

# India's Turbulent Ascent

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In the past decade or so, a spate of books has been published about India's rise in the global arena. The vast majority of these are journalistic accounts of varying quality, such as those by Edward Luce, Mira Kamdar, and Anand Giridharadas. A handful of academic works have also attempted to explain India's emergence and offered prescriptions for addressing the many socioeconomic ills that continue to sandbag the country's prospects. One of the most informed and cogent accounts is Vijay Joshi's *India's Long Road: The Search for Prosperity*, published in 2017. An earlier work that covers some of the same ground but is more sanguine about India's prospects is Arvind Panagariya's *India: The Emerging Giant*.

The growing popular and academic interest in India is hardly surprising. Since the end of the Cold War and an unprecedented economic crisis in 1991, the country has fitfully embraced more market-oriented policies, for all practical purposes discarded its hoary commitment to nonalignment in international relations, and ended its policy of nuclear ambiguity. Because of these policy changes, India has enjoyed robust economic growth, strengthened its military sinews, and increased its diplomatic clout. It is no longer an inconsequential player in global politics.

These important developments and significant achievements notwithstanding, India still faces great challenges both at home and abroad. Despite the economic expansion, according to some estimates more than a third of the population is still mired in abject poverty. The benefits of growth have been extremely skewed, exacerbating existing inequities. Ideologically driven political activists have seized on these economic disparities and launched a range of violent social movements across the country.

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Our Time Has Come: How India Is Making Its Place in the World  
by Alyssa Ayres  
Oxford University Press, 2018

Although members of lower castes have made substantial political progress, even after seventy years of independence the country still has not been able to shed the pernicious legacy of the caste system. Caste violence remains practically endemic in certain parts of India. More recently, the country has witnessed a resurgence of the furies of Hindu nationalism, which threatens to further erode its secular foundations. Finally, even though India has seen its women rise to the highest political as well as corporate offices in the land, the overall status of women still leaves much to be desired.

Alyssa Ayres's new book, *Our Time Has Come*, adds to the growing body of literature on India's rise and challenges, making a useful but limited contribution. The book does not fall squarely into either the popular or academic genres. Instead it is based on both her academic training and her policy expertise on India. She served in the State Department during the Obama administration and is now a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Her book is invaluable in that it sketches out how India has jettisoned a number of shibboleths that had guided its foreign, economic, and security policies. She discusses critical turning points, providing evidence to account for how these changes came about and identifying the key players who made the crucial choices. She demonstrates a mostly sound knowledge of the complexities of Indian politics and society, and is optimistic about the country's trajectory:

Despite the hurdles India still has left to clear, [it] has already become a consequential global actor. As it continues to shed its past diffidence it will realize its ambitions as a global power, likely in its more cautious way, in the decades to come in a way that was unimaginable twenty-five years back.

Substantively, the book focuses on how India, after its long attachment to nonalignment and ob-

session with economic self-reliance, finally came to embrace the world after the Cold War's end. Yet Ayres shows that India, despite formally repudiating nonalignment, has maintained its tradition of prickly independence in the foreign policy arena, especially under the current regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In her discussion of trade policy, Ayres properly emphasizes that India has proved quite resistant to global pressures to open its markets. This reluctance stems largely from the existence of a vast, inefficient domestic agricultural sector to which India's political leadership remains beholden.

Ayres also shows how Indian industrial conglomerates, after their initially hesitant response to a rapid opening of domestic markets, demonstrated an ability to compete in the global arena. She underscores some of Indian industry's notable achievements, such as the behemoth Tata Enterprises' acquisition of the iconic Jaguar automotive brand. Unlike Ford, which earlier had purchased the British company and struggled to turn it around, Tata proved remarkably successful in that endeavor.

