. The author overemphasizes India's moral objectives during its early independence, despite historical evidence suggesting that personal, psychological, and material ambitions played a more significant role. Furthermore, the book underscores India's disproportionate focus on high-status technologies, such as nuclear and space advancements, at the expense of applied sciences critical for addressing urgent challenges like poverty, illiteracy, and famine.

Paul traces India's nuclear ambitions back to 1944, even before its independence, noting that Nehru in 1946 acknowledged the inevitability of states pursuing atomic technology. While Nehru emphasized its constructive potential, he also asserted India's right to self-defense if threatened. In contrast, Pakistan's nuclear program emerged in the 1970s, spurred by India's 1974 nuclear tests, as reflected in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's 1965 statement: "*If India makes an atomic bomb, we will also do so, even if we have to eat grass or go hungry.*" India's claim that its nuclear weapons were developed solely for security purposes, however, remains questionable, especially in light of China's declared No First Use (NFU) policy. Remarks by former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, linking nuclear weapons to international status, further highlight the ambiguity.

Additionally, India's actions—such as the annexation of Hyderabad, the Kashmir conflict, and the annexation of Goa in 1961—culminating in its 1974 nuclear tests, compelled Pakistan to pursue its nuclear program. Furthermore, the establishment of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in response to India's nuclear tests highlights how India's ambitions influenced global non-proliferation frameworks, challenging its claims of advocating for disarmament during the Cold War.

Lastly, the claim that India has an “impeccable non-proliferation record” is misleading. Despite the NSG waiver, India's eight civilian nuclear reactors remain outside of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) safeguards system, which raises significant concerns about accountability and transparency of nuclear material. Additionally, more than twenty cases have been reported repetitively on the smuggling of critical and objectionable material from India since the mid-1990s. Such reoccurring episodes suggest lapses and loopholes in the Indian nuclear safety and security culture and the absence of a regulatory mechanism to govern nuclear and radioactive material. This also suggests the possible existence of a black market in India where unauthorized movements take place repetitively. Economically, while India has experienced notable growth since the 1990s, inequality within India persists largely. Wealth is concentrated among the top 10%, while 129 million people live in extreme poverty. According to the October 2024 Global Hunger Index, India ranks 105th out of 127 countries, categorized as “serious.”

India's democratic trajectory also raises concerns in the context of US-India relations. The rise of Hindutva ideology, extraterritorial killings, and the marginalization of minorities have drawn international criticism. Freedom House downgraded India from a “free” democracy to “partially free,” the V-Dem Institute classified it as an “electoral autocracy,” and the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked India 53rd in its 2020 Democracy Index. Policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status have further eroded India's democratic image on the global stage.