

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sumit Ganguly, William R. Thompson. *Ascending India and Its State Capacity: Extraction, Violence, and Legitimacy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 352 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-21592-2.

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## Can India Pull It Off?

Reviewing this book has posed me with a problem: it is not the kind of book I expected when I agreed to review it. It is not a book about the capacity of India's states, but a book about the Indian state. It does not contain clear and sophisticated discussions about state capacity across the board but spends quite a lot of space discussing comparative international survey data, even when "local knowledge" would suggest that the results of these surveys are questionable. I do not usually read this literature, so this review can give you no idea about whether *Ascending India* is good for its genre. What I can do is say whether this particular example made me want to read more of its kind. In brief, the answer is no.

The first thing that I noticed—as a nonspecialist—on reading *Ascending India* is the oddness of one of its core questions: can India become a great power? For, as the authors admit, the concept is fuzzy, and the criteria for becoming a great power are not widely agreed on. The relevance to India's position today—for example—of whether Italy was or was not a great power in the late nineteenth century is tenuous at best. The justification for this approach is set out in various ways, but primarily that India has been recognized by world leaders as an important part of the international community of nations—recognition in a variety of ways, including Narendra Modi, India's current prime minister, being invited to speak at the 2018 Davos meeting, as well as statements in favor of India becoming a permanent member

of the UN Security Council. In addition, India has been included in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping (though, as the authors acknowledge, by far the weakest on most indicators except population size). Although the question recurs throughout the book, it is addressed most directly in chapter 2, and the authors return to the discussion in the conclusion. At this stage I was (and still am) unable to judge whether the authors are correct to "retain a modified version of lateral pressure theory (Choucri and North), combined with the favorable environment insertion, and link it to the relationships among state capacity, leadership/strategy, and governmental problem solving via a linkage through state capabilities" (p. 274).

Much of the rest of the book addresses questions that are—to me—very interesting, and which do not seem to require a concern with great power theory. Do India's political and administrative institutions have the capacity in three fields—extraction, violence, and legitimacy—to deal with its pressing social, economic, political, and infrastructural problems as well as it can deal with technical challenges? In favorite examples such as sending satellites into space or using rational procedures for selecting a new multicombat fleet for its air force, Sumit Ganguly and William Thompson suggest that the Indian state has, in some areas, impressive capacity. Locating India as neither strong nor weak (chapter 3), but somewhere in the middle allows the authors to provide a more

nuanced approach to these issues than can those thinking in terms of binary oppositions. These arguments are illustrated with data on Brazil, China, and Russia, with the occasional inclusion of other states.

Chapters 4 and 5 take the issues of extraction and legitimacy, and violence monopoly, and provide good summaries of the relevant literature. There is “casual” support for the Indian state’s ability to tax and to raise revenues, despite the fact that India has fought only limited wars (unlike many of the great powers being used for comparative purposes). Similarly, voting turnout seems to suggest that the Indian state retains considerable legitimacy, which is backed up by some survey results on trust in Indian institutions. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 deal with the capacity of the state in the areas of the economy, infrastructure, and inequality. The discussions of separate issues within these chapters are frustratingly brief. As the authors note several times, to give due consideration to the complexities involved would be a Herculean task and beyond the remit of the book. Unfortunately, this means that each topic is addressed in tantalizing brevity. Without specialist support, the authors sometimes rely on outdated material and ignore key elements. My own specialty is health policy: the three pages on this (pp. 176-78) actually deal with medical matters, not health; the authors rely on a consultancy report from 2007; and they make no mention of the National Health Missions, rural and urban, which dominated health policy from 2005 to 2015. The section on educational infrastructure (pp. 173-76) is somewhat better. But in both cases, what is dramatically absent is any substantial reference to the massive interstate differences within India, which make Kerala and Tamil Nadu almost different countries in these matters from the north Indian states whose “state capacities” are so much poorer—such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, or Jharkhand. Health and education are not insignificant issues: they both loom large in human development indicators and in the Millennium Development Goals (neither regarded significant enough to get as far as the book’s

index). India’s poor showing on these fronts is a major embarrassment to India’s diplomatic efforts to be taken seriously in UN and other forums. Such embarrassment helps to explain the efforts to pour money into the social sectors by the Congress-led governments of 2004-14. Their inability to act decisively to overcome these weaknesses (linked to India’s federal structure, but also to issues of corruption, and contributing to problems of legitimacy and trust of governmental institutions) warrant much more attention than they receive here.

The final three substantive chapters deal with politics: democratic institutions, grand strategies, and defense and national security. They review familiar material and do not, in my view, add much that is new: the novelty (if any) relates more to how far the authors go beyond other similar treatments of these issues, and I am not competent to judge this. The final chapter returns to some of the theoretical and conceptual issues introduced earlier, and introduces some further comparison, this time with South Korea as an example that is plausible for India to emulate. The conclusion is that India needs to approach the task of modernization (for that is largely the underlying framework of the book) like a marathon runner rather than a sprinter: “As an ‘in-between,’ [the Indian state] has some resources for capacity development and should be in a position to make a stronger state if decision-makers (and the population) insist on making it one” (p. 286).

For me, the book would have been stronger if it had tried more to focus on how might India become a stronger state. Great power theory seems to be irrelevant to that question. And if that question had been posed, then the conclusion might have been based on rather better understanding of how to enable policy change in key areas—on how the conditions that need improvement can become problems that need to be resolved, and how policy choices are made and seen through to achieve some success.

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