The concluding sections of the book provide a set of sensible, workmanlike, though hardly exceptional policy recommendations for the United States to pursue with a rising India. To Ayres's credit, she does not avoid grasping a particular nettle that has long been a source of discord in Washington's relations with New Delhi: namely, how to simultaneously manage a working relationship with India's recalcitrant neighbor, Pakistan. For the most part, her prescriptions for how best to balance these two relationships are levelheaded. She supports a policy that an astute and able former American ambassador to India, Frank Wisner, helped formulate, known as dehyphenation, which sought to place US policy toward the two countries on separate, distinct tracks.

However, one or two of Ayres's policy suggestions are rather stale. For example, she touts the putative virtues of continuing the US International Military Education and Training program with Pakistan on the ground that this may improve the Pakistani military's regard for human rights. Sadly, decades of bringing Pakistani military officers to the United States under the aegis of this program have demonstrated otherwise.

Ayres also discusses India's troubled relationship with China at some length. She notes that China poses a key strategic challenge for India both in the present and in the foreseeable future.

## ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Despite the strengths of the book, I have a number of general and specific quibbles with Ayres's omission of some issues as well as the way she handles certain others. The omissions are glaring. Ayres provides a fleeting discussion of how the congressionally mandated US Commission on International Religious Freedom has expressed concern about India's record on the treatment of religious minorities in recent years. But she fails to bluntly confront the growing specter of Hindu nationalism and its pernicious implications for the fate of India's democracy in general and for the plight of the vast Muslim minority in particular.

Similarly, the book's exiguous discussion of the challenges of persistent poverty, growing inequality, and their consequences for social and political stability can charitably be described as rather anodyne. This absence of forthright engagement with the subject seems baffling given that Modi's predecessor as prime minister, Manmohan Singh, described the emergence of class-based violent insurgencies as the single most important security threat facing the country. Unfortunately, the Maoist movement—known as “Naxalism” after the region of Naxalbari in West Bengal state, where it first originated in the 1970s—shows few signs of abating.

Beyond these large omissions, some more specific objections must be mentioned. Ayres describes the manufacturing success that some industrial zones in the western state of Gujarat have yielded. There is no gainsaying the achievements of the state in promoting cutting-edge industry and generating high-quality employment in this sector. However, Gujarat's business-friendly (as opposed to market-friendly) policies have come at a considerable social cost. Despite high growth rates, the state's social indicators remain troubling, as the economist Jean Drèze has argued. Since Modi rose to national prominence as chief minister of Gujarat, claiming credit for its advances, it is important to carefully assess the state's socio-economic record.

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Ayres provides a largely sound discussion of India's hesitation about democracy promotion. Its unwillingness to readily take on this project is in some ways puzzling. But clearly one of the key reasons for New Delhi's lack of enthusiasm stems from its assessment of its own domestic democratic deficits. Indian diplomats are all too aware that a more activist policy might expose India's domestic fault lines to the world. Yet despite some obvious limitations, for the most part Indian democracy remains robust. Consequently, India should not shy away from being an integral player in promoting democracy worldwide.

Ayres does not satisfactorily explain India's fitful choices on a related issue, the contested norm of the "responsibility to protect," which calls for humanitarian intervention by external powers when a government fails to protect (or attacks) its own citizens. New Delhi has been ambivalent in its support for the principle and, on occasion,

has opposed particular humanitarian interventions. Ayres notes that this unsteady Indian position is entirely in keeping with its postcolonial preference for avoiding involvement in the internal affairs of other states. However, that is at best a partial explanation. Indian diplomacy has waffled on this issue largely because of the country's rather disturbing record of inadequately protecting human rights when suppressing insurgent movements on its own soil.

The limitations of the book notwithstanding, it is nevertheless a helpful addition to the substantial corpus of work that is focused on India's ascent. Those who are interested in a brisk, even breezy account of where India is currently headed will find it to be of interest. That said, the book fails to adequately address many of the crucial challenges that India faces both at home and abroad. It may be a trifle premature to proclaim that India's time has indeed come. ■